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## ENTERPRISE

From the September 30, 2005 print edition

# Firm teaches how to mind your P's and Q's

[Mike W. Thomas](#)

Since leaving the Air Force four years ago, Tom Marino has spent his time teaching people how to mind their P's and Q's.

Marino is the owner of [Alamo Training](#), which provides courses on serving alcoholic beverages certified by the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission (TABC). Some of his local clients include Pappasito's and Pappadeaux's restaurants, the [Hilton Hotels](#) and [Aramark](#).

Marino likes to note that the term P's and Q's, meaning good manners, was derived from a reference to pints and quarts and originally meant watching how much alcohol one consumes in a sitting.

But there is more involved with managing alcohol consumption today than just good manners. Often there are lives at stake and substantial sums of money as well. Marino notes that the [Outback Steakhouse](#) restaurant chain settled a drunken driving lawsuit last year for \$3.85 million. The lawsuit stemmed from a wreck in North Austin that left one person a paraplegic. The driver who caused the accident had allegedly been drinking at an Outback Steakhouse restaurant before the wreck.

"Our objective is to reduce the number of fatal accidents as well as the lawsuits," Marino says. "Today bars are obligated by law to assure their patrons are able to get home safely."

Alamo Training offers a three-hour and 20-minute course that teaches the liabilities and laws governing the sale of alcohol in Texas. The course is not mandatory, but the TABC offers an incentive for companies and organizations that have all their servers trained by giving them immunity from penalties

that would result in the event of a rules violation.

"The course serves as a shield from TABC fines if all your servers are trained," Marino says. "It can also reduce your insurance costs."

### **Growing business**

Marino teamed up with Matt Scherer, another retired Air Force veteran, three years ago and together they have been slowly expanding the business, picking up new accounts such as the annual Shinerbock Fest in the fall and the Night in Old San Antonio, or NIOSA, celebration held during San Antonio's Fiesta.

"We started out as a part-time business, but now we need to hire more trainers," Marino says.

Marino says he currently trains between 200 and 300 students a month and charges \$20 per person or \$15 for nonprofits. The certificates people receive for successfully completing the course are good for two years, he notes.

Marino says most of his students fall into one of two categories: adult volunteers working for a charity event or nonprofit organization; and students working their way through college.

He says the people who are sometimes most prone to making mistakes are those who have been doing it for awhile and think that they know it all.

"One thing we try to emphasize is responsible service," Marino says. "We go through all of the tips and tricks that servers can use to help avoid customer intoxication."

Some restaurants, like Pappasito's, have a steadfast rule on the number of drinks that can be served to customers before they are cut off.

Other places require servers to be observant of how much they are serving to each person and to consider factors such as alcohol-to-weight ratios, he says.

"The failure to keep track of how many drinks were served was the reason that Outback Steakhouse in Austin got slammed," Marino says. "One lawyer involved in the case says they were lucky to settle out of court because they could have been forced to pay as much as \$10 million if it had gone to trial."

### **Tips of the trade**

In addition to watching how much they sell, servers must also be vigilant about avoiding sale to minors, Marino says. This means knowing how to avoid being fooled by fake IDs and watching out for people who purchase drinks on behalf of minors.

"A real ID has a certain feel to it," Marino says. "You can also bend it without having it come apart. These are just some of the tips we teach our students."

Marino says it is important for businesses and organizations that sell alcohol to know the law because of the growing number of liability lawsuits in Texas. During the past several years, lawsuits have been settled in and out of court that tried to collect damages from alcohol licensees for everything from auto accidents and personal injury to property damage and pregnancies.

The penalty for selling alcohol to an intoxicated person is between \$100 and \$500, while sale to a minor carries a maximum fine of \$4,000.

Scherer says he always tells servers to ask themselves whether they would feel comfortable accepting a drive home with a customer after their next drink. If they are not sure, then they should reconsider selling them that drink.

"We know that stores are in the business of promoting the sale of alcohol to make money," he says. "But there is a fine line and a balance that they all have to watch."

Marino says the toughest thing for a server is learning how to cut off someone who is intoxicated. Sometimes they can become obnoxious or even violent, and the servers need to learn the best ways to avoid problems without giving in to their demands.

Another problem is that servers who refuse sales to customers will sometimes get stiffed on tips, Marino says. To make up for this, some restaurants will compensate their servers in those cases with matching tips so they are not penalized for upholding the law.

### **Safe for everyone**

Debbi Hindman, who handles beverage management for the annual Shinerbock Fest in October, says she has used Alamo Training for several years and is very pleased with their work.

"They provide a great training tool," she says. "They keep your interest up during the class and make it fun."

When the courts set a precedent several years ago that held the people selling the alcohol responsible, it forced everyone to take notice, she says.

"Today the ultimate responsibility goes back to the promoter and the people putting on the show," she says. "We do a lot of eye watching and observing."

Hindman says by getting all of her servers certified before the annual festival, it saves a substantial

amount in insurance. The festival is sponsored by the Shiner Chamber of Commerce and is promoted by [LSA Inc.](#)

But most importantly, she says, it helps to keep the event a family-friendly affair.

"We want to do everything we can to make our event safe and enjoyable for everyone," she says.

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