

GOTAB

VIRGINIA BREWERS CONFERENCE · RICHMOND, SEPTEMBER 2026

6 Best Practices for High-Performance Taproom and Beer Garden Operations

Four operators. Three venue sizes. One hour of honest answers about what really slows a taproom down.

THE PANEL

Adam Howe

Director of Product Enablement, GoTab — moderator

Jake Abell

Owner and brewmaster, Scuffle Hill Brewing Company · Collinsville, VA

Tom Sullivan

Co-founder, Ardent Craft Ales · Scott's Addition, Richmond, VA

Ambar Sharma

Co-owner, Route 7 Brewing · Ashburn, VA

Six problems, handed to three operators who still run rooms

Adam Howe ran brewery operations for eleven years before joining GoTab. He built this panel from six problems he never solved well at the time.

He described each problem, then asked three working operators what they would do instead. The three venues are very different sizes. The same six problems showed up in all of them.

Scuffle Hill Brewing

Collinsville, VA

Veteran-owned, near Martinsville. About 50 seats inside, 25 outside.

Ardent Craft Ales

Scott's Addition, Richmond

About 100 seats inside and 175 more in the beer garden.

Route 7 Brewing

Ashburn, VA

About 150 seats across two dining areas and a mezzanine, plus a patio.

WHAT'S INSIDE

1 Start the clock when the guest decides

Not when someone takes the order

2 Build the bar like a kitchen

Split the jobs instead of adding people

3 Make the tab follow the guest

A phone finds people. A flag does not.

4 Find the bottleneck before it finds you

The fix is a warning, not a bigger oven

5 Charge for the membership

6 Stop counting on a server to remember

Start the clock when the guest decides

Adam Howe · Ambar Sharma, Route 7 Brewing

THE PROBLEM

The number that matters is not ticket time. It is the gap between a guest wanting a beer and drinking one. That gap includes every minute before anyone takes the order.

At Drake's Dealership, a 10,000-square-foot beer garden in Oakland, the gap was built into the job. A server wrote the order on paper, carried it to a station, and rang it in. Howe's fix was to schedule **drink runners**: a separate role that only carried drinks to tables. Even with California labor costs, it paid for itself.

WHAT THE ROOM SAID

Sharma thinks about the guest's time, not the guest's seat. A table gives you about two hours. Every minute a guest waits for the first drink is a minute you cannot sell into.

Route 7 sits next to a children's adventure park. Parents arrive worn out after three hours of chasing kids. Staff go to those tables first. Sharma says that one habit decides whether guests call the service bad or call the place wonderful.

Every taproom has one server who outsells everyone else. Route 7 does not treat that as a personality. They turn what that person does into the standard: greet right away, bring the menu, bring the silverware, ask if the guest has been in before.

They also run **no sections**. Whoever gets there first owns the table. That removes the most common reason nobody moves.

TRY THIS WEEK

- Sit at your own table on a Friday. Time how long it takes to get a drink.
- Write down what your best server does in the first minute. Make it everyone's opening.
- Ask whether sections help your floor, or just give people a reason to wait.

Build the bar like a kitchen

Tom Sullivan, Ardent Craft Ales · Jake Abell, Scuffle Hill Brewing

THE PROBLEM

Ardent built for volume before it had a volume problem. Two tap walls. A bar you can enter from both sides, so staff never queue behind each other. iPads on the floor for ordering and paying.

Then craft beer took off and guests stood four deep at the bar. A line would have fixed the flow. It also would have cost Ardent the thing it sells, which is talking to people about beer.

WHAT THE ROOM SAID

So Ardent split the bar into stations, the way a kitchen is split.

ARDENT'S BAR, STAFFED AS A LINE

Four taking orders · **Two** pouring · **One** running each beer to the right person · **Two** clearing tables and washing glasses

With four people taking orders, nobody is rushed, so the beer talk survives. With two pourers and a runner, the line still moves.

Scuffle Hill does the same thing at a quarter of the size. One main register, plus mobile devices on busy nights to open extra ordering lanes. In a small room, a line to the door can sour the whole night.

Neither venue fixed speed by hiring more people. Both fixed it by making sure no one person is doing two jobs when it matters.

TRY THIS WEEK

- Watch one rush. Note who is doing two jobs at once. That is your bottleneck.
- Name the jobs for your busiest two hours, even if the same people cover them.
- Decide what your bar sells. If it is conversation, protect the spot where it happens.

Make the tab follow the guest

All four panelists

THE PROBLEM

A group books a bowling lane for an hour and orders nachos late. Their hour ends and they drift into the beer garden. The nachos arrive at the lane.

The new group either eats them for free or sends them back. Twenty minutes later the first group works out they paid for food they never got. You refund the tab or you make it again. **Either way, you lose the nachos.**

WHAT THE ROOM SAID

Route 7 numbers every section. Staff upstairs are taught that anyone holding a drink already has a tab, so ask and move it. At car shows they hand out numbers.

Ardent keeps it loose on purpose. Guests order at the bar or from the table, and about 15% choose the table. On busy days they hand out flags. Sullivan admits that on a big night, someone is still walking around looking.

Scuffle Hill is designing the problem out of a new location with text-to-order and numbered tables. Abell's point is that every guest already carries a phone. Send a text and they collect the food in 60 to 90 seconds, while it is hot.

The panel agreed on this much. A flag or a table number means your staff still has to go find the guest. A phone reaches the guest wherever they moved to.

DO NOT FORGET HOW THE TAB CLOSES

Paying is the last thing that happens to a guest, and almost nobody designs it. **Scuffle Hill** pre-authorizes the card when the tab opens, so the money is covered before anyone walks. **Ardent** lets table orders close by phone and settles the rest at end of night. **Route 7** keeps a person in the close on purpose, because it is the last chance to ask how the visit went.

Find the bottleneck before it finds you

Adam Howe · Ambar Sharma · Tom Sullivan

THE PROBLEM

Drake's again. A 275-seat room built around wood-fired pizza. The oven turned out a pizza in under five minutes. **The oven was not slow. It was finite.**

On a Friday night most of the room ordered pizza and ticket times hit 45 minutes. There was no kitchen screen, just paper tickets. The real failure was not the oven. Nobody knew until they were 45 minutes behind.

WHAT THE ROOM SAID

First, find the bottleneck with numbers you already have. Your register shows volume. Your kitchen screen shows delay. Put them side by side and the problem names itself. Route 7 did this, found the fryer, and added a second one.

Second, warn the floor at the register. Sharma wants each item to show green, yellow or red while a server takes the order. Then the server can say the skewers are running 40 minutes and offer wings instead.

Ardent avoided the problem instead. A restaurant runs alongside them on its own register, and Ardent serves a short menu it can heat and assemble in about two minutes an item.

Howe's other fix was to stop selling pizza in a third of the building on busy nights. It worked, but someone in the bar could watch a pizza go by and not order one.

The limit is almost never the technology. It is what the staff will actually use.

TRY THIS WEEK

- Put last month's item volume next to your prep times. The bottleneck will appear.
- Decide what your floor says when an item runs long, before the night you need it.
- Keep new specials off your busiest nights. Put them where they buy you traffic.

Charge for the membership

Jake Abell, Scuffle Hill Brewing · Adam Howe · Ambar Sharma

THE PROBLEM

Howe ran a membership at Upland Brewing built on sour beers. They were hard to find and dropped four times a year. Then the sours showed up on store shelves.

Here is the part worth knowing. **Membership numbers did not drop first. Visits did.** People kept paying and stopped coming, which is what happens right before they quit.

WHAT THE ROOM SAID

Scuffle Hill built a Mug Club after last year's conference. Members get a dollar beer each week, a free four-pack each month, and a quarterly bottle drop. They pay to join, and Abell says it still feels like a benefit.

70%

of Scuffle Hill's top-tier members visit one to three times a week, in a venue open seven days.

They do not grab the reward and leave. **The dollar beer is not the sale. It is the reason for the visit that holds the sale.**

Paying in changes how people act. A discount is something you take. A membership is something you paid for, so you use it to prove it was worth it. Howe also says to **let members spend benefits on the people they bring**. A member who arrives with eight friends just brought you eight guests.

One idea that costs nothing: exclusivity works where a discount does not. Put one tap on the board that only members may buy. Nobody saves money. Everybody wants in.

TRY THIS WEEK

- Look at visits, not headcount. Members who pay but stopped coming are quitting.
- Find one benefit a member can spend on their table instead of on themselves.
- Add one members-only perk that costs nothing. See how it beats your discount.

Stop counting on a server to remember

Ambar Sharma · Tom Sullivan · Jake Abell · Adam Howe

THE PROBLEM

Upselling is not a trick. As Howe put it, it is basic service, and the whole thing is asking. The trouble is that it depends on a busy person remembering, and busy people forget.

WHAT THE ROOM SAID

Sharma fixes it in two steps. First, take what your best server says at the close and make it the standard for everyone. Second, stop relying on memory. He wants the handheld to prompt the server: this table has been here two hours, ask about cans and merch. **The prompt does the remembering. The server does the asking.**

Sullivan was honest about Ardent. They are old school, and it probably gets asked about half the time. Howe's answer is the reason to bother. If 85% of your guests come back to the bar to close out, the chance is in front of you 85% of the time.

THE BEST ANSWER OF THE HOUR

Scuffle Hill had a beer tender named Levi. Abell says he could use the same words and get a no, and Levi would sell a case.

What Levi did was notice. He saw a guest drinking blonde ales all afternoon, and at close-out offered to grab a few cans. He saw someone eyeing the merch wall, and mentioned his hoodie was good for the cold. Four cans out the door, every time.

After Levi left, Scuffle Hill did not teach his words. They taught the noticing.

In a room with seventy people, an offer that shows you were paying attention does not feel like a sale.

TRY THIS WEEK

- Count how many guests close out at the bar. That is how often the chance shows up.
- Pick one moment, like two hours at the table, and build the ask into it.
- Teach noticing, not a script. What did this guest actually drink tonight?

The problem is rarely the equipment

Six problems, four operators, three venue sizes, and mostly the same answer underneath.

Ardent fixed its bar by splitting jobs, not by buying anything. Route 7 built its greeting standard by copying a server who was already doing it. Scuffle Hill's best upsell was one person who paid attention.

And Howe, who now sells the technology, spent much of the hour saying that a real recommendation from someone who knows the beer beats an automated prompt every time.

WHERE TECHNOLOGY EARNS ITS PLACE

Buy it for the things people are bad at: **remembering, measuring, and finding a guest who moved.**

The rest is still the job.

Bring us your operational challenge.

Want to talk through any of the six in your own room? The Friday night bottleneck, the workaround your staff invented, the thing you wish your technology just handled. That is what we do.

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Thanks to Jake Abell of Scuffle Hill Brewing, Tom Sullivan of Ardent Craft Ales and Ambar Sharma of Route 7 Brewing for an hour of honest answers, and to the Virginia Craft Brewers Guild for the session.