



The Class of 2011

FREEHOUSE OF THE YEAR

THE BRICKLAYERS ARMS

Hogpits Bottom, Flaunden, Hertfordshire
Alvin and Sally Michaels

Alvin and Sally Michaels have run the Bricklayers Arms since 2003. Together with head chef Claude Paillet, the pair have built up the pub's reputation in recent years, particularly for its food. In eight years, the Michaels have also increased the pub's profit margins from 49 per cent to nearly 65 per cent.

What factors make your pub outstanding, and why?

Alvin believes the pub's food offer is one of its biggest draws, together with its location and what he calls "welcoming, professional and knowledgeable staff". Consistency of food is maintained by making much of the produce in-house, Alvin says, and the pub is in a beautiful village only minutes from major road routes and mainline railway stations. "Plus the staff are trained in every aspect of customer service," he adds.

How do you ensure excellent standards of service?

Having a dialogue with customers is vital, says Alvin, while staff meetings discuss the customer's experience. Maintaining enthusiasm among the front-of-house team is important, he adds. "We offer staff incentives, if they hit targets and importantly they take home 100 per cent of their tips".

How do you market and promote your pub?

The pub uses the usual array of marketing and promotional tools, including a

regularly updated website, emails to customers on its database, comment cards and ads in glossy magazines. "We've also built up good relationships with staff from luxury hotels in the area, which helps encourage a healthy stream of custom from their guests," says Alvin.

Demonstrate how the business has been improved over the past 12 months.

Alvin says that among the moves to improve the Bricklayers as a business have been closer relations with customers via comment cards; renegotiating the pub's energy suppliers, reducing costs by 20 per cent; signing up with a booking agency which has helped trigger new sales; new, cheaper cuts of meat and fish that appeal to customers but which help maintain margins; cutting staffing costs without reducing service and reducing advertising costs by 40 per cent.

Why should you win this award?

The Bricklayers, says Alvin, is an award-winning pub which offers customers a great experience in fantastic surroundings. "We receive excellent reviews but we're not content to rest on our laurels. We continue to hire the best staff, attract new markets and invest in the business," he says. "We've created a great place to work for our staff and we've worked hard to achieve customer satisfaction and loyalty, even among those who live some distance away."



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FINALIST FACTS

- Wet/dry split: 31/69
- Website: www.bricklayersarms.co.uk
- Interesting fact: The Bricklayers Arms started life as two cottages, built in 1722

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