

Just the tonic

Sampling in action

Phil Argent, head of digital and chief operating officer at Gin Festival, says that event businesses need to think digital. Here, he discusses the festival's growth and cashless

Last month, the UK's love of gin was confirmed by a UHY Hacker Young report that noted a 107 per cent surge in the number of UK distilleries, thanks largely in part to the popularity of artisan gin. Indeed, sales of gin have shot up by 12 per cent in the last 12 months, helping the HM Treasury for the first time ever to secure more revenue from the sale of spirits than beer.

Gin's meteoric rise in popularity has been immortalised in the creation of a number of gin events across the country. In fact, in 2013, Gin Festival launched, championing small gin producers, carving a niche where the nation's gin-lovers could learn more about the spirit.

Digital approach

In 2013, Gin Festival organised a handful of events and each welcomed a few hundred visitors. Some four years on and Gin Festival now organises 42 events, attracting between 4,000 and 10,000 people per weekend. It's a growing brand that has exciting plans to develop.

So, for Phil Argent, head of digital and chief operating officer at Gin Festival, digital solutions and technological innovations feature heavily in the event's transformation.

"One of the challenges within the events industry, there's a blind spot when it comes to digital in the way you manage your business," explains Argent, quite fearlessly. He argues that events businesses are run based on an individual's passion for events, and not whether they make good business sense. Instead, he suggests that events businesses – suppliers and organisers – should adopt a digital approach to commerce and operations.

"I have no fear of digital," he adds. "I know enough about it to know that if you implement or execute any component of digital you have to do it from start to finish otherwise it will fail."

Getting rid of friction

Argent joined Gin Festival just six months ago. With a background in digital, he has taken a transactional approach to the

business, opting to introduce a mandatory cashless solution to all Gin Festival events.

"From my perspective, I looked at the friction. So, for example, how easy is it to take part in an event? I looked at the conventional model of entry, wristbands and the time it takes for people to get to the bar and spend money."

Argent says that all of those processes make it difficult for a visitor to start enjoying the event and spend cash. Hence, he has now introduced a digital strategy and a cashless system that provides a seamless process of access control and with pre-topped up wristbands, customers have quick access to a drink. Without putting a hand in their pocket.

Over the last two months, Gin Festival has used a cashless system – created by Weezevent, a ticketing and cashless specialist – on three of its events. Argent explains just one of the reasons for its introduction: "There are several savings that organisers will resonate with. One was looking at the cost of running a business and the profit and loss. One of the bits that we have to manage is the cash that

is going through our tills and getting cash off site. We were paying Securicor a lot of money to come and get cash. We looked at the cost of doing cashless and we could instantly save money by not using Securicor. Forget about customer efficiency, that was a benefit alone. We could save so much money by reducing our cash and actually only having one Securicor truck at the event rather than having one per session."

Mass adoption

Pierre-Henri Deballon, a co-founder of Weezevent is in agreement. He says that less cash equals the need for less security, and cashless also means less theft and less queues at the bar.

Weezevent is the French ticketing and cashless solution that has mass adoption across music and sporting events in France, including Les Vieilles Charrues and Lollapalooza Paris. It opened an office in the UK and Ireland earlier this year and has provided cashless technology at three Gin Festival events in Guildford, Swindon and Edinburgh. At the till, bar staff use a scanner to scan a wristband that could be credited before or during the event. What's more, if the wristband is lost it can be blocked and replaced.

Now that Gin Festival has introduced a cashless system, Argent has noted a 28 per cent increase in revenue. He explains: "Previously, we had a cash bar but if people had bought a ticket then they would generally have bought more than one. When they came to the festival that person that had bought the tickets was also the person with the drinks tokens. Effectively, you had one purchaser in a



Gin talks and tastings

group of four. When we went cashless, we decided to give everyone a wristband, which they can top up before they come to the event. The difference in the income is that everyone can now have the choice to top up their wristband and go to the bar. Essentially, we had made it difficult for people to buy a drink."

Smooth solution

Deballon is convinced of the synergy between access control, ticketing and cashless. He argues that the success of cashless is founded on trust; equally, he admits that the UK's adoption of cashless is slower compared to its European counterparts because of historical technical glitches.

He explains that Weezevent's product is not dependent on Wi-Fi – indeed, Wi-Fi does make the experience better but the absence of Wi-Fi does not stop functionality. This is a major benefit to organisers that are looking for smooth and effective event technology solutions.

For example, Gin Festival's adoption of the cashless product has already seen positive results says Argent. Seventy-six per cent of all attendees loaded money on to their wristbands, 46 per cent of all top ups were done prior to attending Gin Festival, attendee marketing data increased by 33 per cent and drinks sales increased by 30 per cent, compared to previous shows.



Weezevent in operation

Increase income

Gin Festival's core demographic is 30-50-year-old women and they have embraced cashless. Argent says that he and his team have made it easier for women to go out and have a drink, allowing them to budget for the number of drinks they purchase by encouraging them to top-up their wristbands – £20 buys four drinks – before they get to the venue.

Yet, there's another great advantage to cashless. "We learned that through cashless if we can incentivise people to top up their wristbands before they get to the event, we know that we've got an increase in revenue in the first hour of an event."

Argent explains that efficient and smooth access at the venue, combined with pre-topped up wristbands, means that Gin Festival begins to generate further income within 20 minutes of visitors arriving because they continue to top up.

However, now that Argent is convinced that a mandatory cashless system is the way forward, how does he communicate that change in direction to visitors that have already purchased a ticket?

"We've sold virtually all of our tickets to our events this year so we have had to market to an audience that didn't know that this was the way to do things," he explains. "They are having to buy into cashless. Next year, we will have to run a slightly different marketing campaign to encourage people to buy their tickets and pre-top up their wristbands at the same time. But we could incentivise them to do that. For example, you could incentivise someone to pre-top up their wristband with £100 and then drinks would cost £4 instead of £5. And I know that if we put tickets for the London event up for sale now, and pushed cashless, I could have 60 per cent of the revenue and the event part paid for."

Save and make money

Argent praises cashless' many other benefits. It allows an organiser to analyse the rate of spend, plus you can monitor pinch points and staff. "Cashless tells us which bars are performing best and you can see if one member of staff is not operating correctly; you can take all sorts of real-time data.

"Now we are looking to the future. We are looking at creating a VIP pass, where a device at the bar will recognise who you are so you can have a tailored experience.



Visitors enjoy a drink

Also, we can track people's behaviour. You could invite a sponsor along and monetise the deal. You could build a completely different sponsorship model, built on data and not guesswork. That is powerful; and then you can renegotiate your sponsorship deals based on real-life engagement.

"Cashless saves you money on cash and you could make more money on sponsorship and those are two things any events company can do.

"Event and festival organisers need to change focus," Argent continues. "I have only been with Gin Festival for six months and I have re-engineered how it works to allow it to scale from a digital point of view.

"Also in terms of the future, we are not an events business; we are a digital company. I think every business is a digital

business because of the way you get your customers, the way you sell tickets," Argent adds further.

"A lot of events don't run themselves as digital businesses; they run themselves like a man in a van. I think we [industry] need a mindset change and that is why we [Gin Festival] are confidently pushing through all of our digital changes because we offer a digital journey for our customer from Facebook to email acquisition, to buy a ticket on our platform and go cashless."

Argent concludes: "We are in a position where we can sell 130,000 tickets through a website and get customers to pre-load their wristbands with money.

"It means that the festival is already paid for, money is in the bank for the gin and we can concentrate on actually running the event itself."