

Serving up good vibes for the New Year

My job: Michael Spillane

In conversation with John Daly

Michael Spillane is never likely to forget his very first day working in the bar business. The venue was Canty's Bar on Cork's Pembroke Street, and the date was Holy Thursday, 50 years ago. "I had a very informal chat with Dave Canty, and he asked me to work over Easter to see how it worked out," Michael recalled. "I remember him saying, 'see if you like it, and if you don't there's nothing lost but a few nights'. That was all of 50 years ago, but it doesn't feel like it."

As an apprentice, Michael was limited to cleaning and observing — gaining the foundation skills in a profession that would become his life's calling.

"My job was stocking shelves, helping with deliveries and keeping the premises clean. After six months, I got to pull my first pint, but only under the strict supervision of a senior barman."

Canty's had a mixed clientele, divided between office workers, public servants, professional types and a vibrant rugby following — each group a distinctive entity, some of which required more tact than others.

"Many customers were men who would only take a pint from their preferred barman, the idea of a young upstart like myself doing it was unheard of," he smiled.

"When coolers came in you would have one customer who wanted his pint cold, another wanted it normal, and a third who liked half and half. You needed to know your customers."

In a primarily draught business, the variety of pint glasses ranged from the straight container to the 'nonic' with its telltale bulbous top to the fluted tulip style still popular today.

"Again, certain customers would only drink from certain glasses, and you didn't want to get that wrong."

This was the era when customer loyalty was the mark of any successful public house, and a bar staff who knew by heart the quirks and traits of a varied clientele measured in the hundreds.

"The first customers of the day were postmen, who would come in between their first and second rounds. You would also have the telephone exchange staff who worked above the GPO on Oliver Plunkett Street coming after shifts. Canty's had a tremendous lunch trade, mostly bankers and legal



Michael Spillane, bar manager, Sunday's Well Boating & Tennis Club, who this year celebrates 50 years of service, and recalls an array of changes over his long career.

Picture: Des Barry

people from the South Mall."

Unlike the bar menus of 2015 with their rich variety, the menu offerings of 1966 were slightly more limited.

"It was really just toasted sandwiches and soup, that was it, and there was no chance of tea or coffee. The food element of the trade did gear up slowly in the 1970s, though, and I remember getting in a microwave at one point - £600 it cost, an enormous sum at the time. Suddenly, food was ready in two minutes, it changed everything."

In an era when large stores like Cash's, the Munster Arcade and Hickey's were amongst the biggest city centre employers, Canty's hummed with an ebb and flow of commerce dictated by the shifts and schedules of its broad customer base.

"Many buildings in the city centre were family homes over the shop in those days, all people who would have had their locals."

During his early years in the trade, single ladies were a rarity in pubs. "You simply never saw a woman on her own, and most bars wouldn't have served a

single lady anyway," he recalled. "But as women became a bigger part of the workforce and professions, that attitude changed, as it needed to."

In tandem with the standard requirements you need to be a good barman — discretion, humour, efficiency and responsibility — Michael also lists mathematician, particularly in the days before calculators.

"You had a large variety of drinks, all at different prices, and, on a busy night, being able to add, subtract and multiply rounds of ten different prices — all in your head - and still have ready a joke for the counter," he smiled. "I remember serving Barley Wine on draught, a product strictly limited to two pints per customer — lethal it was, blow the head off you."

The advent of decimalisation in 1971 brought big change — especially in the price of the pint: "Up to that it was a half crown, two and six in old money. Then, overnight, it went to fifteen pence, and there was war. It was a huge jump, and customers went wild." Having learned the trade from the

ground up at Canty's over more than a decade, he subsequently moved on to manage another city centre premises, The Parnell, before eventually running his own establishment, The Pier Head in Blackrock throughout the 1980s.

As the business moved slowly away from the era where barmen wore long aprons and served a predominantly male clientele, the advent of technology continued to transform the trade.

"I remember when video first came out, we were one of the first pubs to buy a machine. We would show bootleg Match of the Day tapes on a Monday night — a massive success, you couldn't

get in the door all evening."

Michael has particular memories of the Michael Jackson concert at Páirc Uí Chaoimh in 1988: "It was the biggest musical event Cork had ever seen, and even though we were well stocked with staff and products at The Pier Head, we were overwhelmed. The crowds just kept coming right up to five o'clock in the morning, and I remember the Guards telling us to stay open to help keep the peace. We eventually closed around 7am. And even with all those thousands of people all over the Marina and the city, there were very few public disorder incidents."

Name: Michael Spillane

Occupation: Bar manager, Sunday's Well Boating & Tennis Club

Background: Celebrating 50 years in the bar trade this year, he has worked in a number of different establishments in Cork, and seen five decades worth of changes in the trends and habits of the industry.

In a stressful profession, Michael is quick to underline the importance of support through the challenging times, adding his own twist to the old adage that behind every successful man there is a good woman.

"I've been blessed with two wonderful women in this life, my wife Theresa and daughter Audrey. They have been with me through it all, the thick and the thin, and made the journey all the better for sharing it."

Now settled as Manager of Sunday's Well Boating & Tennis Club since 1992, Michael continues to observe an industry evolving in everything from food to entertainment to the customers themselves. Asked to highlight the big changes in the pub trade in his 50 years, he cites the decline of customer loyalty as one of the biggest.

"Up to the 60s and 70s, customers were regulars for life. People who lived in the suburbs would drink in their local in town, and nowhere else. That attitude is virtually extinct now. Also sadly gone are the Cork characters, those colourful types who were a real part of the city's fabric."

As to what makes the perfect barman, he lists three essentials: "Personality, cop on and an eye for the customer. Give every customer your best, but give your regulars your very best, because they're the ones who really matter."

JOB of the WEEK

Job: The Census Statistics Office (CSO) wants to hire a team of census enumerators to help it conduct the next nationwide census, which will be held on April 24, 2016.

Duties: Working on a temporary basis, each enumerator will be expected to deliver and collect census forms in their respective areas over a ten week period starting on March 21. You will earn about €2,400 for the work.

Qualifications: You must have a good level of physical fitness, be comfortable working with the public, and have good organisational skills. You must also ensure that all of the required documentation is completed correctly.

Applications: The application period opens on January 5 and will stay open for three days. Full details of the job requirements, and a handy questionnaire which will help determine if this is the job for you are available on www.census.ie.

Learning key public relations lessons from winter floods

John Daly

In a winter where rain, wind and flooding continue to dominate the headlines, the public relations lessons have impacted on Government, local communities and utility organisations.

"Who knew that Parteen Weir and the Inniscarra Dam would become two of the most infamous places in Ireland capable of striking fear at their mere mention," says Jack Murray, CEO and founder of Mediahq.com.

"Being an ESB spokesperson at a time of flooding has to be one of the greatest hospital passes in Irish public relations. For many decades the State electricity supplier has controlled the water flows on the Shannon in order to generate electricity from hydropower — a situation that puts the company in an unenviable position in times of flooding as it has to release extra water for safety reasons," he observes.

"It has led to the seemingly bizarre situation where an ESB spokesperson comes on the news each evening to tell a stressed, damp and not very tolerant public that it is going to release more water on top of them."

While the relentless rain causing all the problems cannot be stopped, taking the decision to release the water in times of crisis away from the ESB and making it the responsibility of the National Co-Ordination Group would result in better public relations for the agency, he suggests.

"When the heavy floods first hit at

the beginning of December, many businesses without insurance raced to criticise politicians in an apparent effort to get help. The image of the Shannon flooding in Athlone was crystallised by live reports from its broken banks on the evening news.

"It painted a picture of a crisis at the heart of each town, but the real story was different. Flooding was not widespread and only affected isolated areas in each location," he added.

While the Government acted quickly with a compensation scheme for businesses without insurance, the damage had been done as a false impression had been created that shops were not open in the run-up to Christmas.

"This miscommunication put really unnecessary pressure on hard-pressed local businesses, and also led to a raft of reports about how these towns actually are open for business."

The lesson is not to lose perspective - even in a crisis, Mr Murray believes.

"During this period of flooding early misconceptions were fuelled by many media outlets making an equivalence between the relatively small flooding in towns like Ballinalsoe and the devastation in places of county Clare."

The flooding crisis has shown the power of open data and giving the facts to public and letting them act.

"Just over two years ago the Office of Public Works launched Water-level.ie to very little fanfare — a simple and powerful service that gives live readings every 15 minutes of the water levels at 380 monitoring stations in river, lake and tidal locations through-

out Ireland. The service has been one of the public relations stars of the current flooding and should be a lesson to Government about sharing more live information," he says.

"While it has been a great help, there is a much more proactive role the Government could be taking on interpreting the data and making their own early warnings through social media."

Once a crisis takes hold, people are on high alert and there is a tendency, especially in Ireland, to 'over warn', he believes.

"I have a view that this can sometimes be a back-covering mechanism to make sure that no one can say they didn't get adequate notice," he said.

"Information from trusted sources is very powerful, and the public relations lesson here is that we should always tell it straight and not feel the need to turn it up a notch and end up scaring people."

Overall, the Government's approach was a lesson in taking control of the story, Jack Murray believes. Convening the National Co-Ordination Group on a daily basis allowed them to shape the news agenda and ensure they had an element of control on a very difficult situation.

"They decided quickly to establish a €5 million fund to hard-pressed small businesses without insurance in the flood affected areas.

"The initial €5,000 payment is generous, and they added the extra bonus of not having an arduous application process. You'd never guess there is an election on the way," he added.

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MATRIX RECRUITMENT	SENIOR FINANCIAL ACCOUNTANT	WATERFORD	15036346
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CUSTOMER-SERVICES/LANGUAGES			
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CLARK	JUNIOR RECEPTIONIST	DUBLIN	15036253
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ENGINEERING			
BIOPHARMA ENGINEERING LTD	WORKING ABROAD - COME HOME?	CORK	15036218
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LOGISKILLS	FREIGHT SALES REPRESENTATIVE	CORK	15034028
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IT			
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