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VinTank sparks collision between wine and digital age

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LISA STOCKON | Posted: Saturday, June 25, 2011 4:30 pm | (0) Comments

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J.L. Sousa TUESDAY - JUNE 14, 2011 - NAPA, CA - VinTank is a two-and-a-half year old digital think tank for the wine industry, led by Chief Strategy Officer Paul Mabray, right. From left, Chief Fire Starter Clay Wallin, Chief Marketing Officer Sheri Hebbeln and Chief Technology Officer James Jory. J.L. Sousa/Register [Buy this photo](#)

As well known as the wine industry is to oenophiles for relentlessly pushing the limits to improve quality and processes, it is equally notorious amongst techies and digital marketers for being slow to take advantage of the digital space. VinTank, a Napa-based strategic consulting and business development firm was created to change that.

“There’s a gaping hole in the wine industry’s understanding of digital,” declared Paul Mabray, VinTank’s chief strategy officer.

The company takes its name from the idea of think tanks, which were historically used to solve complex problems by gathering the brightest minds to work together in analyzing hindrances and developing solutions to overcome them.

With a company mission to “bring wine closer to technology in order to explore new opportunities for marketing and selling wine in a digital world,” the VinTank team considers itself a modern day think tank capable of completing this task.

Taking a lesson Mabray said was learned from the example set by Robert Mondavi, VinTank vows to disclose its discoveries and information with the rest of the industry the same way Mondavi shared his winemaking knowledge.

In May of 2009, the company released its first white paper titled “The State of Wine Industry Social

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Media.”

On their website, where the report can be downloaded free of charge, the introduction calls it a “Herculean labor of love.” According to Mabray, the white paper has been downloaded more than 45,000 times.

Other knowledge sharing includes “pulse reports” —shorter explorations of technology and Internet trends as they affect the wine industry. Topics covered include wine search engines, websites and widgets, iPhone apps and more.

In a move that Mabray acknowledged had some people taken aback, VinTank acquired social media monitoring company Cruvee and then made it available for free to anyone who wants to see what is being said about their brand, by whom and where. Mabray said the technology went from 400 users to 1,700 in the first two months after they purchased it.

Of course, as much as the team said it loves to indulge in what Mabray called “a vibe that still exists” when talking about the free trading of information, VinTank is not a nonprofit, and must make money somewhere. The profitability half of their business model is in their consulting services.

Clay Wallin, partner and “chief fire starter,” said he sees VinTank as the “chief guide” that helps the wine and technology industries collide. The company’s consulting services are divided into two categories: Wine to Tech and Tech to Wine.

The former is for wineries looking to work with digital entities, or find their online consumers directly, to increase online sales, brand development and exposure. The “Digital Pipeline Management” service that VinTank offers promises to “introduce and manage your brand with online retailers, marketing agents, online wine clubs, consumer marketing portals, direct to trade and other new online channels.”

Tech to Wine is applicable to technology companies looking to bring software and applications to the wine industry, or for non-wine companies looking to add wine marketing or content to their sites. According to its website, VinTank offers to guide these types of clients through “one of the most complicated and regulated industries in the U.S.,” by employing their technology expertise and wine industry relationships.

The third component of the VinTank strategy is innovative product development. At the end of May, the company launched the first cross-platform social game created for wine. “Our goal was to create a fun, engaging way for wineries to connect with people who already love both wine and social media,” Mabray explained.

The game asks people to review wines from the participating wineries to win badges that are then exchanged for prizes ranging from discounts and ringtones to tastings and trips abroad. The game can currently be played on web applications WineLog and Adegga and mobile apps Drync, Hello Vino and iRhone, with more platforms to come.

The game launched with 35 sponsors that included many local wineries such as Girard, Rutherford Hill and Folie a Deux; entire regions including Wines of France and Vibrant Rioja; and wine industry personalities like Gary Vaynerchuk and Leslie Sbrocco. The sponsors have all paid to interact with their customers through mobile advertising. The VinPass team said additional sponsors will be added on a monthly basis.

Wallin explained that the concept takes advantage of existing behaviors; it appeals to people who are already playing games on social networks and the networks are all targeted to wine enthusiasts, he said.

“We will be able to analyze which brands do best — which brands matter — on which platforms,” he added. Mabray said they will then be able to take that information and get a clearer understanding of who the interested demographic is for each brand.

As the company looks toward the future, Mabray said the number one goal remains the same: to bring wine and digital together.

In talking about what that will look like, he set his professional persona aside and joked “it’s gonna be crazy, ‘cause that’s how we roll.”

