

Responsible Service In Practice: Managing Intoxicated Patrons – Complete Hospitality Training

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Details:

Refusing service to an intoxicated patron is not a customer service judgement call. Supplying alcohol to a person who is drunk or intoxicated is an offence under Australian liquor law, and that is the reason RSA is a legal prerequisite rather than a nice-to-have.

That framing matters, because staff who understand a refusal as a legal duty rather than a personal choice find it far easier to carry out. "I'm not allowed to" is a much stronger position to hold at 11pm than "I don't think you should".

The specific offence, the wording and the penalties are set by each state and territory separately. Liability can attach to the individual serving as well as to the licensee, and repeated incidents put the licence itself at risk. Confirm the exact position with the regulator for your own jurisdiction — see who needs an RSA course for who those regulators are.

The duty does not depend on whether the patron became intoxicated at your venue. It concerns their state at the moment you serve them.

Four situations to rehearse before a busy shift

The source RSA article makes the duty concrete. At a noisy bar, do not judge intoxication from volume alone; watch for a change in coordination, speech and drinking pattern, and get a supervisor when the signs are unclear. At a quiet dinner, a guest may be slurring or spilling without disrupting anyone, so a discreet refusal and help with a safe next step may be more appropriate than a public confrontation. After a refusal, tell the team so the same person cannot simply order from another service point. At a festival or large event, notice repeated sample requests and coordinate with supervisors under the event's procedure before the situation escalates.

These are examples for staff discussion, not a substitute for your venue's RSA procedure or the rules of the state or territory where you work. The assessed signs, intervention and refusal steps below provide the formal framework.

What the unit actually requires you to be able to do

This is worth reading closely, because it is the most concrete answer available to "what does RSA training cover". The assessment requirements for SITHFAB021 Provide responsible service of alcohol require you to demonstrate, among other things:

Outline the procedure to refuse sale or service of alcohol, and to assist, each of three distinct groups of intoxicated customers: those in emotional or physical distress those with no food consumption during extended service of alcohol those who appear to be under the effect of illicit substances or other drugs

Identify customers to whom sale or service must be refused under your state or territory's legislation, including minors and those purchasing on behalf of minors

Request and obtain acceptable proof of age before sale or service, where appropriate

Refuse sale or service in a professional manner and state the reasons for the refusal

Name at least three early indicators of intoxication and outline suitable intervention strategies to prevent intoxication

Demonstrate appropriate communication and conflict-resolution skills asking two different intoxicated customers to leave the premises: one compliant customer, and one difficult customer refusing to leave

Source and explain two organisational or house policies and procedures that must be followed for the responsible sale or service of alcohol

Use knowledge of industry requirements and professional standards to determine the volume for standard drinks or samples — performance criterion 2.1 of the unit

Three things follow from that list.

First, the unit is built around three specific risk categories, not one generic drunk person. Distress, an empty stomach and the possibility of other substances change what the right response is, and the unit expects you to know the difference.

Second, it requires early indicators and prevention, not just refusal. The point at which the job is done well is before anyone has to be asked to leave. The unit makes that explicit in the title of its second element, Assist customers to drink within appropriate limits — the framing is assistance, not enforcement.

Third, that last requirement — the difficult customer who refuses to leave — is why a genuine RSA course needs a trainer present or a properly run equivalent. It cannot be assessed by a multiple-choice form. See the difference between a good and a bad course provider.

One more requirement is easy to skim past and is worth pulling out. The unit does not only ask you to know the law; it asks you to source and explain two of your own venue's policies for responsible sale or service. House policy is treated as part of the competency, not as an optional local overlay. If your venue cannot produce a written policy on refusal, that is a gap in the venue, not in you.

Recognising intoxication

Assessment is behavioural and cumulative rather than any single sign. Trained staff watch for changes across four areas:

Area	What to watch
Speech	Slurring, becoming loud, difficulty following conversation, repeating
Balance and coordination	Unsteadiness, swaying, difficulty with stairs, spilling drinks, fumbling money
Behaviour	Becoming argumentative, overly friendly, boisterous, withdrawn, annoying other patrons
Appearance	Bloodshot eyes, glazed expression, unfocused gaze, dishevelment

What matters is change against that person's own baseline across the session. This is why observing patrons through the night, rather than only at the point of order, is the actual skill. Someone who arrives loud and stays loud is not necessarily intoxicated. Someone who arrives quiet and becomes loud has changed.

Two practical points the unit's three risk categories point at:

Intoxication is not always obvious in a person with high tolerance, and it is easy to miss where the presentation looks like distress rather than drunkenness. That is the first category.

A person's condition can escalate quickly after they stop drinking , because alcohol already consumed is still being absorbed. Someone who has been served steadily for three hours with nothing to eat — the second category — can deteriorate visibly after their last drink. That is a reason to take an early indicator seriously rather than wait and see.

Erratic drinking patterns: the early sign the unit names outright

The four-area table above is about how a person looks. The unit also requires knowledge of a second, earlier category of signal: how a person orders . Performance criterion 2.3 of SITHFAB021 is to identify erratic drinking patterns as an early sign of possible intoxication and take appropriate action , and the unit's knowledge evidence names the patterns:

Erratic pattern named in the unit	What it looks like at the bar
Mixing a wide range of drink types	Beer, then spirits, then shots, then wine across one session
Drinking quickly and in quick succession	Rounds arriving faster than they can reasonably be consumed
Ordering more than one drink for own consumption	Two drinks ordered at once, for one person
Consistently returning to request more samples	Repeat approaches at a tasting bar, cellar door or festival stand
Ordering multiple or large samples	Unusually large tasting pours, or several at a time
Ordering "triple shots" or extra-large drinks	A request for a measure well above the standard serve

This list is the single most useful thing on the page for someone actually behind a bar, because every item on it is visible before any of the speech, balance or appearance signs appear. It is also the reason cellar doors, tastings and festival bars get their own mention: two of the six patterns are specific to sampling environments, where the volume consumed is easy for both staff and patron to lose track of.

The matching action is not refusal. At this stage it is the intervention set below — pacing, food, water, standard measures — which is why the unit puts these patterns in the element about helping customers stay within limits rather than the element about refusing them.

Refusing service well

The technique that works is early, calm and non-negotiable.

Do it early. Refusing at the point where signs first appear is far easier than refusing someone who is already heavily intoxicated. Waiting makes it harder for everyone, including the patron.

Be private and matter-of-fact. Speak quietly rather than across the bar. Public refusal invites a public argument, and an audience raises the cost of backing down for both of you.

Be clear and brief. State the decision, do not debate it, and do not open a negotiation. Long explanations invite bargaining.

State the reason, and let it be the law rather than a verdict on them. The unit requires you to state the reason for a refusal. "I'm not able to serve you any more tonight" is easier to accept than a judgement of someone's behaviour, and it is also more accurate.

Offer assistance, and the unit names which kinds. Refusal on its own is only half the requirement. SITHFAB021 lists three appropriate means of assistance, and they are worth knowing as a set because they cover the three ways a refused patron actually gets home safely:

Assist the customer to connect with their designated driver or companions — the first question is usually who else is with them

Offer alternatives to alcohol, including food or non-alcoholic drinks — this is the response to the empty-stomach case, and it lets the patron stay rather than be ejected

Organise or provide relevant information on transport for a customer wishing to leave — a taxi or rideshare booked, or the information to book one

All three are to be carried out in accordance with house policy , which is the other reason the unit asks you to know two of your venue's policies by heart.

Do not reverse it. Once refused, the decision holds for the session. Reversing it teaches every patron watching that persistence works.

Intervention before refusal

The unit asks for intervention strategies to prevent intoxication, which is a different skill from refusing. In practice that means things like slowing the rate of service, making food visible and easy to order, offering water without being asked, keeping non-alcoholic options genuinely appealing rather than an afterthought, and using standard measures consistently so a round is what the patron thinks it is.

That last one is not a soft skill, and the unit treats it as knowledge rather than habit: performance criterion 2.1 requires you to use knowledge of industry requirements and professional standards to determine the volume for standard drinks or samples . SITHFAB023 Operate a bar requires the use of correct equipment, ingredients and standard measures , and SITHFAB030 Prepare and serve cocktails requires consistent quality, volume and appearance. A bar that free-pours is not just losing margin; it has no idea how much alcohol it has actually served anyone, and it cannot honestly apply the erratic-pattern test above either.

The parts that make it stick

Tell the rest of the team. A refusal that is not communicated fails the moment the patron approaches another staff member, or sends a friend to buy on their behalf. Secondary supply is the most common way a refusal is defeated, and the unit expressly requires you to identify people purchasing on behalf of minors as well.

Handover is a formal part of bar operations, not an informal courtesy. SITHFAB023 lists the handover information a bar attendant must be able to pass on: current customer information, including drink preferences and customer problems ; issues relating to beverage quality; and stock requirements. "Customer problems" is where a refusal belongs.

Have management support in advance. Staff refuse confidently when they know the venue will back them, and when the venue's expectations were set before the shift rather than during the incident.

Record it. An incident log protects the venue and the individual, and demonstrates that the venue takes its obligations seriously if a regulator ever asks.

Who carries the legal responsibility

Staff carry the duty in the moment. The licensee carries the duty for the system, and in Victoria that is set out in named sections of the Liquor Control Reform Act 1998 rather than left to good practice:

Section	Duty on the licensee	Penalty
s 108AB	Ensure anyone who sells, offers for sale or serves liquor has	60 penalty units

	completed an approved RSA program — in the 3 years before first serving, or within one month after first serving	
s 108AC	Ensure each person who sells, offers for sale or serves liquor completes an approved RSA program within 3 years of last completing one	60 penalty units
s 108AD	Keep RSA certificates at the licensed premises demonstrating ss 26B, 108AA, 108AB and 108AC are satisfied	5 penalty units
s 108AE	Produce those certificates on request by a police officer or liquor inspector, with the names and first-service dates of the people they cover	5 penalty units each

Two further Victorian provisions sit above those. Section 26B is not an offence at all but a restriction on the grant of a licence: an applicant for a general, on-premises, late night or packaged liquor licence must have completed an approved RSA program in the 3 years before applying . Section 108AA then requires the licensee, or the responsible person for a body corporate, to complete an approved program within 3 years of last completing one, at 60 penalty units .

The value of a penalty unit is indexed each financial year under the Monetary Units Act 2004 , so the statutory figure is the number of units, not a dollar amount. Check the current value rather than relying on one published on a web page.

The practical reading for a staff member: a manager who tells you to serve someone is exposing the licensee under s 108AB and s 108AC as well as exposing you. It is not a favour you are doing the venue.

Know when to stop handling it yourself. If a refusal escalates, it becomes a security and safety matter, not a service one. See health and safety best practice in hospitality and dealing with difficult guests .

Why the duty is framed this way

RSA is often read as a rule about one patron and one drink. The unit's knowledge evidence frames it much wider: it requires you to understand the impacts of excessive drinking across six groups at once, and the list explains why liquor law puts the duty on the person pouring.

Who is affected	What the unit names
The individual drinking	Physical and mental health, productivity, emotional behaviour
People around them	Family members, friends, colleagues
The local area	The local neighbourhood and community
The venue	Hospitality venues, the premises and its staff
The industry	The liquor industry as a whole

Public agencies	Local police, health facilities, road authorities, local councils
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The last row is the one most people have never seen written down, and it is the most clarifying. A single over-service decision can end up costing police time, an emergency department bed, a road authority's crash statistics and a council's amenity complaints. That is the reason the obligation is statutory and personal rather than a matter of house style.

A word about restraint

Victoria's RSA course content expressly covers the use of prone restraint , alongside drink spiking, ID checks and secondary supply, harm minimisation, and recognising, preventing and responding to sexual harassment and assault at a licensed venue. That subject is on the syllabus because it has gone badly wrong in venues.

Physical intervention is a security function with its own training, its own law and its own risks. It is not part of the food and beverage attendant's role, and nothing on this page should be read as guidance on it. If a situation is heading that way, escalate.

Related duties

RSA obligations extend well beyond intoxication: minors, secondary supply, proof of age, and in some jurisdictions duties around patrons leaving the premises. Requirements vary by state — see the RSA page for the position in each, and how long does an RSA last for currency.

Victoria's certification also has a second stage beyond the course: after SITHFAB021 , the LCV Learning Hub pre-training survey, the Sexual Harassment and Assault: Recognise, Prevent and Respond module and the post-training survey, before an RSA Certificate of Completion exists at all. See how to get an RSA certificate .

Where the training sits

The national unit is SITHFAB021 Provide responsible service of alcohol , which we hold on scope through the SITSS00071 Responsible service of alcohol skill set. It is also a core unit of SIT30722 Certificate III in Hospitality (Restaurant Front of House) , where responsible service is compulsory rather than elective, and a prerequisite to SITHFAB023 Operate a bar .

Conflict management appears again further up the qualification structure. SITXCOM010 Manage conflict is a core unit of both SIT40422 Certificate IV in Hospitality and SIT50422 Diploma of Hospitality Management , and SIRXCEG008 Manage disrespectful, aggressive or abusive customers is available as an elective in the Certificate III. If refusals are a regular part of your week, those are the units that build on this one. See the Certificate IV in Hospitality and the bartending course .

About us

We are Complete Hospitality Training , RTO 3722, CRICOS 04242E. Level 3, 28 Elizabeth Street, Melbourne VIC 3000, and 410 Elizabeth Street, Surry Hills NSW 2010. Contact melbourne@cht.edu.au or +61 3 9654 1554 .

We link to the relevant course and regulatory sources in this guide. Check those sources for current requirements, and confirm course availability, delivery, fees and entry requirements with us before enrolling.

Source records and further guidance

We link the unit records and regulator guidance relevant to this page below. Check the current source before making an enrolment, licensing or employment decision.

SITHFAB021 Provide responsible service of alcohol

SITHFAB023 Operate a bar

SITHFAB030 Prepare and serve cocktails

SIT30722 Certificate III in Hospitality (Restaurant Front of House)

SIT40422 Certificate IV in Hospitality

Responsible Service of Alcohol training requirements (Victoria)

Can I be personally fined?

Liability can attach to the individual supplying the alcohol, not only to the venue. The specific offence and penalty are set by your state or territory, so confirm the position with your own regulator rather than assuming a national figure.

What counts as an erratic drinking pattern?

The unit names six: mixing a wide range of drink types, drinking quickly and in quick succession, ordering more than one drink for their own consumption, consistently returning to request more samples, ordering multiple or large samples, and ordering "triple shots" or extra-large drinks. Performance criterion 2.3 treats these as an early sign of possible intoxication, so the expected response is intervention rather than refusal.

What if they became intoxicated somewhere else?

The duty still applies. It concerns the patron's state when you serve them, not where they got that way.

Who is legally responsible for making sure staff are trained?

In Victoria the licensee is, expressly. Section 108AB of the Liquor Control Reform Act 1998 requires the licensee to ensure anyone who sells, offers for sale or serves liquor has completed an approved RSA program, and s 108AC requires them to ensure each of those people refreshes it within 3 years. Both carry 60 penalty units. Sections 108AD and 108AE add the duty to keep the certificates on the premises and produce them on request.

What if my manager tells me to serve them?

Raise it with management before it happens rather than during a shift. The exposure does not sit only with the venue, and an instruction from a supervisor is not a defence you should be relying on.

What does my venue's own policy have to do with it?

More than most people expect. The unit requires you to source and explain two organisational or house policies and procedures for responsible sale or service, and it requires the means of assistance to be offered in accordance with house policy. House policy is assessed content, not local colour.

How many signs do I need before I refuse?

The unit asks you to know at least three early indicators, but it is not a scoring system. The judgement is about change in that person across the session, and the unit's emphasis on early indicators and on prevention suggests acting sooner rather than accumulating evidence.

Someone seems distressed rather than drunk. What then?

That is one of the three groups the unit specifically requires you to have a procedure for. The requirement is to refuse and assist, so the answer is not simply to decline service and move on.

What about someone who has eaten nothing all night?

Also one of the three named groups. Food, water and slowing the rate of service are the intervention strategies the unit is pointing at, and the risk of a sudden deterioration after their last drink is real.

What if I think other drugs are involved?

The third named group. Your venue should have a procedure; if it does not, that is worth raising. This is one of the situations where escalating rather than managing it yourself is usually right.

What are the three kinds of assistance I should offer?

Connecting the customer with their designated driver or companions; offering alternatives to alcohol including food or non-alcoholic drinks; and organising or providing transport information for someone who wants to leave. Those are the three the unit names.

Can I refuse entry as well as service?

Venues generally may refuse entry to an intoxicated person. Confirm your venue's policy and your state's rules, and note that in New South Wales security staff and crowd controllers have their own RSA requirement.

What about someone buying for an intoxicated friend?

Secondary supply is the usual way a refusal is defeated. Watch for it, communicate refusals to the whole team, and remember the unit expressly covers purchases made on behalf of minors too.

Do I have to check ID?

The unit requires you to be able to request and obtain acceptable proof of age before sale or service where appropriate. What counts as acceptable is set by your state.

Should refusals be written down?

Yes, as a matter of practice. It protects the venue and the individual staff member, and it makes the refusal survive a shift change.

Does the RSA course cover physical restraint?

Victorian RSA content covers the use of prone restraint as a subject. That is not the same as training you to do it. Physical intervention is a security function with separate training and separate law.

Does any of this apply to gaming areas?

Gaming has its own scheme and its own harm-minimisation obligations. In Victoria, Responsible Service of Gaming is free government-delivered training that a nationally recognised unit does not substitute for. See how to get a bar and gaming licence (</news/how-do-i-get-my-bar-gaming-license/>).