Grower feedback and developing relationships

Chester Osborn
d’Arenberg Wines

Abstract
Developing and maintaining relationships with grapegrowers is immensely important in the many aspects of maintaining the inflow of grapes desired by the winemaker. At d’Arenberg where there are very high quality expectations, relationships with grapegrowers are vital and take up a large part of the company's time. This paper explains ways of developing relationships with growers, and shows the advantages. This argument will be approached from the need to satisfy the Quality Management System ISO 9001 and ISO 9004. This is the new system being implemented at d’Arenberg, and focuses on supplier and customer needs.

Discussion
A quality management principle is a comprehensive and fundamental rule or belief for leading and operating an organisation, and it is aimed at constantly improving performance over the long-term by focusing on customers, while addressing the needs of all other stakeholders as well. These eight principles are:

- Customer-focused organisation
- Leadership
- Involvement of people
- Process approach
- System approach to management
- Continual improvement
- Factual approach to decision-making
- Mutually beneficial supplier relationships

Each of these principles needs to be satisfied to achieve accreditation. They vary in their relevance to the topic being discussed, but all will be mentioned except the last principle, which will be expanded on fully.

Principle 1 – Customer-focused organisation
Customers principally want the best quality wine at a given price point. In order to achieve the best quality grapes possible winemakers need to convey vine growing systems and grape quality parameters to the grower. Given that the relationship between grower and winemaker is healthy, and the winemaker's requirements are within the grower's capacity the best quality grapes should be achieved.

Principle 2 – Leadership
Growers need to be told what kind of grapes to grow and how to grow them. This requires leadership from the winemaker or the grower liaison officer.

Principle 3 – Involvement of people
Some wineries still accept grapes by telephone, and only have contact with the grower when the grower lets the winemaker know that the grapes are ready. Each winery needs to work more closely with the grower, assigning a person from the winery who will co-ordinate aims and ideas.

Principle 4 – Process approach
The winery needs to define what it wants (and a grape growing process to achieve this), and to work with the grower to achieve the quality and yield of fruit at a level which the grower can sustain. This information can only be passed on and implemented if a good winemaker/grower relationship exists.

Principle 5 – System approach to management
The winery needs to systemise the interrelated processes to make its wines. This has little bearing on grower relationships, or the building thereof, unless growers show interest in learning about the system.

Principle 6 – Continual improvement
Through the grower-relationship channels, quality and processes to achieve a better relationship can be upgraded on a continuing basis.

Principle 7 – Factual approach to decision-making
Facts obtained from journals or via experience can be passed on to the grower to achieve the desired response, thereby aiding the relationship and further cultivating it.

Principle 8 – Mutually beneficial supplier relationships
This principle relates to the means of achieving the quality of grapes desired and is the main topic of this paper. If a winemaker does not develop a healthy working relationship with growers the chance of getting the variety, ripeness or quality of grapes, when required, becomes far less. The price may not be as desired, as well. Effectively, a poor relationship between grower and winemaker will lead to dissatisfaction between both, and could ultimately result in loss of supply. This is possible if the grower chooses not to follow the processes, but will be much reduced if a relationship is cultivated. If the grower fails to communicate effectively, or regularly, the problem will be obvious and adjustments to the grower and/or process may be possible to achieve the new target.

The benefits of forming and maintaining good grower relationships are as follows:

- Grapes of the desired variety, ripeness and quality.
- Grapes when the winemaker wants them.
- Grapes at the right price more regularly.
- Less stress, by removing the unknown/unpredictable.

Applying the principles of a mutually beneficial relationship leads to the following actions:

- Identifying and selecting key suppliers
- Establishing supplier relationships that balance short-term gains with long-term considerations for the organisation

Grower feedback and developing relationships

Chester Osborn
d’Arenberg Wines

Abstract
Developing and maintaining relationships with grapegrowers is immensely important in the many aspects of maintaining the inflow of grapes desired by the winemaker. At d’Arenberg where there are very high quality expectations, relationships with grapegrowers are vital and take up a large part of the company's time. This paper explains ways of developing relationships with growers, and shows the advantages. This argument will be approached from the need to satisfy the Quality Management System ISO 9001 and ISO 9004. This is the new system being implemented at d’Arenberg, and focuses on supplier and customer needs.

Discussion
A quality management principle is a comprehensive and fundamental rule or belief for leading and operating an organisation, and it is aimed at constantly improving performance over the long-term by focusing on customers, while addressing the needs of all other stakeholders as well. These eight principles are:

- Customer-focused organisation
- Leadership
- Involvement of people
- Process approach
- System approach to management
- Continual improvement
- Factual approach to decision-making
- Mutually beneficial supplier relationships

Each of these principles needs to be satisfied to achieve accreditation. They vary in their relevance to the topic being discussed, but all will be mentioned except the last principle, which will be expanded on fully.

Principle 1 – Customer-focused organisation
Customers principally want the best quality wine at a given price point. In order to achieve the best quality grapes possible winemakers need to convey vine growing systems and grape quality parameters to the grower. Given that the relationship between grower and winemaker is healthy, and the winemaker's requirements are within the grower's capacity the best quality grapes should be achieved.

Principle 2 – Leadership
Growers need to be told what kind of grapes to grow and how to grow them. This requires leadership from the winemaker or the grower liaison officer.

Principle 3 – Involvement of people
Some wineries still accept grapes by telephone, and only have contact with the grower when the grower lets the winemaker know that the grapes are ready. Each winery needs to work more closely with the grower, assigning a person from the winery who will co-ordinate aims and ideas.

Principle 4 – Process approach
The winery needs to define what it wants (and a grape growing process to achieve this), and to work with the grower to achieve the quality and yield of fruit at a level which the grower can sustain. This information can only be passed on and implemented if a good winemaker/grower relationship exists.

Principle 5 – System approach to management
The winery needs to systemise the interrelated processes to make its wines. This has little bearing on grower relationships, or the building thereof, unless growers show interest in learning about the system.

Principle 6 – Continual improvement
Through the grower-relationship channels, quality and processes to achieve a better relationship can be upgraded on a continuing basis.

Principle 7 – Factual approach to decision-making
Facts obtained from journals or via experience can be passed on to the grower to achieve the desired response, thereby aiding the relationship and further cultivating it.

Principle 8 – Mutually beneficial supplier relationships
This principle relates to the means of achieving the quality of grapes desired and is the main topic of this paper. If a winemaker does not develop a healthy working relationship with growers the chance of getting the variety, ripeness or quality of grapes, when required, becomes far less. The price may not be as desired, as well. Effectively, a poor relationship between grower and winemaker will lead to dissatisfaction between both, and could ultimately result in loss of supply. This is possible if the grower chooses not to follow the processes, but will be much reduced if a relationship is cultivated. If the grower fails to communicate effectively, or regularly, the problem will be obvious and adjustments to the grower and/or process may be possible to achieve the new target.

The benefits of forming and maintaining good grower relationships are as follows:

- Grapes of the desired variety, ripeness and quality.
- Grapes when the winemaker wants them.
- Grapes at the right price more regularly.
- Less stress, by removing the unknown/unpredictable.

Applying the principles of a mutually beneficial relationship leads to the following actions:

- Identifying and selecting key suppliers
- Establishing supplier relationships that balance short-term gains with long-term considerations for the organisation
by monitoring costs, increasing quality through discussing various methods, and increasing the return to the grower. This may save the grower from major blunders, for example, grafting incompatible varieties, planting the wrong clone and other processes associated with planting and growing. There is no doubt that information transfer between winemakers and growers is often very poor. Growers doing what they believe is right may differ vastly from what the winemaker wants. Establishing the information transfer is a responsibility which lies with both winemaker and grower, but it is easiest when initiated by the winemaker.

**Jointly establishing a clear understanding of customer needs**

The winemaker's understanding of the market needs is best discussed with the growers when tasting and comparing wines from barrel and bottle.

**Sharing information and future plans**

All meetings with growers, throughout the season, allow the time and opportunity for an exchange of information between grower and winemaker. Other than how to actually grow the desired grape, the grower's security risks can be abated by discussing demand, distribution, accolades for wines and winemakers, equipment, philosophies, wine styles, new products and expansions etc.

**Recognising supplier improvement and achievement**

Explaining to growers where their fruit has gone and how their new practices have influenced the style may give them satisfaction and justify the extra work that may have been required of the grower. Informing growers of accolades given to a particular wine which contains his grapes is an important way of recognising and praising the grower. The same may be achieved by keeping the grower informed of good reviews of the wine made from his grapes. Bonuses are also paid for Baume and quality.

**Identifying and selecting key suppliers**

The winery needs to identify which growers or which vineyards to purchase grapes from. This needs to come from one of three sources.

- Growers already supplying the desired quality
- Growers supplying grapes from vines that have the potential to meet quality demands
- New growers

**Establishing supplier relationships that balance short-term gains with long-term considerations for the organisation and society in general**

Growers tend to want the biggest dollar return per acre without compromising the relationship with the winery, whereas wineries want the best quality grapes at the lowest price. The means of arriving at an appropriate price for grapes can be further facilitated by developing and maintaining a healthy grower/winemaker relationship.

**Creating clear and open communication**

The key is to communicate frequently with each grower. Some are happy with less contact, however most appreciate more frequent visits. After final payments are made in September some growers will then come to the winery in November to look at their wine in the barrel. In December there is usually a low-sell party for all growers, and in January further discussion takes place to allow growers to express any concerns, and for the winemaker to look at the development of their crop. The potential of the winery to cope with the yield is also considered, as are the logistics of picking and grape receipt, testing, watering, topping and other viticultural practices.

Growers are then visited once or twice a week until harvest, principally for tasting grapes and monitoring stress. The testing is all done on site with a hand-held refractometer, and by tasting, so that each grower can see the variation which exists within each block. A ny other viticultural practices which need to be reviewed are then discussed.

Growers are again visited the day after harvest, and then maybe a few more times before last payment. With new growers, or with growers with newly-modified practices, the contact will be even greater. Each meeting gives the grower an opportunity to voice any concerns or discuss to practices.

**Initiating joint development and improvement of products and processes**

By working closely with the grower, the winemaker can assist in the development and maintenance of an excellent work relationship. The development and maintenance of an excellent working relationship between grower and winemaker may help prevent mistakes of all magnitudes.