

Staying Afloat in the Tips Pool:

Contributed by Hipster Chai
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A weekly pool, daily pool, shift-by-shift… Which method of splitting tips works best for your shop?

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A Hipster Chai Column

Whether we flash sweet smiles, make witty remarks, or hand out over-zealous compliments, we baristi all have our own tricks when it comes to getting tips. At the end of the day, a full jar almost makes up for the aching legs, espresso-covered clothing, and burns that still sting from the Panini grill. Eight dollars an hour only gets a person so far in the United States, and, like many other workers in the food service industry, we rely heavily upon the additional tips (and appreciate them).

However, the method used to distribute tips amongst baristi is slightly controversial, resulting in a variety of distribution models. Some cafes follow a weekly pooling model where the total amount of tips in a week is divided by the total number of labor hours in that week in order to derive the amount of tips earned per hour. The corresponding amount is then distributed to each worker based on the hours he/she worked during that week. Daily pooling, another popular model, works in the same manner, except that tips are distributed each night based upon labor hours within a single day. Finally, other places, generally with smaller staffs, divide tips based upon shifts; when one employee's shift begins, the tip jar is emptied and divided evenly between those who worked before this shift.

The mornings in cafes are typically busier, so whether a person is smiling brightly or cursing obscenely, the chances of her finding a full jar are greater in the morning than in afternoons with less traffic. It's not fair, say some, that a barista with exceptional people skills and endless patience will most likely earn less in tips in the pm shift than the jerk who bares his teeth at customers during the morning shift.

"I work mornings," says Zach Evans, a barista at 1369 Coffee House in Inman Square, Cambridge (www.1369coffeehouse.com), "so I would benefit more from not pooling tips than the people who work at night, but this is the fairest system for everyone involved."

Zach is referring to the weekly pooling system currently in place at 1369. According to Zach, the weekly pool "balances it out the best," because even from day-to-day the amount of tips can vary.

However, Colin Kelly, a night manager of Carberry's Bakery and Coffee House in Cambridge, MA (www.carberrys.com), strongly disagrees. "The weekly pooling just kind of screws people over, because if you work really hard a couple of days that week, but the other days aren't as hard for the other people, it doesn't even out fairly."

At Carberry's, also my current place of work, the daily pooling method is used. "It's not the best, but there's really not another feasible way because this place is too busy," says Colin. "When someone comes on shift, that's when the tips are divided, but there's so much overlap so there's not enough time to figure it out fairly." Colin feels that changing the current way to a weekly pool would make it even more "impossible to figure out."

However, with either of these systems, the teeth-baring barista is still receiving the same amount in tips as the cheery,

upbeat barista, and, though this is a step, some say it's still unfair because the bad barista is reaping the benefits of the good barista's efforts.

From some points of view, this may be true, but even the baristi who don't work as well with customers are still contributing to the overall needs of the store. Without those workers who clean, stock and close the store, the morning employees would be attempting to assist the many customers while also brewing more chai, stocking the milk, refilling the espresso beans, and on and on. The evening baristi also work hard for the store, but in a different way that just doesn't bring in as many tips.

Meg Fluker, a former barista with years of experience from the True Grounds Coffee House in Somerville, MA (truegrounds.com), has similar complaints about both systems. "If I do the work, I want to make the money for my work." At True Grounds, the tips are divided by shifts. However, this system typically only makes sense for cafes with smaller staffs. In a place like Carberry's, with an incredible amount of overlapping amongst shifts, the tip jar would be emptied and divided almost every hour. At True Grounds, only one person opens the shop, and only one other comes in at 11, making it much easier to distribute tips by shift.

However, as mentioned, the mornings are busier, so when gratuity is split in this manner, the morning barista typically earns more than the afternoon barista. In attempts to make this system fairer, the owners of True Grounds rotate shifts so that one person works Monday morning and another Monday night, then the opposite shifts the next day. But what if someone can only work mornings? Or what if someone needs to switch shifts?

Perhaps bad barista should always close and good barista should always open. Or perhaps bad barista should just get fired. But then it's unfair because the other employees will have to cover those hours and although that equals inordinate amounts of tips, it also equals inordinate amounts of hours.

Apparently coffee houses aren't the only places in the food service industry having this debate. Taylor Vecchio, a long-time employee of the catering department at The Inn at Longwood (www.innatlongwood.com), has much to say about their current system, which also follows the weekly-pool model.

"It's almost [the best option] because if there's not a lot going on but you still have to prepare for an event, you're still working hard, but without this system, you wouldn't be receiving any tips," she explains. "Nobody will work for the wage to just set up and clean up, but if there are functions happening, they'll work for the tips. If your boss asks you to stay later to clean up, you will because you're still getting a percentage from the pools for those clean-up hours."

However, one place in which it becomes unfair is the bar. "Sometimes, people won't know they're supposed to tip if you're bartending, which doesn't work out because bartending is harder and more work than the others. And the houseman position (the person who only sets up) has the hardest job with the heaviest and most work, but only gets paid a bad hourly wage. Because of that, we currently don't have a houseman and the work is just split between us."

Servers and bussers in restaurants don't have this dilemma, but, as expected, have their own disagreements when it comes to tips. Dave Buivid, a server and bartender at the Middle East restaurant in Central Square, Cambridge (www.mideastclub.com), says that their tips are divided by sections of tables within the main dining area.

"There are two sections, the big section and the little section," he explains. The servers have the same sections for the entire night and collect all the tips from their tables. "At the end of the night, we give 10% of our tips to the bussers and 10% to the bartender." Typically, the big section seats more customers and produces more tips, so the servers rotate who has the this section each night. "The server with the little section gets out earlier, so it usually works out pretty well because someone always wants to go home early. And we're all friends here, so if someone needs money, they just ask for the big section and it's cool."

With all this disagreement surrounding the best way to divide tips, there's almost no disagreement surrounding

the amount of tips themselves. Taylor, the only person interviewed with a positive outlook on the amount customers leave, says about the Inn at Longwood, "The gratuity is an automatic percentage included in the bill, so week-to-week I make about \$500-\$700 in tips, after taxes." She again points out, though, that the bartenders are not tipped well enough.

However, in comparison to a typical barista, the under-tipped bartenders are still earning a vastly larger amount. Though the weekly total ranges from café to café, around \$100 in additional earnings seems average.

When the topic of customers and appropriate tipping arises, Zach expresses his sentiments quite passionately, saying, "No, not at all! Customers who come in at night almost never tip appropriately. And the customers who order more complicated drinks always tip less than those who order easy drinks. Every syllable that's used to order a drink is about \$.10 less in a tip."

Though not an employee of coffee shop, Dave agrees. "I don't think people understand how big of a difference tips actually make," he says. "On a \$15 bill, some people will tip \$1.50, which is only 10%. What's an extra dollar to that person? That extra dollar makes a server feel good. It encourages me when people tip well. Ten percent just isn't enough."

There's no perfect system. One that works for True Grounds may not work for Carberry's, and vice versa. Perhaps the ultimate answer is not for managers to devise a new system that best distributes tips, or for people to be fired from already understaffed locations. Perhaps the best thing may be for customers to think that the next time they order their double vanilla cappuccino with extra foam and really hot but not too hot, they should think that being a barista is hard work and an extra quarter or two may go far, whether divided amongst workers by shifts, by tables, or by 72 total labor hours.

Tips Model

Advantages

Disadvantages

Best Setting for Usage

Weekly Pool

- * Counted only once per week
- * Takes differences between days and shifts into account
- * Employees with "easier" days make same amount as others
- * Difficult with large staff

Medium-sized cafes with slightly larger staffs

Daily Pool

- * Counted only once per day
- * Takes difference between shifts into account
- * Employees with "easier" shifts make same amount as others

Large cafes with many staff members

Shift by Shift

- * Person working makes the tips he/she earned
- * Doesn't require manager's time to pool and evenly divide
- * Difficult to divide if there are many shifts in one day
- * Tips for the morning shift are better than closing shift

Small cafes with small staffs