

British Medical Journal article published on 21st January regarding alcohol advertising

Although the content of alcohol advertisements in the UK is restricted, an analysis of previously unseen industry documents published on bmj.com today, finds that advertisers are still managing to appeal to young people and promote drinking.

Professor Gerard Hastings and colleagues show that companies are “pushing the boundaries” of the advertising code of practice and warn that the UK system of self regulatory controls for alcohol advertising is failing.

Hastings and his team analysed a sample of internal marketing documents from four alcohol producers and their communications agencies. The documents were made available as part of the House of Commons Health Committee alcohol inquiry and included client briefs, media schedules, advertising budgets, and market research reports.

The alcohol industry spends around £800m (€900m; \$1.3bn) a year promoting alcohol in the UK.

The authors looked at four themes that are banned by the advertising code of practice, such as appealing to people under 18 and encouraging irresponsible drinking, as well as sponsorship and new media.

They found that market research data on 15 and 16 year olds is used to guide campaign development and deployment, while many references are made to the need to recruit new drinkers and establish their loyalty to a particular brand. WKD, for instance, wants to attract “new 18 year olds” and Carling takes a particular interest in the fact that the Carling Weekend is “the first choice for the festival virgin.”

Despite a ban on encouraging drunkenness and excess, the authors also found many references to unwise and immoderate drinking, suggesting that increasing consumption is a key promotional aim.

Other documents suggest that brands can promote social success, masculinity or femininity, despite this also being banned under advertising codes. For example, Carling is described as “social glue” by its promotion team, while the need to “communicate maleness and personality” is noted as a key communications objective for WKD.

Although the codes prohibit any link between alcohol and youth culture or sporting achievement in advertising, the documents discuss in detail sponsorship deals with football, lads’ magazines, and music festivals. The use of new media, including social networking sites, is also a fast growing channel for alcohol advertising, say the authors.

Hastings and his team argue that the UK needs to tighten both the procedures and scope of the regulation of alcohol advertising. They suggest that regulation should

be independent of the alcohol and advertising industries and that all alcohol advertisements should be pre-vetted. And they call for sponsorship to be covered by the regulations, and much greater scrutiny for digital media. Particular efforts should also be made to protect children from alcohol advertising, they say, such as banning billboards and posters near schools and restricting TV, radio and cinema advertisements.

They believe that the current problems with UK alcohol promotion are reminiscent of those seen before tobacco advertising was banned, "when attempts to control content and adjust targeting simply resulted in more cryptic and imaginative campaigns.

"History suggests that alcohol advertisers are, appropriately enough, drinking in the last chance saloon," they conclude.

In an accompanying editorial, Trish Groves, BMJ deputy editor calls for a clamp down on alcohol promotion and a minimum price per unit of alcohol to prevent the rise of alcohol related ill health in the UK.

She points out that the government is spending £17.6m on alcohol education and information in 2009-10, but this is dwarfed by the UK drinks industry's £600-800m annual spend on promoting alcohol.

"It is time to put away the rhetoric, popular with the drinks industry, that alcohol misuse is largely an individual problem best avoided and managed through education, counselling, and medical treatment," she writes. "Instead, the UK needs to embrace the idea that the health and societal costs of alcohol misuse are best prevented through legislation on pricing and marketing."

But it's not just the money that keeps the industry a step ahead. A linked article explains how the alcohol industry and trade organisations such as the Portman Group are well placed in UK policy circles to defend their position, and asks, is the government under the influence of the drinks industry?

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Analysis: Failure of self regulation of UK alcohol advertising
<http://www.bmj.com/cgi/doi/10.1136/bmj.b5650>

Editorial: Preventing alcohol related harm to health
http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/extract/340/jan20_1/c372

Observations: Lobby Watch **The Portman Group by Claire Harkins**
http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/extract/340/jan20_1/b5659