

National Liquor News – November 2008

Advertising battleground continues

Alcohol advertising is a constant battleground for the industry, with the peak industry associations having to persistently defend the industry's right to responsibly promote a perfectly legal product that is consumed by the majority of adult Australians.

The key reason that alcohol advertising attracts so much attention by the anti-alcohol groups is that it is by its very nature public and noticeable, so they assume it has a large and negative impact on alcohol abuse. Somehow, the anti's reasoning goes, the advertising makes people drink more or irresponsibly, sending otherwise sensible and rational people on a search for intoxication. If there was a ban on advertising then there would be less alcohol abuse.

This simplistic argument is based on the idea that the industry advertises to increase overall consumption, rather than recognising that companies advertise to increase their market share.

If advertising was intended to increase overall consumption, then the alcohol industry is wasting millions of dollars a year, because per capita alcohol consumption is flat. Looking at underage drinking in particular, the numbers of young men and women under 18 who are drinking at risky or high risk levels has declined over the last three National Drug Strategy surveys held since 2001.

In reality, advertising does not make people drink, or to drink more than they want to – it tells them about their choices between products that they may choose to drink, and where to buy them.

Neither does advertising teach Australians how or when to drink, in what circumstances, or what is responsible or irresponsible consumption. People learn that firstly from their parents and family, and then (to a lesser degree) from their peer groups. DrinkWise recognises this fact, and targets parents with their common sense slogan "Kids absorb your drinking".

Alcohol advertising has been scrutinised by four major state or commonwealth inquiries in the past five years. Each inquiry has suggested small changes, for example having a website for the ABAC scheme, which have always been implemented by the ABAC Management Committee. But the fundamental basis of how alcohol advertising is regulated has never been suggested as ineffective or that it should be changed.

None of these obvious arguments, nor the results of the inquiries, stop politicians and activists from calling for bans or restrictions.

Recently, one state's Minister of Health told a Sunday paper that there should be a ban on alcohol advertising, after announcing that 40,000 people in his state attended hospital with alcohol-related injuries and illnesses.

The report the Minister was referring to was actually from 2006. His press secretary told an inquiring journalist that the Minister had never said "that the report was new." What was also left out was that the "40,000 people" was an estimate, not an observed or recorded total.

It is little wonder that Australians don't know what to think about how to tackle alcohol abuse.