

Drinks Trade – December 2008

Christmas Cheer

The drinks industry should be enjoying its yearly peak in retail sales as Christmas approaches, albeit with some impact from the economy's slowdown.

Many wholesalers and retailers are flat out providing their customers with products that we all hope will be used moderately and sensibly across Christmas and the New Year. Inevitably, some consumers will not be sensible and will abuse alcohol, so risking causing harm to themselves and to others.

Balanced against that is the fact that the great majority of Australians will use alcohol very sensibly, even though across the festive session they might drink too much on occasion. Many people who do not drink at other times of the year do so during Christmas and New Year, even if it is only a celebratory glass on New Years Eve or at the Christmas dinner table. About 83 percent of Australians drink (defined as a complete serve) at least once a year, and about 41 percent drink weekly. It is an enduring myth that Australians are especially heavy drinkers. There are now more people who have never had a full serve of alcohol in their life than who drink on a daily basis.

Having an accurate picture of how Australians are drinking is very important to any meaningful discussion of alcohol regulation, and the responsibilities that the different parts of the alcohol industry have. Only alcohol regulation that balances the freedom of the majority to use alcohol (and occasionally mis-use it) with necessary controls to reduce the serious or anti-social abuse of alcohol by the minority, and limits consumption to people above the legal purchase age, has a chance of success.

The groups and individuals that are opposed to alcohol, and how the industry operates, often confuse alcohol consumption in general with alcohol abuse, either deliberately or because they forget the difference. I am often struck how easily and quickly 'the costs of alcohol abuse' becomes simply 'the costs of alcohol'.

Everyone in the industry has to acknowledge their responsibility to market and serve alcohol responsibly and to do what they can to reduce alcohol abuse, particularly among underage drinkers. In the midst of the Christmas sales, it is something to consider.

The federal government has a major public health initiative to reduce obesity, smoking and alcohol abuse, with the ambitious target of making Australia the healthiest country in the world by 2020. The purpose of the public health initiative is to reduce the high and increasing costs of health care, especially with an aging population in coming decades.

This push for improved public health has been lead by the National Preventative Health Taskforce, who have released discussion papers on how Australia can reduce the harms and associated costs of obesity, smoking and abuse of alcohol. The public and the industry have until early January to send in submissions on what recommendations the government should adopt, and DSICA will be making its views known.

The scrutiny of the alcohol industry shows no sign of easing off, and the preventative health strategies could bring yet further restrictions.

On behalf of all DSICA members, I want to wish everyone a safe and prosperous Christmas.