

National Liquor News - February 2008

Risk and responsibility

The year 2008 - the Year of the Rat according to Chinese custom - is shaping to be a very interesting time for the alcohol industry.

A new government in Canberra means that many existing alcohol policies could be revisited, if not actively reconsidered with the aim of 'fixing' what's broken in the coming year. Unfortunately, what is broken and what is the best way to do something about it is usually in the eye of the beholder or the media, which is why DSICA always advocates for evidence-based policy making. This insistence on evidence and proper research is the best defence against those activists who claim that the sky is falling and that our streets are awash with alcohol-fuelled violent teenage criminals.

Fortunately, Labor-state and federal-has many sensible politicians with a lot of common sense, who want to find workable solutions to proven problems. The task of the alcohol industry in the coming years will be to provide well-researched evidence and data to balance out the anti-alcohol activists.

DSICA has written a submission on a Food Standards Australia and New Zealand report on mandatory pregnancy warning labels on alcohol containers. The push for this regulation change comes from the New Zealand government body (ALAC) set up to promote moderate drinking.

Alcohol and pregnancy is a very important and very complex issue. Nobody wants babies to be born with damage from alcohol or anything else. How the Australian and New Zealand governments go about reducing or stopping that from happening concerns a lot of people.

Neither government actually knows much at all about how many children are born with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) or with the less severe Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) because very little research on that question has been carried out.

There is very little up to date research in Australia and New Zealand as to how many women drink during pregnancy or how much, what do they know already about drinking during pregnancy, or what their doctor asks or advises them about their drinking.

There is lots of advice about having a healthy pregnancy if women go looking for that information, but there are no television and radio advertisements or posters, about not drinking during pregnancy.

All of the research into labelling shows that it does not change drinking behaviour. Even ALAC acknowledges that fact in its application for labels to be mandatory. So why are labels the first move in reducing the number of women drinking during pregnancy?

The alcohol industry argued very strongly against labelling on the basis that research shows it has not worked in other countries, is not cost-effective, and that it has some risks and drawbacks for women as well. A major problem is that the medical evidence for abstinence is contradictory.

DSICA's position is that labelling should be a small part of a much larger and more comprehensive public health campaign, and until that campaign is up and running, we would not support labelling.