

National Liquor News column – October 2008

Industry has to be aware of voters' fears

Like many in the industry, I have increasingly despaired of the extreme alcohol-related violence in our entertainment precincts. The violence is not confined to those precincts, but as reported by the press, they seem to be the main areas.

The violence seems to have increased in its intensity. Where fights were once punches between a couple of blokes, which usually stopped when one person fell over, it appears now that groups are assaulting individuals, and the fights are not stopping, with victims kicked on the ground until unconscious or worse.

As an industry, we have to be aware that this extreme violence is at the heart of many Australian's fears; as a parent wondering if their teenagers will make it home safely, or as residents who will not venture into the city entertainment precincts late on Friday or Saturday nights.

When voters are fearful, politicians act. The alcohol industry is an obvious place to start when something must be done and also seen to be done, not only because we may have contributed through inappropriate service of alcohol, but because we are visible and regulated. With the alcohol industry, 'something' can be done, as opposed to illicit drugs which no one can effectively control much further than already done.

The Australian Institute of Criminology has an ongoing program to monitor the use of alcohol and drugs among police detainees, and recently released its yearly report on drug use by people held by the police. Detainees are asked what drugs they have use and a urine sample taken for analysis.

Nearly one quarter of male detainees, and one third of female detainees, tested positive to methylamphetamine, or Ice. The results for methylamphetamine have been stable since 2003 but the level of amphetamine use in Australia remains among the highest in the world.

Extreme violence is concentrated among young Australians, and its causes are many and varied. The culture of many of Generation Y is dramatically different from earlier generations – less respect for authority, determined to be independent, pleasure seeking (including use of illicit drugs), and happy to record and share their activity by mobile phone and web.

The Police and governments at all levels are looking for effective means to reduce violence and other anti-social behaviour as much as possible. I am not sure that Australia yet has the understanding and the tools to effectively deal with the problem.

Alcohol is widely used and easily available. When questions are asked why somebody's child is lying in a coma, empty bottles and licensed venues are visible, but the Ecstasy and meth dealers are not. Advertising is in our newspapers and letterboxes – but there is far less visibility from the illicit drug industry. So we are visible and controllable, and so we cop the blame and the extra regulations, sometimes fairly and sometimes not.