

National Liquor News – March 2012

Industry slowly being sidelined in bureaucracy by health activists

One of the unseen struggles that the alcohol industry endures is the fight to have its voice heard at all within the bureaucracy. National Liquor News readers might find that surprising because they hear a great deal from, and about, the industry in these pages.

But within some Commonwealth or state and territory government departments, the industry struggles to have even the opportunity to put its case. Very often the bureaucracy's efforts to find relevant stakeholders extend only as far as the health sector and some Non-Government Organisations.

The public health NGOs argue strongly that the various health departments and Police forces should exclude the industry from discussions simply because the industry has a profit motive. This tactic originated in the tobacco wars and is now being replicated against the alcohol industry.

The argument goes that the profit motive means we have absolutely nothing of value to add to the debate, and that our arguments are always corrupted and self-interested. There is also a deliberate running down of the industry's efforts to reduce alcohol-related harm. The fact that we have years of experience and are actually at the coalface of drinkers and drinking is irrelevant.

Thankfully I am not talking about writing a submission to a public inquiry or on a new piece of legislation. However, the struggle to be heard also stacks the deck against an industry submission being taken into account or given proper consideration.

Instead, I am referring to being consulted on what goes into the policy that the new legislation is supposed to enforce. Once the policy is written and the draft law approved by Ministers (based on advice from the bureaucrats who drafted it), it is much harder to argue against ill-intentioned and badly thought-out ideas becoming law. Once policies have become law, they are very hard to stop.

There is another and more sinister side to the activist's efforts to silence the industry's voice within governments.

The industry – particularly the retail sectors – is the only organised and consistent voice for the 90 percent of Australians who are alcohol consumers. Nobody else speaks up for them.

Individuals might write letters to the editor and leave comments on websites for a short while, but they don't form an organisation and lobby against the all-too-frequent removal of their rights and being further treated as children.

Ensuring the industry is not heard and not considered until policy is fully formed and ticked off is a very effective way ending 'organised resistance' to the aggressively anti-alcohol and anti-industry ideas that are coming out the health NGOs and the doctor organisations.