

National Liquor News – November 2009

Is your drinking harming yourself or others?

Last March, DSICA member companies agreed to adopt an advisory label on products sold in Australia. DSICA wanted to Australians to consider if their drinking was harmful - to themselves, their families, or communities.

After researching what Australians thought of the usual genre of warning words, together with how they considered their own and others' drinking, we decided not to use a health advisory statement or a bland statement of the blindingly obvious.

The research suggested that Australians drink in so many different contexts, and at different stages of their lives, and with differing experiences, that a simple warning statement or set of statements would not resonate with a majority of Australian for most of the time that they were having a drink.

If the warning doesn't resonate with consumers and their own experience, it won't be effective. For example, a warning about drinking and driving will be ignored by all drinkers who don't intend to drive – because they are already at home, because they don't have a car, or will walk home.

Also, Australians rejected the 'parent to child' tone of most warning statements as being condescending. No one likes being spoken to like they are a child.

The research showed that Australians did not find health warnings to be relevant to them personally. Young Australians thought alcohol related health problems were about homeless people living in parks in their 60's. Older Australians, having lived through their younger heavy drinking, thought they did not drink enough to have a health concern.

Words like 'moderation' and 'responsible' were regarded as irrelevant and meaningless to the individual, and as simple corporate-speak.

In a similar way, words like 'could' or 'may' were regarded as saying something was possible but not likely, nor something that should concern. The problem with stating something bad will actually happen if alcohol is abused is that it usually does not, which makes an alarmist mockery of the label.

Instead, the research suggested a broadly worded question would be more effective because it does not depend on the individual circumstances of the consumer – it would apply to everyone. Every consumer would have to answer, or at least consider if the question was relevant.

Australian drinkers consider themselves adults able to manage their own lives, and as such are quite happy to drink and take the risks, but do not like to think that their drinking impacts on others close to them.

DSICA also wanted to use a broad term that made people consider more than acute health impacts, but also their responsibilities to others.

This led to DSICA choosing the question: *Is your drinking harming yourself or others?*

I believe that the use of a question, rather than a statement or advice, is a world first, and one that leaves the answer and the choice where it should be - in the hands of the consumer.

The labels will be used across both RTDs and full strength bottled spirits, and will start to appear from October as new labels are designed or old label stocks are replaced.