

National liquor news – September 2009

Push for advertising ban off the mark

Recently there was a leak about recommendations from the Preventative Health Taskforce that would end sports sponsorship by alcohol brands, end internet advertising and ban alcohol advertisements in 'youth magazines'.

The media predictably got very excited by the prospect of the end of sport sponsorships. What were largely overlooked were the other two elements of this leak – end internet advertising and ban advertising in 'youth magazines'. Both ideas appear to be more about what the public will likely accept rather than as a result of concise thinking through the issues.

Internet advertising is no more inherently good or bad than television or print advertising. The difficulty with the internet is that it is impossible to verify the age of the viewer. What is important - vital even - is that it meets the same standards of responsibility and content restrictions that apply to television and magazines. Surely it is the message that should be regulated and controlled, not how it conveyed. Yet the internet is being singled out, presumably because the Taskforce members and many older Australians think of the internet as a 'youth' medium, hence any advertisement is to young and underage Australians.

The second leaked recommendation – banning advertising in youth magazines - is equally a political one, rather than based on evidence. It will also be very palatable for many Australians, parents especially, because advertising in 'youth' magazines would - correctly - be regarded as targeted at youth.

But very few parents or journalists will stop to inquire just how much youth magazine advertising there actually is.

Complaints to The Alcohol Beverage Advertising Code Scheme about inappropriate placement in magazines are quite rare, in fact only one in the last three years. Ironically, the publication was the ABC's rock music magazine. 'Girlfriend' magazine does not take alcohol ads. The 18+ readership of 'Cosmopolitan' and 'Cleo' are 82% and 78% respectively.

The reality is that alcohol is already not advertised in youth magazines. This is because the great majority of the alcohol producers take their responsibilities seriously and try to avoid placing adverts where a lot of underage people can see them. Many DSICA members have global marketing guidelines that 70% of a publication's readership must be above the legal purchase age. Editors are also pretty well aware of the risks of alcohol advertising.

One of the difficulties that alcohol advertisers have in doing the right thing and avoiding placing advertising in youth magazines is that there is no list of such magazines. If the Government does take up the suggestion and ban youth magazine advertising, then it will have to develop and maintain such a list so that the alcohol and magazine industries know which magazines are in the ban.

There is a broader issue. A leading tobacco control expert has recently said that before the ban on tobacco advertising on television was introduced, it had been preceded by a newspaper ban. When

the television advertising ban was mooted, it was very hard to justify having different standards for different media.

The suggested bans on youth magazines and the internet may well be the start of a similar process.