Alcohol Advertising: Its Impact on Communities, and What Coalitions Can Do to Lessen that Impact
Advertising is omnipresent in our lives. It is everywhere we are. Advertising of alcoholic beverages is nearly as pervasive. There are ads when we turn on our televisions, radios and the Internet; we drive by billboards and bus placards; advertising appears on our tables in restaurants and on the shirts of the people who wait on us — to say nothing of our friends, neighbors and classmates who wear beer company logos. Companies that produce alcoholic beverages also produce concerts and festivals and competitions and sponsor athletes and racecars. In 1998 alone, nearly $1.2 billion was spent on alcoholic beverage advertising and probably a billion more on other marketing, including promotions and discounting.

All of this advertising and promotional activity contributes to underage drinking, increased drinking-related problems for individuals and society as a whole, and other forms of substance abuse. The economic cost of dealing with alcohol abuse and alcoholism in the United States totals nearly $166 billion annually. The quality-of-life cost to young people is devastating. Studies have found that youngsters who begin drinking before age 15 are four times more likely to develop alcohol dependence than those who begin drinking at age 21. Young people who drink are also much more likely to have ongoing problems with other drugs.

Alcohol advertising is especially attractive to younger people. This attraction has the potential for encouraging underage drinking, with lethal effects for the future of these children. Too many young people begin drinking in junior high school; 32 percent of them are binge drinkers by the time they are high school seniors. Children who are alcoholics or problem drinkers number more than four million. Alcohol is the most used and abused drug among young people. It is a factor in four leading causes of death (motor vehicle crashes, unintentional injuries, suicide and homicide) of youth and young adults from 10 to 24 years of age. Despite this evidence, the placement, timing and themes of alcohol advertising continue to be geared to young people in large degree.

Community coalitions are uniquely situated to help curb the glorification of alcohol use in their communities.

This Strategizer outlines the kinds of alcohol advertising that coalitions need to monitor, the audiences that are targeted by the alcohol industry, and what coalitions can do to eliminate and/or curb such advertising.
KINDS OF ADVERTISING

Advertising serves three major purposes. First, it introduces a product and generates new consumers for it; second, it attempts to convince people to switch from one product to another; third, it attempts to stimulate and sustain consumer consumption.

Alcohol advertising is true to those principals. Ads often feature hip and attractive young people to attract new consumers who also wish to appear “cool.” The message generated is that drinking is okay, everyone does it and it is a great way to meet new people and really fit in. Unfortunately, too many of those who soak up those messages are younger than the legal age of purchase and consumption.

Many messages also encourage excessive drinking and binge drinking by depicting large quantities of alcohol, suggesting having more than one, featuring over-sized containers or suggesting drinking on any and all occasions. Ads on college campuses often offer drink specials, such as “two-fers,” dollar pitchers, happy hours and the like. Routinely, the ads are absolutely silent on the risks associated with alcohol consumption.

Various kinds of advertising and their impact are listed below.

• Billboards

Billboard advertising, which can also include free-standings signs and signs on buildings, vehicles and other public locations (such as bus placards or subway ads), are particularly troublesome. Unlike the other media described above, this type of signage cannot be turned off or put away. Billboards and other public signage are the most pervasive and intrusive types of advertising. And because they are local, they are the type of advertising that communities can most effectively combat.

Alcohol companies spent $93 million on billboard advertising in 1998. The medium is relatively inexpensive and provides an easy way to target specific demographic groups. Alcohol billboards appear disproportionately in inner city and low-income communities, helping to contribute to neighborhood blight.

Unlike television, radio, Internet and magazine and newspaper advertising, local communities have had some success in curbing billboard ads through local zoning regulations, billboard bans and through public pressure. Although many local billboard ordinances have been challenged by the industry, several have been upheld. As a result, a growing number of communities have proposed billboard restrictions. Information on the ways to remove alcohol billboards are listed in this Strategizer.

• Broadcast and Print Media

At the end of 1998, USA Today reported that the Budweiser lizard commercials were the most popular ads on television. Since 1995, Budweiser beer ads have topped the charts as the ads consumers, including teenagers, liked the most. Miller Lite beer commercials finished third in the 1998 survey. Clearly these ads generate considerable interest in the youth market.

In 1996, the Distilled Spirits Council of the U.S. (DISCUS) revised its Code of Good Practice to allow its members to advertise liquor in the broadcast media. Since 1936, the Council had urged members not to advertise on radio and extended the ban in 1948 to television. Since the voluntary ban was lifted, expenditures for broadcast liquor advertising have climbed about 1000%, even though the TV networks still refuse such ads.

Alcohol advertising on television and radio totaled more than $787 million in 1998 alone. Most television ads featuring alcohol appeared during prime time, late in the evening and on weekend afternoons. On radio, alcohol advertising often airs on youth-oriented rock and roll or album-oriented rock formats that target 18- to 24-year-olds. Many of these stations also attract much younger listeners.

It is no wonder, studies find, that junior high students can name more beer brands than presidents and younger children can sing the jingles and mimic the characters in alcohol commercials. Magazine and newspaper ads often show good-looking young people having a great time while consuming the advertisers’ brand. The message: drinking is cool. Other ads encourage giving alcohol as gifts, stress new, larger-sized containers and promote sales of specific brands. Many youth oriented magazines, such as Rolling Stone, Details and Spin, feature a significant number of alcohol ads.
The Internet
Sophisticated advertisers use the Internet to market thousands of products on line. Alcohol companies, in particular, appear to be taking full advantage of the tremendous increase in the use of the Internet as fertile marketing territory to attract new, especially younger, customers.

On the Web, personalized, targeted advertising can be used very effectively to build a relationship with a brand. The most prevalent practices include the use of cartoons and motion video. On-line stores (for example http://www.budshop.com) sell brand merchandise behind a click-able marquee often titled “cool items!”

Games and contests not only attract people to Web sites, they encourage the participants to remain at the site for a longer period of time. Their attractions are youth-oriented, including memory/matching games, musical tone games, quizzes and picture puzzles. In addition, favorite and well-known characters from the companies' television spots are also incorporated into the Web sites. Budweiser and others feature downloadable screensavers, among them the popular Bud frogs.

The language used on the sites mimics youth-oriented slang, and the sites often incorporate chat rooms and bulletin boards — two areas where youth frequently hang out while on the Web. Many chat rooms simulate bars and other drinking environments, allowing participants to choose the kind of setting (music and TV, sports, etc.) they would like to visit.

Promotions
Alcohol promotional advertising is, in many ways, as intrusive as billboard advertising. It seems that no matter what kind of event we attend, restaurant we select or area we visit, alcohol ads are “in our face.”

The alcohol companies sponsor all or portions of fairs, festivals, concerts (from rock to classical), museum exhibits, tours and more; national and local. Sponsorship allows the companies to place their names and ads prominently on programs and signs throughout the site. Professional sports such as baseball, football, hockey and basketball, all of them favorites of teenage boys and girls, routinely have a major beer sponsor.

NASCAR racing cars and races, formerly the nearly exclusive venues for tobacco companies, are being sponsored by the alcohol industry in increasing numbers. As the popularity of NASCAR racing grows, the participation of beer and liquor companies will grow proportionally.

What better place to advertise to a captive audience than in a restaurant! Table tents that advertise beer, wine and specialty drinks are on tables; logos for specific brands appear on menus; clocks, mirrors, mugs, glasses and other advertising gimmicks are on walls, counters and your table. All this, even at family-style eateries.

In addition to Web sites, alcohol-related merchandise is available in liquor stores and through the mail. Younger people (and underage drinkers) who wear it (t-shirts, sweatshirts, jackets, etc.) and carry it (luggage, bags, etc.) favor this “cool stuff.”

Advertising Targets
There is no question that an integral part of effective advertising involves targeting the markets in which one hopes to gain consumers, increase sales and instill brand loyalty. In the case of alcohol advertising, those targets are too often kids, college students and minorities.

- Kids
Statistics on underage drinking in the country are frightening. Underage youth consume in excess of a billion beers each year. Every week, more than 100,000 elementary school age children get drunk. More than 80 percent of all high school seniors
have tried alcohol. In 1998, 23 percent of eighth grade students and 39 percent of 10th grade students reported using alcohol in the past 30 days.

Clearly, young people are heavily inundated by the sophisticated and ubiquitous advertising of alcohol. The ads glamorize alcohol, downplay or ignore the risks associated with its use and create expectations about its use. This young audience frequents the Internet where 82 percent of the beer sites and 72 percent of the spirits sites studied by the Center for Media Education made some appeal to youth. According to Nielsen Media Research, more than 18 million children and teens watch television during prime time, when alcohol advertising is high.

In a report released in September 1999, the Federal Trade Commission found that alcohol industry voluntary advertising standards provided excessive access to underage persons. Those standards, which were sometimes violated, allow ads to target audiences comprised of 50 percent underage youth. The Commission also concluded that even where the majority of the audience was of legal age, large numbers of children could still be watching. The Commission recommended stronger standards to protect young people, as well as third-party independent review systems to insure industry compliance with its own rules.

Surveys of students in grades 5 through 12 show that 56 percent of the students say that alcohol advertising encourages them to drink. It is no wonder that the average age at which children begin drinking is about 13 and that these young people consume close to 10 million drinks each day.

College Students

Binge drinking has become a serious issue on college campuses around the country. Binge drinking is defined as five or more drinks in a row for men and four or more for women. A recent survey of students at 130 colleges showed that 41 percent of those responding had engaged in binge drinking. Frequent binge drinkers — those who binge three or more times within a two-week period — totaled 21 percent of those surveyed.

Most kids learn to drink during their high school years. After graduation, when they begin living away from home, their consumption increases.

Heaviest drinking occurs between ages 18 and 25. Consequences of this campus epidemic include:

- Students at higher risk of a variety of health problems, including the contraction of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs);
- Increased fatal accident rates;
- Increased vandalism, including trashing of dorms, stealing of property and graffiti. Drinking accounts for 80 percent of the acts of vandalism;
- Ninety-five percent of violent crime on campus is alcohol-related;
- Ninety percent of all reported campus rapes involve alcohol use by the victim or the perpetrator;
- Alcohol use is a factor in 40 percent of academic problems, 28 percent of dropouts.

Beer companies are well aware that college students consume billions of cans of beer each year. Student drinking represents both current and future sales. So college campuses are important places to reach "entry level" drinkers. Beer advertisers spend millions of dollars on campus promotions, most in the context of sports.

These promotions range from ads in campus publications by local retailers and bars to special discount nights, "all you can drink" for low price specials, "ladies night" and so on. In addition, companies sponsor concerts, festivals and athletic events. Nearly 75 percent of the nation's major concert facilities have beer company sponsors. Beer companies also sponsor the printing of sports schedules and advertise in programs. Their ads are frequently aired during the broadcasts of college sporting events. Though not as common as before age 21 became the law, beer logos still appear on stadium and arena signs and scoreboards.

Minorities

Minorities and the neighborhoods in which they live are major targets of alcohol advertising, in part because they are a growth market, ripe for expansion, and in part because, among those who drink, the heavier consumers drink prodigious amounts. The appeals range from implicit promises of
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Elegance and power to scholarship donations and sponsorships of local cultural and athletic events. Minority-owned television and radio stations, magazines and newspapers have become heavily dependent on alcohol advertising. Billboards for alcohol and tobacco are especially intrusive as they blanket minority neighborhoods more than others. A study of one Latino community found that children see as many as 60 alcohol ads on a one-way trip between school and home.

Minority advertising agencies hired by the alcohol companies play to the types of promotions that trigger response by minority drinkers. These promotions include sponsorships and advertising at sports, music and cultural events, and the use of minority superstars to do the promoting.

Although minority groups overall drink less than whites, the overall impact of alcohol use and abuse in the minority community is far more severe. A Department of Health and Human Services report states that minorities “suffer disproportionately from the health consequences of alcohol and appear to be at a disproportionately high risk for certain alcohol-related problems.”

ACTION STEPS FOR COALITIONS

To be most effective in lessening the impact of alcohol advertising in your community, coalitions need to be informed.

Find out which state and/or local governmental body regulates the sale of alcohol in your community and what laws exist that govern the advertising and promotion of alcohol. Also, survey your local media, both print and broadcast, to determine the amount of alcohol advertising that appears locally. Determine also, who owns and operates your local television and radio stations, magazines and newspapers and billboard companies.

The following is a checklist that coalitions and other community groups can follow to combat alcohol advertising.

- Contact the Federal Trade Commission [600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20580 (877) 382-4357] and Consumer Protection Division of your State's Attorney General’s Office if you find alcohol advertising that appeals to underage persons and/or targets significant numbers of young people. For ads on radio and television, contact the Federal Communications Commission [445 12th Street, SW, Washington, DC 20554; (888) 225-5322] too. The FTC regulates advertising practices, and the FCC has jurisdiction over the broadcast media.

- Monitor the influx of liquor advertising on radio and television and encourage the FCC and the broadcast networks to continue to hold the line on such ads.

- Find and work with city officials and the city attorney’s office to pass and defend an ordinance that would reduce or eliminate alcohol billboard ads in the community.

- Visit the managers of local television and radio stations and encourage them to refuse or stop running ads for distilled products. At the very least, ask for (1) equal time on a public service show to discuss the issue; (2) time to present a guest editorial to express community concern about the expansion of liquor advertising; (3) a message discouraging underage drinking to follow liquor and beer ads.

- Find out when the broadcast licenses of local radio and television stations expire. Advise any station that runs liquor ads that your community coalition will recommend against license renewal because the station fails to meet its public interest responsibilities by airing liquor ads that encourage young people to drink.

- Write your Congressional representatives and ask them to support an FTC investigation of all alcohol advertising in the broadcast media.
"...in one Latino community, children see as many as 60 alcohol ads on a one-way trip between school and home."

Given children's high exposure to alcohol advertising in public areas, and the correlation between advertising and youth attitudes about alcohol, several communities nationwide have enacted or drafted ordinances to regulate both the placement and content of alcohol billboard advertising. While local government has little control over television, Internet and print advertising, it does have the ability to regulate billboard and other types of outdoor ads, such as signs attached to poles and sides of buildings.

The legal basis for regulation of alcohol billboard ads where children are present is the Supreme Court’s recognition that children are unable to fully assess commercial messages. And since alcohol cannot be sold to children, they should not be targets of this particularly insidious form of advertising.

To protect your local initiative against possible legal challenges, it helps to state clearly that the purpose of billboard regulation is “to promote the welfare and temperance of minors” and to adopt appropriate findings of fact to support that regulatory purpose.

The following are the four most important targets of billboard reform. The model ordinance specifically addresses the first two steps.

1. Limit the alcohol industry’s ability to promote alcoholic beverages in areas where children are often present, such as areas near schools, churches, playgrounds, and shopping centers.

2. Implement a system of permits and fees. This provides the appropriate local governmental agency with a way to monitor and enforce the ordinance.

3. Ban the erection of new billboards, regardless of content. Several communities have legislated this reform as a way of improving traffic safety and eliminating billboard “blight.”

4. Remove existing billboards. This can be a difficult process, but is feasible through amortization and purchase of billboards.

The following are some salient points from the model ordinance to be incorporated into your local initiative:

- The intention of the ordinance is to protect minors from the constant barrage of alcohol advertising and not to place excessive restrictions on retailers and distributors. Thus, it does not include, for instance, ads inside licensed premises, on vehicles that transport alcoholic beverages, or in commercial or industrial zones where kids are not usually present. Nor does the ordinance significantly impair the ability of adults to receive consumer information about alcoholic beverages.

- While public health messages about the hazards of alcohol and underage consumption sponsored by alcohol companies should be encouraged, those that link a positive commercial image, such as a recognized logo used in marketing alcoholic beverages, with the message should be restricted.

- In establishing a system of permits, fees and penalties, existing regulations should be considered. The new ordinance should provide for: identification plates issued by the local responsible agency attached to all billboards; the delegation of monitoring and enforcement of the ordinance to a specific local governmental agency; adequate staffing and resources to carry out the ordinance; and easy identification and removal of illegal billboards.

- In order for the ordinance to be effective, the responsible local agency must have a way to monitor outdoor ads and enforce their regulation. The issuance of permits and standardized I.D. plates not only allows the agency to enforce the ordinance and identify illegal billboards, it also provides the funds necessary to staff and run the responsible office.

- The model ordinance eliminates criminal penalties as these can greatly increase the cost of enforcement. Instead, civil fines should be imposed to punish violations and infractions of the ordinance. It is of particular importance that each day of violation constitutes a separate offense so there is an incentive for the violator to correct the infraction. In addition, other appropriate civil penalties, such as assessment of costs for legal action, should be considered.

- Finally, a date at which the ordinance is effective must be established. A waiver process is necessary in order to allow for pre-existing contracts and re-negotiation of those contracts.
COMMUNITY ANTI-DRUG COALITIONS OF AMERICA is a membership-driven organization put in place to give anti-drug and drug-related violence coalitions technical assistance and support.

The purpose of the Strategizer Technical Assistance Manuals is to provide step-by-step guidance on various topics relevant to the work you do in your community each day. We know you are busy, so Strategizers are designed to be easy-to-use guides that help to streamline the planning process.

Strategizers cover such topics as long-range planning, board and staff development, development of media strategies, marketing planning, fundraising for coalition operations and programs, methods for engaging hard-to-reach populations, and more. For a current list of Strategizer Technical Assistance Manuals or for additional technical assistance on the topic covered in this Strategizer, contact the CADCA staff by writing to:

901 North Pitt Street, Suite 300
Alexandria, VA 22314

or call toll-free: 1-800-54-CADCA

Please notify CADCA regarding the technical assistance needs you may have. Your coalition is on the front line against the ravages of drugs, alcohol and violence.

Keep up the good work!

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- Find concerned state legislators to introduce a bill restricting the placement of liquor ads on broadcast stations within the state.

- Work with your state Consumer Protection Agency to monitor liquor advertising in the state, especially its appeal to underage drinkers.

- Contact the Center for Media Education to discourage alcohol-related Web sites on the Internet, especially those that feature games, contests and cartoons that attract young people. Contact CME at www.cme.org or (202) 331-7833

- Encourage colleges and universities in and around your community to prohibit alcohol consumption at cultural and athletic events, especially tailgate parties.

- Support college sports and other events at colleges and universities that give up beer advertising and sponsorship.

- Write beer companies and demand that they use older actors in their advertising and eliminate the use of youth-oriented music, themes and characters.

- Work with local organizations that organize events, concerts and festivals to find non-alcohol-related sponsors.

- Keep local media informed of your activities.

A MODEL ORDINANCE

On the preceding page is a summary of some of the most important points of a model ordinance, based on a successful Baltimore initiative. The summary is designed as a tool for developing regulation of billboard alcohol advertising in your community. If you would like more information about this important initiative and other alcohol advertising issues, please contact the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) at www.cspinet.org or (202) 332-9110, ext. 311.

SUMMARY

Combating the constant barrage of alcohol advertising can seem like an uphill battle. Alcohol producers continually find new and creative ways that attract kids and minorities to their products, and many of their marketing techniques are difficult to regulate. However, the bad faith that the industry has shown in saturating segments of the population, namely young people and minorities, who are the most susceptible to the adverse effects of drinking, increases the need for coalitions and communities to take action to curb the detrimental and ubiquitous message that underage drinking is “cool.” Various community groups, such as those in Providence, RI; Troy, MI; Baltimore; Cincinnati and Los Angeles, have led the way in regulating alcohol advertising by enacting ordinances which restrict alcohol billboards in areas where children are present. They have proven that the fight to protect children from these insidious messages is a battle that can be won.