Alcohol Promoters Misrepresent Policy Makers on the Effects of Alcohol Advertising

The alcoholic-beverage industries assert that governmental bodies have concluded advertising has insignificant, if any, effects on alcohol consumption and abuse. Here are a few of their common arguments that do not tell the whole story behind billions of dollars in advertising expenditures.

Industry Assertion:
The Federal Trade Commission found “no reliable basis to conclude that alcohol advertising significantly affects consumption, let alone abuse.” (1985)

FTC Position on the Effects of Alcohol Advertising:

1991:
“In 1985, the Commission staff conducted an analysis of the existing literature on the quantitative effects of alcohol advertising on consumption and abuse. Based on the staff's finding, the Commission found insufficient evidence to justify initiating an industry-wide rulemaking to consider banning or otherwise restricting alcohol advertising. This staff recommendation has been cited by some as proof that banning all alcohol beverage advertising, or taking other intermediate steps, would not diminish the abuse of alcohol.”

“The Commission believes that the evidence is inconclusive on the issue of the linkage between alcohol advertising and consumption. There are studies that appear to support either position. This inconclusiveness of the studies, however, does not prove that no relationship exists. Rather, the question is whether econometric and economic studies can establish the advertising effects on consumption. It appears that the research methodology by itself may simply be incapable of accurately measuring the relationship.


1999:
“While econometric study is an important tool for evaluating the effect of an individual factor on a multi-factor result, efforts to measure the effects of differing levels of alcohol advertising on overall consumer behavior face significant methodological challenges....research focuses only on the effect of advertising on population-wide alcohol consumption, and thus it may not effectively test for the very small part represented by underage consumption...the generally inconclusive nature of the empirical research does not rule out the existence of a clinically important effect of advertising on youth drinking decisions. This is consistent with previous findings.”

(Footnote 11, Self Regulation in the Alcohol Industry, September 1999)
Industry Assertion:
The FTC agrees that alcopop advertising does not target consumers under the legal age of 21 years.

Actual FTC Finding on the Effects of Alcopop Advertising (emphasis added):
“Our review of the internal company documents did not find evidence that the products and their advertising are targeted at consumers under 21.... This action is not to be construed as a determination that a violation of the FTC Act may not have occurred” (FTC Letter to CSPI, March 6th, 2002).

CSPI Polling shows that:

- Teens are 3 times more likely to have heard or read about alcopops than adults.
- Teens are 4 times more likely to have tried alcopops than adults.
- 59% of adults believe that alcopops are marketed to people under the age of 21.
- 53% of Teens believe that alcopops are specifically marketed to their age group or younger.

Awareness of Alcopops is High, Considering the Short Time Ads Have Run

Children See More Alcopop Ads than Adults

- “Marketers of low-alcohol refreshers, the so-called ‘malternatives’ such as Smirnoff Ice, delivered 60% more [magazine] advertising to youth than to adults.” (“Overexposed: Youth a Target of Alcohol Advertising in Magazines,” The Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth: September 2002)
- Because of the placement of the commercials, almost 25% of alcohol advertising on television in 2001 was more likely to be seen by youth than adults. (“Television: Alcohol's Vast Adland” The Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth: December 2002)

Industry Assertion:
The Department of Health and Human Services has concluded that “research has yet to document a strong relationship between alcohol advertising and alcohol consumption.”

Conclusions From The Effects of the Mass Media on the Use and Abuse of Alcohol, National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Research Monograph 28, 1995:

- [T]here is sufficient evidence to say that alcohol advertising is likely to be a contributing factor to overall consumption and other alcohol-related problems in the long-term (Dr. Sally Casswell, Alcohol and Public Health Research Unit, School of Medicine, University of Auckland, p. 282).
- [A]lcohol advertising can influence children, particularly their beliefs about alcohol and, indirectly, their intentions to drink as adults (Dr. Joel Grube, Prevention Research Center, p. 288).
- [I]f research were designed to take account of what the advertiser is trying to do and if it examined the relationship between the specific structure of the message and the individual or group for whom that message is targeted, investigators probably would find “whopping effects” (Dr. Esther Thorson, School of Journalism, University of Missouri, p. 282).
The preponderance of the evidence indicates that alcohol advertising stimulates higher consumption of alcohol by both adults and adolescents. It appears to be a contributing factor that increases drinking to a modest degree rather than being a major determinant. (Dr. Charles Atkins, Department of Communications, Michigan State University, p.281)

Current Research Supports these Conclusions:

- Adolescents can remember and sketch details of events in alcohol commercials adequately enough for independent judges to identify. (Stacy et al, 2001)
- Advertisements are a significant predictor of adolescent knowledge of beer brands, brand preference, current drinking behaviors, brand loyalty and intentions to drink. (Gentile et al, 2001)

**Industry Assertion:**

“Advertising does not cause an individual to consume, let alone abuse beverage alcohol.”

(Distilled Spirits Council of America Website: accessed 01-13 03)

In 2001, (Lorillard Tobacco vs. Massachusetts) a case in which stuck down Massachusetts’ restrictions on billboard ads for cigarettes, the Supreme Court stated:

“Product advertising simulates demand and the absence of it suppresses it.”