Alcohol advertising: the last chance saloon

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Although the content of alcohol advertisements is restricted, Gerard Hastings and colleagues find that advertisers are still managing to appeal to young people and promote drinking.

Targeting and appealing to young people

Upcoming generations represent a key target for alcohol advertisers. Although the documents mainly refer to this group as starting at the legal drinking age (18 years), this distinction is sometimes lost. Thus market research data on 15 and 16 year olds are used to guide campaign development and deployment, and it is clearly acknowledged that particular products appeal to children (Lambrini, for instance, is referred to as a “kids’ drink”). Many references are made to the need to recruit new drinkers and establish their loyalty to a particular brand: WKD, for instance, wants to attract “new 18 year olds, ” and Carling takes a particular interest in the fact that the Carling Weekend is “the first choice for the festival virgin,” offering free branded tents and a breakfast can of beer.

Campaigns aspire to be associated with and appeal to youth: Smirnoff Ice wants to “become the most respected youth brand (overtaking Lynx [deodorant]).” New media channels are used because they will appeal to and engage young people, and Lambrini’s 2007 television campaign set out to be “a cross between myspace and High School the [sic] Musical.”

University students are another focus. A Smirnoff presentation says, a “great place to create excitement and drive recruitment is within the student community,” and Carling wanted a “greater focus on students: a core recruitment audience.” Carling’s aim turned into a proposal to produce a magazine for first year students—including those at Scottish universities, where a significant proportion of fresher are under the legal drinking age.

Attitudes to drunkenness and potency

Advertisers are well aware that some groups drink irresponsibly. Brand strategy documents and campaign briefs abound with references to unwise and immoderate drinking. Far from regretting or avoiding any promotion of this behaviour as the codes require, producers and agencies analyse it for market opportunities. Thus Lambrini’s qualitative research with young women provided respondents with stimulus themes such as “getting pissed,” “one night stands,” and “drinking games” to help them discuss their experiences with the product (figure). Increasing consumption is a key promotional aim, contradicting the claim that the intention is simply to encourage brand switching.

Drunkenness is also linked to high alcoholic strength—any reference to which is forbidden by the codes. Yet Smirnoff has worked out that “potency can be communicated in a number of ways,” including by reference to the drink being “ten times filtered or triple distilled,” noting that “for consumers both result in increased purity and therefore increased strength.”

Association with social success

Advertisers are not allowed to suggest that alcohol can enhance the social success of either an individual or an event—yet the documents are full of references to brands doing both things. Thus Carling is described as a “social lubricant” by its promotion team, and the brand overtly seeks to “own sociability,” as this is the way to “dominate the booze market.” Lambrini is described as a “social lubricant” in a creative brief for a summer campaign, and the “brand key” for the product, produced in 2008, positions it as “the perfect start to the night,” with the promise that the drink is “the best way to make your night light, bubbly and full of flavour.”

Efforts are also made to associate brands with personal transformation and enhancement.

Selection of documents

Because alcohol advertising is so extensive (around £800m (€900m; $1.3bn) a year) it was not possible to examine documents from all relevant companies. Requests were therefore sent to only four producers, chosen for their profile, and their respective communications agencies; and they were asked to send documents relating to just five brands out of the dozens on their books for 2005-8 (table). We analysed the documents on behalf of the committee.

Although the sample is small, the requests resulted in thousands of pages of paper documents and nearly three gigabytes of electronic ones. These comprised contact reports between client and agency, client briefs, creative briefs, media briefs, media schedules, advertising budgets, and market research reports (box 1 on bmj.com).

We conducted a thematic analysis of the documents. We initially looked at four themes that are banned by the advertising code of practice (box 2) as well as sponsorship and new media.
Lambrini can “transform you into the glamour pusses you know you should be.”

**Sexual attractiveness**

Suggesting that alcohol can enhance either masculinity or femininity is proscribed, yet the documents are full of references to both. Thus the need to “communicate maleness and personality” is noted as a key communications objective for WKD, and Diageo highlights the brand values and personality of Smirnoff Black as “urbane,” “masculine,” and “charismatic”; dictionary definitions of these characteristics are accompanied by photographs of George Clooney, Bono, and Ewan McGregor. Masculinity is often equated with physical performance, personal qualities, attractiveness or sexual success.

**Sociability and social success**—Advertising must not link drinking with enhanced attractiveness, masculinity or femininity, nor with daringness, toughness, bravado, challenge, seduction, sexual activity, or sexual success.

**Power of sponsorship**

Although sponsorship is not specifically included in the advertising code, it is a large and powerful part of alcohol promotion. Sponsorship is a way of raising brand awareness, creating positive brand attitudes, and building emotional connections with consumers. A Carling document about a music sponsorship campaign sums this up neatly: “Ultimately, the band are the heroes at the venue and Carling should use them to ‘piggy back’ and engage customers [sic] emotions.”

Although the codes prohibit any link between alcohol and youth culture or sporting achievement, the documents discuss in detail sponsorship deals with football, lads’ magazines, and music festivals. Often the intent of such sponsorship is specifically to reach young people: Carling’s sponsorship of the English football League Cup (Carling Cup) is a way to “recruit young male (LDA [legal drinking age]–21) drinkers into the brand.” Events are chosen to show how well the brand understands and relates to young people: as one Carling executive expresses it, “They [young men] think about 4 things, we brew 1 and sponsor 2 of them.”

Sponsorship is not explicitly covered by the codes, so producers can take advantage of the resulting regulatory ambiguity, as box 4 shows.
risk of breaching the company’s internal marketing code (for example, as a result of depicting or encouraging irresponsible drinking); nevertheless, Smirnoff continues to do all it can to boost its presence on the site. Others are less reticent and welcome the fact that new media “will allow us the most creative freedom,” and give access to “‘Young and Energised’ consumers who engage in new technologies and gadgets.”

Inadequate regulation
The documents we analysed show that attempts to control the content of alcohol advertising have two systemic failings. Firstly, the sophisticated communications and subtle emotional concepts such as sociability and masculinity that comprise modern advertising (and sponsorship) often defy intelligent analysis by the regulator, especially when the thinking and strategising that underpins them remain hidden (box 5). Secondly, producers and agencies can exploit the ambiguities in the codes and push the boundaries of both acceptability and adjudication.

The second problem of pushing the boundaries is illustrated by Lambriani’s tenacious attempts to retain the strapline “Girls just wanna have fun” in the face of repeated advice from the regulator that it was “targeting young girls, and promotes getting pissed” and was “unacceptable.” Only when the strapline appeared in newspaper coverage of the death of a young woman in an incident that occurred after she had been drinking Lambriani did the company consider disassociating themselves from it.

Tightening the rules
The UK needs to tighten both the procedures and scope of the regulation of alcohol advertising. In terms of procedures, regulation should be independent of the alcohol and advertising industries, matching best practice in other fields such as financial services and professional conduct. In addition, young people should be formally involved in the process—the best people to judge what a particular communication is saying are those in the target audience. Finally, all alcohol advertisements should be vetted, not, as at present, just those for broadcast.

Turning to scope, sponsorship must be covered by the regulations, and digital media should also come under much greater scrutiny. In addition, particular efforts should be made to protect children from alcohol advertising (box 6).

The current problems with UK alcohol promotion are reminiscent of those seen before tobacco advertising was banned, when attempts to control content and adjust targeting simply resulted in more cryptic and imaginative campaigns. Indeed David Abbott, a leading advertiser of the time, argued that the codes were in fact acting as a stimulus, not a constraint, on creative imagination and that the only solution was an outright ban. History suggests that alcohol advertisers are, appropriately enough, drinking in the last chance saloon.

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Contributors and sources: The authors all have a long term research interest in examining critically the role of marketing in society. Previous work has included systematic reviews of the impact of food marketing (GH, MS) and alcohol advertising (GH, KA) on children, most notably through a large NPI grant. CB is currently studying alcohol cultures and new media, while TA and TF have an interest in business ethics and regulation.

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