Drug and Alcohol Review

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Online Publication Date: 01 March 2008

To cite this Article: Munro, Geoffrey and de Wever, Johanna (2008) 'Culture clash: alcohol marketing and public health aspirations', Drug and Alcohol Review, 27:2, 204 - 211

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/09595230701827136
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09595230701827136

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
Culture clash: alcohol marketing and public health aspirations

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It is of no coincidence that a number of recent Harm Reduction Digests have addressed the issue of the reduction of alcohol-related harm. Despite the dominant focus on illicit drug use in the popular discourse, alcohol remains Australia’s number one drug problem, as it is in many other developed countries. In this Digest Munro and de Wever use the ‘four Ps’ of marketing: product, price, place and promotion, to critique the two decades industry self-regulation of alcohol marketing. They conclude that if we are going to develop policies which effectively change Australian drinking culture to reduce alcohol-related harm, we need first to accept that the alcohol industry and the health field have separate and conflicting interests.

Introduction

In the current iteration of Australia’s national alcohol strategy the notion of ‘culture’ has a central role [1]. Alcohol is acknowledged as a source of enjoyment and comfort, and integral to a host of social rituals, but too many people participate in ‘drunken cultures’ rather than ‘drinking cultures’ [1]. The key challenge is ‘developing Australia’s drinking cultures to produce safer and healthier outcomes’ [1]. This is daunting because drinking to intoxication is ‘not a random occurrence’ [1], nor is the pursuit of ‘determined drunkenness’ [2]. The dimension of the problem is well known: 20% of the whole population risk their safety and well-being on at least one occasion each month; people aged 20–29 years are most likely to engage in short-term unsafe drinking; 80% of all alcohol consumed by underage drinkers is drunk at risky or high-risk levels for immediate harm [1]. In Australia such unsafe drinking is normative and buttressed ‘by powerful, intangible social forces—such as habits, customs, images and norms…and equally powerful, tangible forces…such as promotion and marketing…’ [1]. Therefore: ‘It is vital that alcohol promotions be regulated to ensure public health and safety interests are upheld’ [1].

The regulation of promotion is important because ‘exposure to repeated high level alcohol promotion inculcates pro-drinking attitudes and increases the likelihood of heavy drinking’ [3, p. 183]. Yet the extent of control foreshadowed in the National Alcohol Strategy is limited to ‘continuous monitoring of alcohol promotions’ and the hopeful suggestion that the self-regulated Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code (ABAC) ‘can help shape the drinking culture for the better’ [1]. It is an optimistic proposal because over two decades the alcohol industry has failed to align its advertising with the self-regulated code of practice and shows no sign of doing so in future. Moreover, this prescription does not account for other aggressive methods by which the industry promotes its product in a time when government has deregulated the market-place in the cause of economic competition. The industry’s aggressive marketing undermines the Strategy’s aim of producing healthier drinking cultures, and poses a fundamental challenge to those who strive to prevent and reduce alcohol related harm.
The marketing mix

The implementation of national competition policy throughout the last decade has had the intended effect in the alcohol sector: greater competition, more venues and outlets, improved economies of scale and efficiencies, greater purchasing and advertising power of businesses and lower prices [4]. The principal aim for producers and traders of alcohol, as for other commodities, is the return to shareholders by gaining the greatest possible share of the market and maximising consumption. Only by maintaining profitability can they remain in business [5]. Marketing is crucial to the achievement of the goal, but it is a wider project than is understood by ‘advertising’ or ‘promotion’. Several marketing variables make up the ‘marketing mix’ as developed by McCarthy and refined by Kotler: they are product, price, place and promotion [6,7]. The ‘four Ps’, which encompass market research, product development, distribution, pricing, advertising and all forms of promotion, offer a framework for understanding the marketing behaviour of the alcohol industry.

In this account we use each of the four variables of the marketing mix to illuminate ways in which the broad alcohol industry uses its freedom to expand the place of alcohol within the society and shape the formation of customs and norms in its own image.

The product

Product differentiation is considered vital by alcohol manufacturers because ‘who innovates, wins’ [8], but some innovations clash with the aims of public health. Harm reduction measures encourage the use of drugs in forms that are likely to result in fewer adverse outcomes, such as promoting the use of low-alcohol beverages over higher strength variants [9], but this principle is offended by the introduction of ‘premium strength’ premixed spirits. Premium strength premixed spirits are the latest variant of the category labelled ‘designer drinks’ or ‘alcopops’ or Ready-to-Drink beverages (RTDs). They have triggered international concern since the mid-1990s because they can blur the distinction between soft drinks and alcohol, encourage increased consumption by adolescents and facilitate higher levels of intoxication among young people [10–13].

Premixed spirits are already popular among Australian secondary school students. In 2005 it was the preferred drink for 43% of girls aged 12–15 years and for 53% of girls aged 16–17 years, while the prevalence among boys aged 12–17 years had doubled from a low base [14]. Many students drink hazardous levels: 20% of current drinkers aged 12–15 and 40% of current drinkers among older students were drinking on a per occasion level that would be hazardous for an adult [14]. They face the natural sequelae of intoxication that includes ‘... memory loss, the potential for violence and sexual risk taking’ and the risk of fatal and non-fatal accidents and injury [14, p. 3].

The role of premixed spirits in dangerous drinking is clear. Unpublished data sourced from the 2004 National Household Survey shows that 77% of females and 73% of males aged 14–19 years who drink ‘at risky or high risk levels for short term harm’ consume premixed spirits as much, or more, than any other alcohol beverage (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, personal communication to G. Munro, 2007).

Premium-strength RTDs can only worsen the risk and the likely outcomes. Whereas the first designer drinks contained around 5% alcohol by volume (ABV) and comprised about one standard drink per bottle/can, most new generation RTDs contain around 7% ABV, and due to packaging in slightly larger containers, comprise around two standard drinks (e.g. Smirnoff Double Black, Jim Beam Black). Some ‘energy’ drinks such as Elevate Bomb contain 8% ABV, while two bourbon-based RTDs, Bulleit and Woodstock Blue, contain 9% ABV and comprise 2.7 standard drinks per can. These RTDs seem designed for the ‘determined drunk’ drinker, as those with the highest ABV display their alcohol content prominently on the label, in contrast to standard RTDs that have the information on the back or side of the container in a small or near illegible font.

The whole RTD category is growing at over 9% per annum, almost twice as fast as any other [15]. As premium-strength RTDs grew by 34% in the 12 months to August 2007 and now represents 17% of the entire RTD market [16], leading spirits brands, including Bundaberg Rum and Johnnie Walker, have joined the rush to market premium-strength RTDs [15]. They regard the RTDs as entry-level spirits drinking, from which the customer will progress to the ‘glass’ version [17,18].

Mat Baxter of Naked Communications, marketer of the premixed spirit Absolut Cut, confirmed that young people, implicitly including minors, are targeted with premixed spirits: ‘It’s one of the few drinks where you don’t necessarily know you’re drinking alcohol and that’s a conscious effort to make these drinks more appealing to young people’ [19]. He described the super-strength category as particularly attractive for product innovation: ‘... the real area for growth, if you can carve it out, is still 7% with a sophisticated but affordable drink that will appeal to young people on a budget who want to get drunk very quickly’ [20]. His testimony proves the alcohol and advertising industries know RTDs are misused by young consumers, that they depend on the determined drunk drinker to drive sales, and that they tailor their campaigns to that ‘category of drinker’ [20].
To increase the alcoholic strength of drinks that are favoured by the heaviest drinking minors and other young people is serious: higher levels of deliberate and accidental intoxication and incidence of harm is predictable when beverages with a potency of 7–9% are substituted for standard beverages. In the United Kingdom the heaviest-drinking young people prefer ‘designer’ beverages with the highest concentration of alcohol, and the same result is likely in Australia [3,21]. However, that is not the concern of the industry producers or traders: they are not required to justify the innovation or warn the consumer of the higher risk. That is left to the public health field.

The reduction of price
Price is important in influencing demand for a product. Kotler identified price as influencing the buyer’s perception of value and the setting of price enables access to the product for the consumer [6]. Similarly, the public health field understands price is one determinant of alcohol consumption levels [22,23] and an influence on externalities, including automobile accidents, liver cirrhosis, youth drinking, drink driving and violence [22,24,25]. A lower retail price for alcohol results in higher consumption by both light and heavy drinkers and, correspondingly, a rise in price generally lowers demand [22,24]. While the discounting of the price for on-premises patrons through gimmicks such as ‘happy hours’ is criticised for encouraging unsafe levels of drinking [22], less attention has been given to artificial price reductions for packaged liquor.

Deregulation of the packaged liquor sector, which represents over 50% of the total alcohol market in Australia, has resulted in a prolonged retail price war as competitors struggle for market share [26]. The industry titans that control nearly half of Australia’s retail stores, Woolworths and Coles Myer, engage in ‘assertive price discounting’, including selling below wholesale price as a ‘loss leader’ to attract custom [26]. Discounting for bulk purchases is standard practice. Coles’ Liquorland and Woolworths’ Safeway Liquor typically offer discounts of 10% and 20% for purchases of six bottles of wine [27]; Coles’ 1st Choice offers a $10 wine voucher for $100 expenditure on bottled wine and Woolworth’s Dan Murphy’s ‘guarantees lowest liquor prices’ [28,29].

The duopoly’s competitors have joined battle and discounting has spread throughout the retail liquor sector. Among the ‘specials’ promoted by Liquor Stop in New South Wales during 3–16 November 2007 were: a Woodstock Bourbon and Cola 10-pack for $19.99; a Bulleit Bourbon and Cola (9%) six-pack for $24.99; eight Vodka Cruiser bottles (2 x four-packs) for $18; an Elevate Bomb (8%) four-pack for $11.99; and a Heineken stubbies six-pack for $13.99 [30]. One effect of this pricing and packaging strategy is to facilitate access to large amounts of alcohol to adolescents who have comparatively limited financial resources. A Victorian study in 2002 found that minors aged 13–17 years who paid for alcohol expended an average of $22 on the last occasion [31].

In many cases the amount of alcohol that must be purchased to qualify for a discount is raised from one bottle of spirits to two, three or six bottles; from one wine cask to two casks; from one slab of beer to two slabs and to multiple packs of RTDs. While consumers may appreciate the lower prices made possible by competitive discounting, the research consensus indicates the practice may lead to greater incidence of acute and chronic harm if it propels higher levels of problematic drinking. The prospect of harm must be elevated when consumers buy alcohol in bulk: it increases domestic availability and encourages opportunistic consumption; and increases supply to the most vulnerable drinkers when the drinks discounted are youth-friendly.

The expansion of place
According to the marketing mix model, the concept of ‘place’ involves ‘marketing activities [which] are concerned with making and distributing the finished product to target consumers’ [6, p. 106]. In the present case, ‘place’ refers to the distribution channels through which alcohol beverages are made available to the consumer; in Australia, this includes a wide range of licensed venues and packaged liquor retailers. Traditionally the distribution of alcohol has been tightly regulated as the control of the physical availability of alcohol is one tool governments can deploy to limit alcohol problems [32]. However, a feature of deregulation in Victoria is the growth in the total number of all types of licensed premises from under 4000 in 1986 to over 17 400 in 2007 the expansion of on-premises trading hours to a virtual 24/7 and the granting of on-premises licences to generalist or non-specialist businesses such as cafes, bookshops, hairdressers, florists, laundries (S. Willshire, personal communication to G. Munro, 2007).

Packaged liquor retailing has been liberalised and the abolition of the anti-monopoly cap on the market share owned by a single entity has led to the establishment of large chains that compete with each other and independent or family businesses (e.g. Liquorland, Liquor Wise, Liquor Stop, Vintage Cellars, Quaffers, First Choice, BWS, Premix King) [26]. In a late development in Victoria, several Coles Myer supermarkets are licensed to sell alcohol direct from the grocery aisles rather than from a physically distinct liquor store with a different entrance [33]. On the grounds of ‘customer convenience’, this innovation turns previous non-licensed premises where children...
commonly spend time into licensed premises from which children have traditionally been barred on the grounds of moral hazard. If this trial innovation becomes standard practice it will transform alcohol into the 'ordinary commodity' against the warning of health advocates who have suggested the impact, while 'difficult to measure' will assist the normalisation of alcohol and form one of the 'intangible influences' that help shape cultural attitudes [34].

The growth of promotion

In the marketing mix, 'promotion' refers to the combination of advertising, sales promotion and public relations which combine to create brand awareness. Alcohol promotion by producers and retailers in Australia is prolific with the collective advertising budget in 2006 estimated to top $130 million [35]. This sum does not include expenditure on below-the-line promotion (point-of-sale, special events, sponsorship and company-owned websites). Producers focus on advertising campaigns in the mass media, sponsorship of sport, online promotion, point-of-sale and venue promotion, while a recent industry article listed 31 different ways a retailer could promote alcohol to their audience ranging from giveaways, advertising and direct mail to 'stunts' [36]. In this account, due to the significance of the issues and the limitation of space, we have chosen to focus upon alcohol advertising policy and the sponsorship of sport.

Advertising self-regulation

While it is accepted that advertising contributes to levels of consumption and alcohol-related harm, its greatest effect may be to help shape, in a less tangible form, values and attitudes toward alcohol [3,37]. Control of alcohol advertising has long been contested in Australia. In 1989 the National Health Policy on Alcohol called for 'a workable code of practice' because:

The existing form of industry self regulation of advertising is not working uniformly in way calculated to protect the health interests of the population and is being reviewed [38, p. 7].

This policy wanted advertising to encourage 'responsible use' of alcohol, to 'adequately address health issues', 'not place unfair pressure on young people' and be 'subject to effective mechanisms of monitoring and review of its administration'. Finally, it warned that a mandatory form of regulation was an option if self-regulation failed [38].

Alcohol advertising in Australia has been self-regulated by peak industry bodies through the ABAC since 1998. In summary, ABAC requires alcohol advertisements to: 'present a mature, balanced and responsible approach to drinking'; 'not encourage excessive use or abuse of alcohol; 'not have strong or evident appeal to children or adolescents'; nor depict 'the consumption or presence of alcohol as contributing to personal, business, social, sporting, sexual or other success'; nor suggest that alcohol contributes to a change in mood or environment [39]. The scheme includes a pre-vetting process, in which advertisements are previewed in the developmental stage to ensure that 'they abide by the letter, and the spirit, of the Code', and an Adjudication Panel that determines the value of objections to specific advertisements [39].

The decision in 2003 by the Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy (MCDS) to review the effectiveness of ABAC indicated it had lost confidence in the code, and the subsequent investigation found the ABAC system was deficient, even dysfunctional (see below) [40]. Yet throughout 5 years of operation the ABAC principals had maintained the system represented best practice and could not be improved. The Distilled Spirits Industry Council of Australia (DSICA) had proclaimed: '...Australia has a comprehensive self regulatory system in place that specifically prevents advertising directed at young people' [42]; '...the Pre-vetting system has been extraordinarily successful' and it had '...proved ground breaking internationally with several countries adopting the model' [43]. The rigour of the system was lauded: 'the industry’s voluntary code and its complaints system was one of the world’s most stringent’ [43]; and ‘Australian brewers...lead the world in strong self regulation of advertising’ [44].

2003 Review

The ad hoc National Committee for the Review of Alcohol Advertising (NCRAA) concluded that ABAC ‘does not address public health concerns about alcohol advertising and use’ [45]. The Report indicated that inter alia advertisements contravened the code and the system lacked transparency and accountability; the public was not aware of the code or how to register a complaint; the process for judging complaints was slow; the decision-making process was unclear; the outcomes were not reported; and the code did not apply to internet advertising or promotions at events [40]. Moreover, the complaints mechanism had barely functioned—only 5% of objections to alcohol advertisements submitted by the public were passed for assessment to the official ABAC Adjudication Panel by the gatekeeper: the Advertising Standards Board (ASB). Instead, the majority of complaints (95%) were assessed by the ASB against a generic advertising code and were rejected [40]. NCRAA determined that the ASB did not have sufficient understanding of public health concerns about alcohol advertising to make
adequate judgements about specific advertisements [40].

The outcome of the committee’s report should have been devastating for the industry’s credibility. To accept the self-regulators’ word at face value, they had been unable to distinguish between a system that represented ‘world’s best practice’ and one that was dysfunctional, even in extremis. The failure of ABAC after 5 years of unhindered operation calls into question the alcohol industry’s capacity to supervise its advertising and the advertising industry’s ability to comply with the self-regulated code.

Outcomes of the Review

Rather than impose a different system, MCDS allowed the industry to continue to conduct an ABAC system that was ‘revised’ and ‘strengthened’ by 25 amendments [38]. These included the proposal that each complaint must be referred to the ABAC Complaints Panel, tested against the spirit and letter of the code, and resolved within 30 days. A government official was added to the ABAC Management Committee and a public health expert joined the complaints panel; the code was extended to include internet advertising and sponsorship of events. The public was to be informed of the code and the results of objections were to be publicised via a dedicated website. In an echo from 1989, MCDS warned ‘Should industry fail to implement the recommendations contained in this report, other options, such as regulation by Government should be considered’ [40].

Post-revision performance of ABAC

The performance of the ABAC system ‘post-revision’ is disappointing. Although MCDS considered public awareness of the scheme was crucial, the industry rejected the proposal of advertising the scheme via a media campaign [40]. Instead, it agreed to create a dedicated website to publicise the code and report on its processes [40]. The website, developed on behalf of an industry known for its creative use of the internet [40], was not established until August 2007, nearly a decade after ABAC began and 3 years after the scheme was found to be deficient. There is no sign that the public is more aware of ABAC today than in 2003 and public ignorance is a barrier to a scheme that is dependent on the participation of the public. The lack of public advertising is disturbing because a website can be utilised only by those already informed, and the small number of complaints is interpreted by the principals as proof of public satisfaction [45].

On two occasions since the revision the ABAC Management Committee, whose function is to ‘play an active role to ensure it is an effective self-regulatory system’ [46, p. 21] has rejected advice from the Adjudication Panel that the Code requires amending in order to restrain improper advertising. In 2005 the Chief Adjudicator, Professor Michael Lavarch, noted: ‘The Management Committee may wish to consider section (c) of the ABAC and assess whether it is meeting community expectations in terms of the use of sexual imagery in alcohol advertising’ [46]. He repeated the call in his annual report for 2006: ‘For instance, if there was a concern about the use of sexual imagery in alcohol advertising, then section (c) could be amended to prohibit the use of sexual imagery rather than the current provisions which allow sexual imagery but not the suggestion that alcohol is a contributor to sexual success’ [47]. The Management Committee rejected his proposal [G. Broderick, personal communication to G. Munro, 2007]. In the second case, following a complaint against a Cougar Bourbon advertisement in 2005 (see below), Professor Lavarch found there was not a provision in ABAC which prevented advertisers from discouraging the making of complaints by objectors, and it was a gap that deserved to be filled [46]. The code has not been changed in accordance with that suggestion.

The inability of leading brands to abide by the code prior to 2003 [42,48,49] has continued in the post-revision period. Since the revision took effect in April 2004, the brewer J. Boag & Son has published a gallery of advertisements that has been the subject of constant and often successful objections: one advertisement was withdrawn following complaints that it depicted violence and/or sexual assault [50]; two others were judged by the Adjudication Panel to transgress the code due to respective references to masturbation and sexual success [51,52]. A complaint against a fourth advertisement was upheld on a technicality although the image was judged to be acceptable by the adjudication panel [53]. This image appears to have led the Chief Adjudicator to question the adequacy of the section that prohibits an association between alcohol and sexual success (see above) [46].

The Foster’s Group appeared to repudiate the code in 2005 when it broadcast a Cougar Bourbon advertisement that threatened retribution against those who register complaints. ‘You’ve Been Warned’ broadcast the name and address of a person who had purportedly complained of a previous, allegedly popular, advertisement and invited viewers to ‘visit’ him at his home. In possibly reducing the inclination of members of the public to participate in the scheme, this advertisement could be interpreted as an assault on the code itself [54]. A formal complaint by the first author suggested that the advertisement infringed section (a) (iii) which forbids the promotion of offensive behaviour and argued it might intimidate people from submitting a complaint [55]. The Adjudication Panel considered
that section (a) (iii) was not relevant, and while ‘misguided’ and ‘inappropriate’ the advertisement did not contravene the literal terms of the code. However, the panel did suggest the code could be amended to prevent a repetition (see above) [55].

Those cases suggest that the NCRAA review has not had a lasting impact on the attitudes of the alcohol industry and the advertising industry. In case of code breaches, the failure to observe the ABAC is threefold: first, by the creative designers of advertisement; secondly, by the client company that approved it; and thirdly, by the pre-vetting panel that ratified it. In a similar vein the Management Committee is unwilling to act on the advice of the adjudicators to ensure that the Code is attuned to contemporary developments.

**Sponsorship of sport**

Major national sports teams, events and competitions, especially those that are televised are, or have recently been, sponsored by alcohol brands: cricket, tennis, golf, horse racing, car racing, surfing and the three major football codes. The importance of sport to alcohol companies was demonstrated over the summer of 2006/07, when Lion Nathan invented an international beach cricket competition for Fourex beer to sponsor, so it could compete with Victoria Bitter, the sponsor of the official international one-day cricket competition [56].

Gaining naming rights to televised sport enables the brand to be promoted to mass audiences throughout the day, although technically alcohol advertisements are barred from television until 8.30 p.m. Sponsorships therefore enable alcohol brands to evade the restrictions imposed by ABAC and other media codes, and market their products indiscriminately to the entire population. The branding of official merchandise ensures that the avid fan is exposed continually to the promotion: children who wear official Australian cricket shirts have sported the Victoria Bitter logo and Carlton Football Club’s Little League players wear the name of the alcohol retail chain store Dan Murphy’s, although the brand and the store cannot advertise to children.

Foster’s choice of David Boon as the ambassador for Victoria Bitter’s sponsorship of cricket in 2005/6 and 2006/7 indicates the extent to which industry leaders ignore the spirit, if not the letter of ABAC. Infamously, in 1989 Boon drank 52 cans of beer while en route to England with the national cricket team in a drinking contest that has entered sporting folklore [57,58]. A Foster’s representative explained its decision: ‘The link is between VB and cricket. We did research that showed he really resonated with VB drinkers and cricket fans...’ [59, p. 3]. During the ‘Boonanza’ campaign purchasers of a slab of Victoria Bitter beer (24 cans) gained a talking figurine modelled on Boon that was designed to sit atop TV sets and call, ‘Get me a VB, the cricket’s about to start’, and ‘Got a beer yet?’ during telecasts [60]. ‘Boonanza’ implicitly reinforced the traditional nexus between playing and watching cricket and ‘determined drunkenness’ [61]; an association that is now subject to critical scrutiny by senior sports journalists [62,63].

The exploitation of a ‘heroic drinker’ [6] is obviously not consistent with Foster’s claim to a commitment to responsibility in marketing. First, it transgresses the Foster’s Group’s own corporate code of practice which states it will, inter alia ‘[encourage] the responsible consumption of its products’, [observe] the letter and spirit of all relevant laws’ and aims for ‘zero injury to our communities’ [64]. Secondly, it violates the spirit of the ABAC, to which it is a signatory, as it does not ‘present a mature, balanced and responsible approach to drinking’ and implicitly encourages excessive use. Equally aggressive is Foster’s rejection of the ABAC that is implicit in the post-revision Cougar Bourbon advertisement, and Boags’ post-revision advertising campaign.

The continuing inability of industry leaders to adhere to the Code and the difficulty the principals have in managing and implementing the Code suggests that the moderation of advertising is a task beyond the industry’s capacity. The Foster’s and Boags’ campaigns are notable for being implemented when the industry is on recent notice that self-regulation is a privilege and not a right. It must believe that its privilege will be renewed regardless of its performance, because government will not enforce regulation in an era of neoliberalism.

The alcohol industry’s dismissive attitude toward the advertising code is symptomatic of the aggression with which it pursues its corporate aims generally. Advertising may be the most obvious strategy, but the other elements in the marketing mix—product, price and place—are employed to promote the maximum use of alcohol, to proclaim it suitable for every occasion, to push it into every social space, against the orientation of public health policy that seeks to draw boundaries around it.

**Is a friendly industry possible?**

The capacity of the alcohol industry to market its product in conformity with the objectives of public health was posed by a leading alcohol researcher in 1992. David Hawks proposed that a ‘friendly industry’ that shared the public health aim of limiting alcohol problems would:

1. Promote and advertise in a truthful way that did not make false assumptions or encourage over consumption or target vulnerable populations;
Ensure, as far as possible, the responsible sale and serving of its product and not the deliberate cultivation of intoxication;

(3) Not subvert public education messages or public health policies enacted to ensure safer use of its product; and

(4) Admit that alcohol is a potentially dangerous product and should not be regarded as a commodity to be sold as cheaply and freely as cabbages [65].

Having considered how the alcohol industry employs the ‘four Ps’ of the marketing mix to advance its interests, we can test the results against Hawks’ four principles. The development of high potency ‘premium-spirits’ products compromises the first two explicitly, as it is likely they will facilitate ‘over consumption’, especially as they are targeted implicitly towards young people who seek ‘determined drunkenness’. A reduction in the price of alcohol that is achieved through assertive discounting by packaged liquor licensees, with the complementary encouragement for consumers to buy in bulk, offends explicitly the fourth principle. An expansion in the physical availability of alcohol through the deregulation of licensing and the consequent growth of outlets, particularly large discount chains, contributes to the pressure for retailers to lower prices. It also reverses a traditional public health policy (of restraining the number of venues) and therefore would infringe the third principle. The fourth principle is transgressed when mainstream supermarkets transfer their alcohol licences from their next-door bottle-shop to the grocery shelves, as alcohol gains the status of a normal grocery item. Self-evidently, the general refusal of industry to adhere to the formal advertising Code and its evasion of the Code via the sponsorship of sport infringes the first principle, and often the second, third and fourth principles.

Conclusion

An expectation that the alcohol industry might constrain its marketing in order to advance ‘healthier drinking cultures’ is at odds with the record of the industry’s performance over time. The sociologist Zygmunt Baumann has pointed out when the freedom of the market is given priority, ‘market standards replace moral responsibilities’, so we are gripped by our own interests and have little regard for those of others [66]. There is no requirement for alcohol producers or retailers to consider the impact on the individual or on the whole society of the distribution and consumption of their product. It would contradict the commercial imperative, ignore the shareholder’s interest and offend the operation of the free market.

The marketing examples referred to in this account indicate that it is difficult for the industry and public health sector to find common ground. The industry’s practice does not support the national Strategy’s goal of developing healthier and safer drinking cultures. If successful, the Strategy’s aim of reducing the incidence of intoxication among drinkers must reduce consumption levels, and that is not in the industry’s interest when it must try to maximise consumption in order to survive and grow in a competitive market-place.

Accepting that the industry and the health field ultimately have separate and conflicting interests and aims is an essential step towards developing policies and programmes that might impact on the customs, values, images and norms that contribute to form Australia’s unsafe drinking cultures.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by funding from the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation.

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