

ALCOHOL MARKETING: GETTING THE FACTS



What is alcohol marketing?

Alcohol marketing is all around us. It's there when you are passing a billboard on the way home, watching your favourite sports, using Facebook, walking around a supermarket or getting a leaflet through the door telling you about the latest grocery offers which, of course, include alcohol.

Alcohol marketing, like other marketing, uses a mix of four different elements to get potential consumers to buy products and existing consumers to buy even more:

- **Product** i.e. design and packaging
- **Place** i.e. where it is sold and in what position
- **Price** i.e. how much it costs
- **Promotion** i.e. creating awareness of the product

Advertising on television or social networking sites, for example, and sponsorship of sports and music events are two of the most common ways of promoting a product in order to increase awareness with the target market.

Alcohol marketing is now hugely prevalent on digital and social media platforms - one in three Irish 16 and 17 year olds said they had seen an ad or pop-up for an alcohol product on their social networking page¹.

Alcohol, just like any other product or grocery, is marketed using all elements of the marketing mix.

The problem is that alcohol is not an ordinary product or grocery, despite the fact it is being sold like one and is now considered by many as part of the normal family shopping basket. Alcohol is not a grocery. Alcohol, while enjoyed by a great many of us, is consumed at levels by half of us that are harmful to our health causing a significant range of social and health harms and costing this State an estimated €3 billion plus every year.

Does alcohol marketing actually have an impact?

Alcohol marketing has a particular impact on children and young people. Alcohol marketing including advertising, sponsorship and other forms of promotion, increases the likelihood that adolescents will start to use alcohol, and to drink more if they are already using alcohol².

A number of studies have also shown that children who own alcohol branded merchandise are more likely to start drinking as are children who are regularly exposed to point-of-sale alcohol advertising in grocery stores³.

The marketing messages of the drinks industry reach children as young as 10 and 11 years of age. A study of brand and logo recognition by primary school children in Wales found that 79% of children were aware of a particular brand of beer as alcoholic drink, a much higher rate of recognition compared to recognition of Ben and Jerry's ice cream (74%) and Mr Kipling cakes (41%) as types of food⁴.

The same study cites research showing the earlier people become aware of brands, the more likely they are to use them throughout their lives, suggesting establishing early alcohol brand loyalty benefits alcohol companies in that future drinkers are more likely to choose their brand than another.

Why does alcohol marketing really matter?

It matters because alcohol marketing influences children and young people to drink earlier and to drink more. It is easier to get new consumers to adopt a brand than it is to get existing consumers to change a brand, so young people are particularly targeted by alcohol marketing.

It matters because young people's alcohol use has a direct effect on their health, development and welfare. It matters because young people are more vulnerable than adults to the effects of alcohol use, with their drinking carrying an increased risk of harm.

Drinking before the age of 15 increases the risk of alcohol dependence fourfold, compared to those who start at age 20 or older. However, we can see from the latest ESPAD report that many young Irish people are drinking early and often, with 40% of Irish schoolchildren reporting heavy episodic drinking.

Does the alcohol industry, producers and retailers, invest much in marketing?

The alcohol industry invests heavily in marketing and it's worth asking why it would do so if it did not work to increase alcohol sales. In 2010, €44 million was spent on alcohol advertising alone in Ireland⁵. It is estimated that the alcohol sector invests about €25 million in sponsorship in Ireland⁶.

The World Health Organisation⁷ states that "advertisements have a particular impact in promoting a more positive attitude to drinking among young people" and recommends restricting the volume and content of alcohol marketing communications as a key way of reducing alcohol-related harm.

What is the aim of alcohol marketing?

The aim of alcohol marketing is to increase sales of an alcohol brand, whether by encouraging current drinkers to buy more or by recruiting new customers. Marketers know that it is easier to recruit new consumers than to get existing consumers to switch brand. In addition to competing with each other for market share, alcohol companies also use marketing to create new markets.

Alcohol marketing can shape culture by creating and sustaining expectations and norms about how to achieve social, sporting or sexual success; how to celebrate; how to relax and how to belong. According to the British Medical Association⁸ "the cumulative effect of this promotion is to reinforce and exaggerate strong pro-alcohol social norms".



¹ Behaviour and Attitudes (2010) *Have We Bottled It?* Survey commissioned by Alcohol Action Ireland

² Scientific Opinion of the Science Group of the European Alcohol and Health Forum (2009) *Does marketing communication impact on the volume and patterns of consumption of alcoholic beverages, especially by young people? - a review of the longitudinal studies*; Anderson, P. et al (2009) *Impact of Alcohol Advertising and Media Exposure on Adolescent Alcohol Use: A Systematic Review of Longitudinal Studies*. Alcohol and Alcoholism, pp.1-15, 2009

³ WHO (2012)

⁴ Alcohol Concern Wales (2012) *Making an Impression: Recognition of Alcohol Brands by Primary School Children*

⁵ Irish Marketing Journal (April 2011, vol.37, no.4)

⁶ Irish Marketing Journal (April 2011, vol.37, no.4)

⁷ WHO (2012)

⁸ British Medical Association (2009) *Under the Influence*

⁹ Steering Group Report on a National Substance Misuse Strategy (2012) Department of Health

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What would make a difference?

Alcohol marketing in Ireland is a poorly regulated area and the current system of self-regulation is ineffective in protecting children and young people from these sophisticated and powerful influences on their drinking expectations and behaviours.

We need legislation that addresses all elements of the marketing mix. The Steering Group Report on a National Substance Misuse Strategy⁹ recommended the introduction of statutory codes and legislation which would

- Phase out drinks industry sponsorship of sport and other large public events by 2016
- Reduce the volume, content and placement of all advertising in all media
- Introduce a 9 pm watershed for alcohol advertising on radio and television
- Ban outdoor advertising

The Report also recommends commencing Section 9 of the Intoxicating Liquor Act, which would regulate the marketing of alcohol through product placement alongside food, drinks and other products in mixed trade premises such as supermarkets. In relation to pricing the Report recommends increasing tackling the price of alcohol through introducing a minimum "floor" price beneath which alcohol cannot be sold.



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