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”.

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.