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# How Responsible Are “Responsible” Drinking Campaigns for Preventing Alcohol Abuse?

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## Abstract

### Purpose

The purpose of this article is to question the misplaced efforts to curb alcohol abuse through “responsible” drinking messages from the alcohol industry, asking how responsible this strategy really is.

### Design/methodology/approach

This article cites published research that calls into question the effectiveness of “responsible” messages, particularly those that situate the problem of alcohol abuse within drunk driving and underage drinking without addressing heavy consumption. Examples of “responsible” messages are drawn from websites of three major beer companies.

## Findings

Problems with “responsible” drinking are identified, including the fact that such messages place the problem within the user rather than the product. “Responsible” messages also give permission to drink heavily as long as underage and driving is not involved. “Responsible” drinking messages enable drinkers to shift responsibility to others, which gives carte blanche to binge drinking.

## Practical implications

There is little doubt that “responsible” messages are effective public relations tools that enhance the image of beer companies, but serious doubts exist regarding their ability to prevent alcohol abuse.

## Originality/value

Questioning the effectiveness of these messages puts pressure upon the industry to develop strategies that do a better job of addressing the realities of alcohol abuse.

## Keywords

Advertising, Beer, Alcoholic drinks, Drink driving

Many beer manufacturers and distilled beverage companies have embraced “responsible” drinking campaigns as a way of addressing alcohol issues. In the process, they may hope to head off further regulation efforts, enhance their image, and gain credibility as good corporate citizens who want what is best for society – even to the point of sacrificing sales. However, many critics of responsible drinking campaigns have surfaced, and perhaps rightly so. Though there will always be critics of anti-drinking campaigns that originate from the alcohol industry because such messages run counter to the sales goals, there are sound reasons to question the responsible message strategy for preventing alcohol abuse.

One critic points out that responsible drinking campaigns are tied to an outdated model of alcohol abuse prevention that is no longer in vogue with health care practitioners (Mickey, 2003). During the twentieth century ten different models have framed the way society views alcohol abuse including the temperance model, which pressed for the elimination of distilled spirits around 1900; the disease model, which assumed that alcoholism is a sickness; the responsible decision-making model, which regards alcohol as a neutral substance that is problematic only when users make wrong decisions; and more recently the lifestyle risk reduction model, which holds that alcohol is a problematic substance in itself that causes impairment for those at risk (Daugherty and O'Bryan, 1987). The responsible decision-making model blames the user for alcohol abuse, whereas the lifestyle risk reduction model blames the product. Mickey notes that the lifestyle risk reduction model is the present theory from the field of health promotion for addressing alcohol problems in society; however, “the beer industry continues to extol responsible drivers, responsible drinking, bartender training and designated drivers advocacy” (2003, p. 104).

The beer industry has often situated responsibility messages within the problem of drunk driving, which implies that drinking excessively can still be done responsibly as long as no driving is involved. The designated driver program was touted as a common-sense solution to the problem of drunk driving (DeJong and Wallack, 1992); however, this initiative is not without its own problems. For example, the designated driver can make a difference only if two or more people are traveling together, and the majority of vehicles involved in fatal crashes have only one occupant (Wagenaar, 1992). Furthermore, agreement upon the meaning of the designated driver is problematic. Though the original intent was for the designated driver to abstain, some drinkers define the designated driver as the one who drives the best when intoxicated (Wolburg, 2001). Last, the focus on drunk driving fails to address problems associated with binge drinking among college students, who

make up some of the heaviest drinkers and are often within walking distance of bars (Wolburg and Treise, 2004). For them, the real problems are passing out, losing control, getting into fights, being the victim or perpetrator of sexual assault, and poor academic performance rather than drunk driving (Wolburg, 2001).

The beer industry has also situated responsible drinking within the issue of underage drinking, as though binge drinking can be done responsibly as long as the drinker is not under the legal drinking age of 21. Because beer and other alcoholic beverages cannot be sold legally to people under 21, it is no surprise that alcohol companies take a stand against underage drinking. Such efforts can appear to be a proactive attempt at self-regulation, which in turn benefits the company by heading off further external regulatory efforts. However, by focusing on the age of the drinker rather than the amount of the product consumed, the problem of alcohol abuse is again situated within the drinker instead of the product. The ineffectiveness of this approach is evident when we realize that for many underage drinkers, the solution is simply to avoid being caught. Drinking responsibly merely means getting a good fake ID, avoiding bars that are “card hard,” or drinking at private parties instead of bars to avoid being carded at all (Wolburg, 2001).

A look at the websites of three major US beer companies confirms the emphasis on responsibility, especially through efforts to address drunk driving and underage drinking. As part of its “live responsibly” campaign, Miller Brewing (2005) aims to “... reduce drunk driving, prevent underage access and promote responsible decision-making by legal drinking age consumers” using a number of initiatives including designated driver and safe ride home programs, parent guides, and event planning guides. According to its website, Anheuser-Busch (2005) has similar initiatives as part of its “responsibility matters” campaign and claims to “... set the industry standard for aggressively promoting responsibility among adults who drink, fighting illegal underage drinking and educating the public about the importance of using designated drivers.” The Coors (2005) website, too, promotes responsibility with its “21 means 21” campaign and claims that Coors “... has become a leader in the creation and support and initiatives aimed at preventing drunk driving, underage drinking and other forms of alcohol abuse.” Anheuser-Busch and Coors both go one step further by acknowledging that for some people the responsible decision is to never drink, but it is framed as a problem within the user rather than the product. The real message is that alcohol is only a problem for a minority of people who have an abnormal reaction to alcohol.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of the responsible drinking message is the fact that it encourages the drinker to shift responsibility to others. In the minds of many drinkers, the only irresponsible drinking acts are drunk driving and getting caught for underage consumption. Circumventing the age restriction and designating a driver turn people into responsible drinkers, who are free to consume as much as possible without worry about the consequences. These simple acts give carte blanche to binge drinking.

No one would suggest that alcohol companies promote “irresponsible” drinking as a solution to the problem, but perhaps it is time to evaluate whether “responsible” drinking is a really a misplaced message.

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