

Marketing Alcohol and Tobacco to Teens

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When corporations market their products, they will naturally attempt to suggest that their products can be associated with certain lifestyles. People using their products are portrayed as successful, healthy, and carefree. Usually these depictions are mere exaggerations, but when the products advertised are unhealthy and even deadly, ethical concerns are raised. Although manufacturers of cigarettes and alcohol do not have the same rights to target youth as manufacturers of other products do, they still strive to reach this age group, hoping to secure teens as lifelong customers.

Tobacco

Today tobacco advertising in Canada is strictly controlled. Before 1989, the tobacco industry had relatively few restrictions, but was not permitted to advertise directly on television or radio. After 1989, tobacco companies were explicitly banned from direct advertising, but were still free to

sponsor widely seen events (with no restrictions on the nature of the event or where these advertisements could appear). After 1995, direct advertising was permitted, but portrayals of human figures smoking cigarettes were not. In 1997, the Tobacco Act was passed—resulting in stricter advertising restrictions—but health warnings were not required and the tobacco industry continued to associate cigarettes with a healthy, active lifestyle. Finally, in 2000, restrictions were placed on sponsorship advertising, leaving the tobacco industry with still fewer places to advertise:

publications intended for adult readership, and places where minors are not



admitted, such as bars (“Cigarette Advertising in Canada”).

With these rigid restrictions in place, the tobacco industry was forced to find more creative ways to speak to today’s youth. Retail displays (such as posters, clocks, and

countertop displays) are one way; another is to advertise in U.S. publications (publications that routinely find their way to Canadian shelves), where the rules are much less stringent. Finally, perhaps the most successful tactic employed by the tobacco industry is placing products in Hollywood movies. There, teens can see their favourite celebrities smoking a particular brand of cigarette, or just cigarettes in general. As smokers in movies are usually synonymous with sexy,



rebellious, or tough characters, and tobacco use is prevalent in 85% of the top 25 highest grossing movies, it is no wonder the tobacco industry relies on movies to mass-promote its products ("Tobacco Advertising in Canada").

In addition to heavy restrictions on tobacco advertising, the tobacco industry is also hindered by aggressive anti-smoking campaigns throughout Canada that, using humour or shock techniques, depict the not-so-glamorous side of smoking. An example of a campaign that uses shock-value to scare teens off smoking is one organized by the Alliance for the Control of



Tobacco, based out of Newfoundland. This controversial campaign features horrific

images of the effects of cigarette smoking, including a large, full-colour photograph of a mouth ravaged by cancer. Teens interviewed about this campaign admitted that it was disgusting enough to catch their

attention. Such drastic measures were introduced after smoking levels rose significantly following a decline in the early 1990s (MacDonald).

Another counter-marketing campaign is from Nova Scotia, a province that sports the country's highest smoking rate, which saw 36% of teens smoking in 2000 ("NS smoking rates worst in country"). This campaign uses humour (rather than stomach churning images) to help wean young people off smoking. The Nova Scotia Office of Health Promotion, using the tagline "Great Reasons to Smoke," portrays the smokers as unhealthy, unattractive, and unsuccessful—the exact opposite of the message that the tobacco industry wishes to transmit to Canada's youth.

It is too soon to speculate on whether the recent restrictions on tobacco advertising or the anti-smoking campaigns have made a meaningful impact on smoking rates in Canada, but according to the Canadian Medical Association, only 1 in 5 Canadians smokes. The most dramatic decline in the

popularity of smoking was seen in British Columbia (33% to 17%) and Quebec (40%-24%) ("Popularity of smoking shrinking fast"). The Government of Canada reports (2004) that smoking rates are continuing to slide: 20% of Canadians smoked an average of 15.7 cigarettes a day, while 18% of youths were reported as being smokers. This is the first time since 1994/1995 that the youth smoking rate was less than that of the total population ("Youth smoking rates continue to decline"). Perhaps a combination of tougher advertising regulations, innovative anti-smoking campaigns, and the rising cost of cigarettes can account for smoking's decline in popularity among teens in Canada.



Alcohol

The alcohol industry, unlike the tobacco industry, is free to advertise directly to its customers through any medium it chooses. It too, however, has restrictions that prohibit it from

deliberately sending messages such as: encouraging non-drinkers to start drinking, connecting drinking to high-risk activities, suggesting drinking can lead to social acceptance or to achievement in business or sports. Also, alcohol advertisements can only encourage drinkers to choose between types of alcohol; they cannot encourage drinking generally. As far as advertising for teens is concerned, advertisements are barred from targeting youths, and therefore songs that appeal to youths are forbidden, as are well-known personalities.

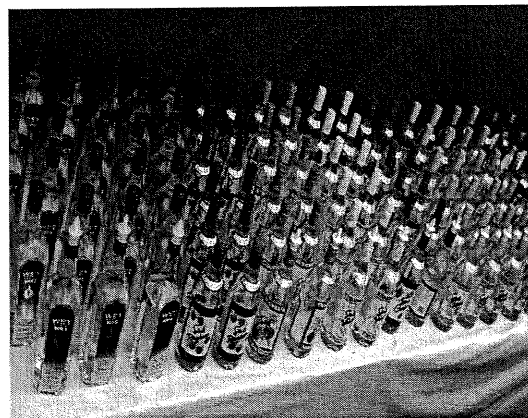
Like smoking, drinking alcohol is considered a "grown-up" activity, a part of the adult world that teens are all too eager to join. Though of course teens cannot be

depicted consuming alcohol, there are no restrictions on using images of what most teens aspire to be. This is why those appearing in alcohol advertisements are attractive, successful, and athletic. It has been suggested that young boys and girls forge a self-image based on the confident, charming people the alcohol industry portrays as the average consumer of alcohol. Similar to the tobacco industry, the alcohol industry attempts to obey the letter of the law, but not wishing to lose a generation of consumers, designs its advertising campaigns with teens in mind ("Alcohol Advertising and Youth").

Although it is illegal to suggest that alcohol contributes to social acceptance and personal acceptance, it is not illegal to

A study on alcohol advertising in magazines from 1997 to 2001 found that the number of beer and distilled spirits ads tended to increase with a magazine's youth readership. For every 1 million underage readers ages 12-19 in a magazine, researchers generally found 1.6 times more beer advertisements and 1.3 times more distilled spirits advertisements.

Source: Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth



portray socially accepted, highly successful people who also, purely coincidentally, happen to enjoy a particular brand of alcohol. And although it is expressly forbidden to market alcohol to youth (even the inclusion of children's toys or mythical creatures such as the Easter Bunny is forbidden under any circumstances), there is no way of policing the marketing of the lifestyle of successful, sophisticated,

A study of 12-year-olds found that children who were more aware of beer advertising held more favorable views on drinking and expressed an intention to drink more often as adults than did children who were less knowledgeable about the ads.

Source: Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth

sexually adventurous adults.

Although the industry claims that it is complying with the advertising code, and is not directly targeting youth, it has been argued that this is a moot point because children and teens are still being affected by these campaigns. The lack of reference to youth in alcohol commercials may have

the opposite of the desired effect, because it reinforces that consumption of alcohol is an adult indulgence. Rebellious teens and teens looking for a rite of passage to adulthood might see alcohol as a way to speed up the process as well as combat the social awkwardness that is associated with adolescence.

Like smoking, drinking is on the decline in Canada. And since the industry cannot directly encourage its consumers to drink more, it has been accused of shifting its focus to Canadians aged 18-24. This group, although only 2% of the adult population of Canada, accounts for 11% of the beer sales. In order to ensure that this age group continues to produce active consumers of alcohol, it is important that the industry hook them early. This targeting of the age-group immediately above high school aged youths may be affecting students of younger ages as they desperately grope towards adulthood. There are signs that the industry is successful, as statistics show that nearly 66% of high school students in Ontario are active drinkers, compared to 56% in 1993

(McKenzie).

Both the alcohol and tobacco industries have been accused of skirting rigid regulations by advertising directly on the Internet. Although Websites advertising these products have disclaimers and age restrictions, to gain access to the site is simply a matter of entering one's age. For example, Budweiser's website (<http://www.budweiser.com/>) insists that its users be above the age of 21. Clearly, this would not be a major barrier to a teen interested in browsing this site, and the fact that the site is forbidden makes it all the more likely that a curious teen will want to explore. Again, the tobacco industry faces stricter advertising restrictions, and is not able to directly market its products online. It has been suggested, however, that it markets products covertly through endorsing online cigarette vendors and promoting pro-tobacco Websites.

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The National Survey on Drug Use and Health estimates that each day more than 4,000 people under 18 try their first cigarette. That's more than 730,000 new smokers every year

Source: American Heart Association

