Advertising and Marketing Alcohol

Introduction

Alcohol advertising is all around us. Whilst watching television we laugh with the young men playing practical jokes on their friends in the WKD advertisements; we linger over the imagery of Piper Heidsieck champagne as we flick through glossy magazines and we might even nod in appreciation at the band line-up shown on music festival t-shirts sponsored by Carling for nine consecutive years. Producers of alcohol beverage brands invite us to listen, look and even wear their messages. Some argue the promotion of alcohol brands should be totally banned to prevent young and vulnerable people being drawn into the hedonistic carefree lifestyles often depicted in alcohol advertising and sponsored events, which in turn could lead to physiological and psychological harm. The brewing industry and spirits manufacturers point out that they advertise primarily to protect market share and not to encourage alcohol drinking per se. And, of course, it is ultimately down to the consumer to negotiate between the ‘upsides’ depicted in promotional activity and the ‘downsides’ that excessive alcohol consumption has on their own physical and mental health.

This chapter will consider alcohol advertising, promotion and sponsorship, it will also discuss the rules and regulations that govern the messages depicted in them and evaluate how alcohol brands imbed themselves into our culture. The chapter has three separate sections. The first section will consider global regulations that surround alcohol advertising, and how European and UK communications fit within the international scene. It will also discuss the effects a total ban would have on industry and consumption. The second section will reflect on big-budget, high-profile television advertising, radio and press campaigns
and alcohol brand sponsorship. This will include examples such as Guinness advertisements and Johnnie Walker Scotch whisky, sponsors of McLaren’s Formula One racing team (based in Woking, England). Some fear that alcohol linked with the sport and leisure industry will encourage vulnerable consumers who feel the sponsors are inviting them into that world. Elite sports would be hit hard if the sponsorship money from the brewing industry and spirits manufacturers were to be banned, as finding new partners could take several years. The final section considers the advertising initiatives put in place by the organizations such as the Home Office and the National Health Service to encourage consumers to ‘know their limits’ and acknowledge the harm that alcohol can cause. There has often been criticism that advertisements and promotions encourage drinking. There are also a number of ‘joint’ communications put forward by alcohol manufacturers, departments of health and governments to educate the public about the social and physical harm of excessive drinking.

**Alcohol advertising regulations across the world**

The link between excessive, harmful drinking and health problems is a given. Alcohol producers and the World Health Organization (2008a) certainly agree on that. What they do not wholeheartedly agree on is a definition of what harmful drinking is, and whether alcohol advertising and marketing encourages consumers to drink or drink more, leading to the health problems frequently referred to throughout this book. Many countries have made, or are considering imposing, strict rules, regulations and legislation with regard to the promotion and advertising of alcohol. This is in response to pleas from the World Health Organization, Alcoholics Anonymous, law enforcement agencies, psychiatric services and so on. However, in 2002 the International Center for Alcohol Policies (ICAP) presented a report to the World Health Organization regarding the ethical position of the alcohol industry. They specifically reported on the ethical roles that beverage producers play whilst, at the same time, giving alcohol a ‘space’ within culture and society through advertising and marketing. The International Center for Alcohol Policies is an organization sponsored by international alcoholic drink producers including Allied Domecq PLC, Bacardi-Martini, Foster’s Group Limited and South African Breweries PLC. Some would argue, then, that the report is not disinterested. However, alcohol producers clearly show their support to ‘global group thinking’ of how alcohol consumption affects health. It also shows they are prepared to review the effects that marketing and