Advertising at the point of sale has been acknowledged to have potentially powerful effects on consumers. With some product categories, such as tobacco, the spread of increasingly comprehensive restrictions on advertising have meant that promotions at the point of sale are the only options left. Quite apart from their role in promoting products, points of sale represent sites of access to alcohol for young people. Ultimately, control over consumption comes down to how easily accessible alcohol is to obtain and that control must be exerted at the point of sale.

The availability of alcohol in the local environment of young people has been identified as one important factor related to underage drinking (Wagenaar & Perry, 1994; Scribner et al., 2008). One study in the US reported that the numbers of on-premise and off-premise alcohol-selling outlets within a three-mile radius of 32 college campuses were correlated with general levels of alcohol consumption and propensity to drink a lot when partying (Scribner et al., 2008). Reducing this availability and creating an environment in which alcohol is perceived by young people as difficult to obtain, especially if they are under the legal drinking age, may represent one of the most significant steps that can be taken to tackle the problems of youth alcohol consumption (Edwards et al., 1994). Yet, in the US, for example, most young people believe that alcohol can be readily obtained, whether the purchaser is underage or not (Johnston et al., 2004). This belief is not surprising in the light of other research showing that illegal alcohol sales to minors were widespread in the US (Forster et al., 1994, 1995). Furthermore such purchases were easier to achieve in retail stores than in bars or clubs (Forster et al., 1995; Wolfson et al., 1996a).

The need to examine the role played by point-of-sale factors in the consumption of alcohol by young people is underlined by findings that
not only is drunkenness linked to alcohol abuse (Engineer et al., 2003), but that around half of underage drinking derives from alcohol purchases they make from retail off-licence premises (Bradshaw, 2003).

The significance of marketing in retail outlets where products are purchased by consumers has been championed by the Point-of-Purchase Advertising Institute (POPAI) in the US and in other parts of the world. Point-of-sale advertising comprises a range of different marketing and promotional devices that are used by advertisers on the insides or exteriors of retail outlets to enhance consumer awareness of their brands and to trigger purchases (Pegler, 1995). Such devices include banners, checkout displays, counter-top unit, illuminated signs, posters, shelf signs, wall units and window displays. In some larger retail outlets (e.g., supermarkets) product advertising can even be carried on shopping baskets and trolleys.

The purpose of these devices is to attract consumer attention in retail environments, then to encourage purchase through interest and desire. Thus, point-of-sale promotions and product displays represent important marketing devices. By making the product look attractive, point-of-sale factors have a part to play in promoting brand image (Pollay, 2007). Their role can be critical given that they occur at the site of purchase and if they can appeal to the consumer, their impact will be immediate. This effect can be especially acute if point-of-sale promotions cause a brand to stand out from the rest. In this way, point-of-sale effects have been cited as having an important role in the establishment of brand share (Lavack & Toth, 2006). In the context of alcohol sales, retail site promotions have been found to influence the drink choices of young people who frequent those shops (Brain & Parker, 1997). Some writers have argued that point-of-sale promotions have effects that go beyond the manipulation of market share; they can drive overall growth in the market by encouraging new consumption among those who do not yet consume particular products (Pollay, 2007).

Advertisers will often coordinate the use of point-of-sale advertising devices with advertising campaigns in other media. Manufacturers may offer incentives to retailers to display point-of-sale promotions such as providing discounts, direct monetary incentives and promises to buy back unsold merchandise. They may also pay for the cost of creating on-site advertising displays in retail outlets. The point-of-sale environment represent the one occasion when product promotions, products and consumers all come together in the same place at the same time. Point-of-sale advertising therefore enjoys closer proximity to the product being advertised than is true of any other form of advertising. The