

## Alcohol Advertising on the Web



Alcohol companies have taken enthusiastically to online platforms as a way of reaching potential buyers. In the United Kingdom, spending on online ads overtook spending on TV ads in September 2009.(1) The Web makes it easy for alcohol marketers to blur the lines between marketing and entertainment: one study found that half of kids who saw alcohol websites didn't recognize that they were advertising.(2)

And, with its large youth demographic, the Web is a natural medium for reaching and influencing young drinkers. Most websites for alcohol brands ask you to give your age before accessing the content, but accept whatever birth date the user enters. Alcohol brand accounts on social networks such as Twitter or video sites like YouTube are even easier to access. (Facebook does restrict alcohol-related content, based on the birth date the user entered when he or she first registered. Unfortunately, many Facebook users lie about their age to register before they turn 13.)

A study of websites operated by the four main alcohol brands in the United Kingdom found that they contained messaging that violated alcohol advertising codes by:

- appealing to youth, social success, masculinity and femininity
- suggesting that alcohol might be essential and that the success of a social occasion depends upon alcohol
- suggesting that alcohol can improve your mood
- linking alcoholic drinks to sexual success
- associating alcohol with success in sports (3)



Researchers have found that there are several different types of online alcohol sites that are geared towards different audiences. Generally, sites for microbreweries and wine companies target older customers, but many commercial sites for beer and liquor companies seem specifically designed to appeal to college and high school students. One report concluded: "These sites exude a joyful abandon about drinking: that it is good, clean, sexy and rebellious fun that doesn't hurt anybody."

A 1997 report by the Center for Media Education in the United States identified several strategies used by alcohol sites to attract young people, and most of these are still used today:

- Ineffective age disclaimers that do nothing to prevent underage visitors from accessing the site
- Glorification of youth culture, featuring hip, attitude-laden language, humour, music, popular performers, movie reviews and other events that would appeal to youth (many alcohol companies have their own YouTube channels and online radio stations)

- Recipes, especially for “bridge” drinks – sweet alcoholic drinks that are designed to encourage new drinkers to try hard alcohol (although alcohol websites have toned down their interactive elements, one feature that’s still commonly found is a “virtual drink mixer”)
- Information about rock concerts, company-sponsored sporting events, and links to other “cool sites”
- Funky virtual communities designed around the product brand
- Branded gimmicks such as the keychain “key” mailed to those who signed up for the Heineken virtual community (4)

Since that report was released, alcohol companies have come up with new ways of using digital media for advertising:

- Presence on social networks, both by creating official pages (Southern Comfort now puts most of its marketing budget into Facebook) and encouraging user-created fan pages
- Apps and widgets that help promote the product, such as a Bacardi party invitation app
- Viral marketing campaigns such as contests that encourage buyers to post videos promoting the product
- Loyalty programs run through email and company websites
- Smartphone apps that let users play games and simulate drinking
- Ad campaigns that use multiple online platforms

All of these factors allow alcohol marketers to bypass the rules and regulations of traditional media to reach young people. As Ann Dowsett Johnston, author of *Drink: The Intimate Relationship Between Women and Alcohol*, puts it, “If you’re an underage drinker, it isn’t so much the ad you’re seeing on television, but ‘pull’ marketing, where you’re Googling a vodka company and Facebook friending it.” (6)

Today, alcohol brands continue to use digital media to build brand loyalty and promote drinking as a fun, harmless and desirable activity. Currently, there is no legislation in either Canada or the United States that prohibits alcohol sites from using techniques that might appeal to underage drinkers.

- (1) “Routes to Magic”: *The Alcoholic Beverage Industry’s Use of New Media in Alcohol Marketing*. University of Stirling, March 2010.
- (2) *Alcohol Advertising: the Effectiveness of Current Regulatory Codes in Addressing Community Concerns*. Australian National Preventive Health Agency, December 2012.
- (3) “Routes to Magic”: *The Alcoholic Beverage Industry’s Use of New Media in Alcohol Marketing*. University of Stirling, March, 2010.
- (4) *Absolut Web*, Center for Media Education, 1997.
- (5) *Alcohol Advertising in New Media*, European Centre for Monitoring Alcohol Marketing, 2009.
- (6) Elizabeth Gonzalez, “Are Alcohol Ads Targeting Kids?” *The Consumer Eagle*, March 29, 2014. <<http://www.consumereagle.com/2014/03/29/are-alcohol-ads-targeting-kids/>>

