

'You have a new message'



The drinks industry has won the battle of regulation, says **Don Shenker**

What's the best way to get the message across that alcohol in excess can be harmful? The Campaign for Smarter Drinking was announced in July amid much fanfare (*DDN*, 27 July, page 5). It is the drink industry's £100m response to Gordon Brown's challenge to put its house in order last year. The industry has come up with the goods just in the nick of time, staving off mandatory legislation for unit and health information at all supermarkets, pubs, bars and off-licences.

The scheme is backed by 46 companies including Molson Coors, Diageo and Tesco, however some supermarkets are not playing ball, in particular Sainsbury's and Asda. The campaign will be voluntary, so those not wishing to take part will not be penalised. The message too, will be chosen by the drinks industry, so you will soon see 'Why let the good times go bad?' on beer mats, bottlenecks and outdoor adverts, rather than the Department of Health's sensible drinking guidelines.

The Campaign for Smarter Drinking's social marketing push, aimed at curbing binge drinking in young adults, has been endorsed by government in a letter of understanding sent to the industry by Andy Burnham MP, secretary of state for health. The letter confirms that as long as the campaign runs successfully, mandatory point of sale information will not be thrust upon retailers and producers. The irony in this is that the Home Office has just completed a public consultation where mandatory point of sale information was suggested as a national condition for all.

The real story here is actually that the Drinkaware Trust, the government's last great hope for a drinks industry social responsibility campaign, had run out of money and not received its intended share from industry coffers. The Campaign for Smarter Drinking will now continue to fund the Drinkaware Trust for at least a year, much to government's relief.

Having been involved in the discussions at the time of the creation of the Drinkaware Trust, Alcohol Concern and other stakeholders are now obviously concerned to see the creation of another voluntary vehicle prior to any independent review of Drinkaware's actual efficacy in raising awareness of sensible drinking. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS) although 70 per cent of people had heard of sensible drinking limits, only two-fifths of those actually knew what those limits were – hardly positive progress after three years' work.

Drinkaware's website is riddled with assumptions that if only drinkers were simply more aware of the hazards of drinking, everything would be alright. This, sadly, comes from an industry hell-bent on not telling its customers how many units are in its products. Drinkaware also likes to position itself as the consumer's friend, yet has refused funds for alcohol charities that would like to promote harm reduction.

Of equal concern is that the creation of the Campaign for Smarter Drinking will unduly delay decisions government should be making, with regard to making point of sale information mandatory. Having set out government's position on



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the importance of labelling and point of sale information in Safe Sensible Social, surely it is imperative now for government to act, rather than rely on the goodwill of the drinks industry.

It is highly unlikely that another voluntary agreement with the industry will yield the results government are looking for, namely compliance among all retailers to raise alcohol and health awareness. Previous government research on on-trade retail practices and product labelling have long demonstrated the fallibility of relying on self-regulation.

In addition, there is a very real concern that the very message 'Why let the good times go bad' will actually reinforce the notion that you need alcohol to have a good time. As long as the industry rather than professional public health promoters are in charge of the message, there is the very real risk that the message will simply serve the interests of the industry rather than the consumer. In the context of tobacco, there is actually evidence that some industry-funded tobacco information campaigns actually increased smoking rates.

In my view, two things need to happen. Government should establish a levy from industry to pass onto a health promotion body, wholly independent of the drinks industry, albeit funded by it. This body, answerable to the Department of Health and Home Office, should create the health and awareness messages that consumers need to see, raising unit literacy and changing the culture of drinking to get drunk.

Secondly, industry should be mandated to carry these health and unit information messages on all its products and wherever alcohol is sold. Failure to do so should result in a fine or loss of licence. Pie in the sky? Quite possibly, but it's the most sound solution I can think of to ensure consumers receive objective consistent advice about drinking in a targeted way.

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