Jean Kilbourne, PhD

Alcohol is the most commonly used drug in the United States. It is also one of the most heavily advertised products in the United States. The alcohol industry generates more than $65 billion a year in revenue and spends more than $1 billion a year on advertising. The advertising budget for one beer -- Budweiser -- is more than the entire federal budget for research on alcoholism and alcohol use. Unfortunately, young people and heavy drinkers are the primary targets of the advertisers.

There is no conclusive proof that advertising increases alcohol consumption. Research does indicate, however, that alcohol advertising contributes to increases in consumption by young people and serves as a significant source of negative socialization for young people. Those who argue that peer pressure is a major influence on young people strangely overlook the role of advertising.

The alcoholic beverage companies claim that they are not trying to create more or heavier drinkers. They say that they only want people who already drink to switch to another brand and that they want them to drink the new brand in moderation. But this industry-wide claim does not hold up under scrutiny. An editorial in *Advertising Age* concluded: "A strange world it is, in which people spending millions on advertising must do their best to prove that advertising doesn't do very much!"

About a third of Americans choose not to drink at all, a third drink moderately, and about a third drink regularly. Ten percent of the drinking-age population consumes over 60 percent of the alcohol. This figure corresponds closely to the percentage of alcoholics in society. If alcoholics were to recover (i.e., to stop drinking entirely), the alcohol industry's gross revenues would be cut in half.

Recognizing this important marketing fact, alcohol companies deliberately devise ads designed to appeal to heavy drinkers. Advertising is usually directed toward promoting loyalty and increasing usage, and heavy users of any product are the best customers. The heavy user of alcohol is usually an addict.

Another perspective on the industry's claim that it encourages only moderate drinking is provided by Robert Hammond, director of the Alcohol Research Information Service. He estimates that if all 105 million drinkers of legal age in the US consumed the official maximum "moderate" amount of alcohol .99 ounces per day, the equivalent of about two drinks the industry would suffer "a whopping 40 percent decrease in the sale of beer, wine and distilled spirits, based on 1981 sales figures."

Such statistics show the role heavy drinkers play in maintaining the large profit margins of the alcohol industry. Modern research techniques allow the producers of print and electronic media to provide advertisers with detailed information about their readers, listeners, and viewers. Target audiences are sold to the alcohol industry on a cost per drinker basis.

One example of how magazines sell target audiences appeared recently in *Advertising Age: Good Housekeeping* advertised itself to the alcohol industry as a good place to reach women drinkers, proclaiming "You'll catch more women with wine than with vinegar. She's a tougher customer than ever. You never needed *Good Housekeeping* more."
The young audience is also worth a great deal to the alcohol industry. *Sport* magazine promoted itself to the alcohol industry as a conduit to young drinkers with an ad in *Advertising Age* stating, "What young money spends on drinks is a real eye-opener."

Social learning theory suggests that repeated exposure to modeled behavior can result in behavioral change. The impact of modeling on young people is particularly important given the widespread use of such celebrities as rock stars, television personalities, and athletes in alcohol ads. Alcohol ads feature only very healthy, attractive, and youthful-looking people. Advertising is a powerful educational force in American culture, one that promotes attitudes and values as well as products.

The "Seventh Special Report to the US Congress on Alcohol and Health" found evidence that early positive expectations about alcohol were strong predictors of drinking behavior in adolescence. "Children at highest risk were most likely to have strong expectancies of social enhancement and to believe that alcohol improves cognitive and motor functioning."¹

What more powerful source of these early expectancies is there in a culture than alcohol advertising? Indeed, one of the functions of advertising is to induce these early expectancies. According to an editorial in *Advertising Age*, "Quite clearly, the company that has not bothered to create a favorable attitude toward its product before the potential customer goes shopping hasn't much of a chance of snaring the bulk of potential buyers."²

No wonder ads feature characters with special appeal to children. The Spuds MacKenzie figure reportedly has been licensed by Anheuser-Busch to the makers of some 200 consumer products, including stuffed animals, dolls, T-shirts, posters, and mugs. In one Christmas ad campaign, Spuds appeared in a Santa Claus suit, promoting 12-packs of Bud Light beer. In another ad he is cavorting with ninjas, drawing on the popularity of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles movie. "Heavy Metal," proclaims one Budweiser ad featuring a six-pack hardly an ad designed for the middle-aged crowd.

Many alcohol ads play on the theme that drinking is the primary ritual into adulthood in our society. Others turn soft drinks into alcoholic drinks, often in a way that scoffs at the idea of a soft drink standing alone (e.g., an ad for a wine cooler says, "Sick of soft drinks? Here's thirst aid."). Even in supposedly commercial-free movies showing in theaters, viewers are targeted. Many films, especially those appealing to young people, include paid placements of cigarettes and alcohol.

The average age at which people begin drinking today is 12. A *Weekly Reader* survey found that more than one-third of fourth graders surveyed had experienced peer pressure to drink alcohol. A 1988 survey of high-school seniors found that 92 percent had used alcohol (while 54 percent had used another illegal drug). At least three of 10 adolescents have alcohol problems.

Youthful drinking is frequently characterized by heavy binge drinking, making youngsters a lucrative market for alcohol producers. According to the 1989 National Institute on Drug Abuse survey of high-school seniors, 33 percent reported they had consumed five or more drinks on one occasion within the previous two weeks.

More than 40 percent of teenage deaths are caused by motor vehicle crashes. More than half of those are alcohol related. Alcohol is implicated in at least half of the other major causes of death for young people, i.e., suicides, homicides, and accidents. Alcohol use is often a factor in many of the other problems afflicting this age group, such as teenage pregnancy, date rape, suicide, assault, and vandalism.

The college market is particularly important to the alcohol industry not only because of the money the students will spend on beer today, but because they may develop drinking habits and brand allegiances for a lifetime. As one marketing executive said, "Let's not forget that getting a freshman to choose a certain brand of beer may mean that he will maintain his brand loyalty for the next 20 to 35 years. If he turns out to be a big drinker, the beer company has bought itself an annuity." This statement undercuts the industry's claim that it does not target advertising campaigns at underage drinkers since today almost every state prohibits the sale of alcohol to people under 21 years old and the vast majority of college freshmen are below that age.

The alcohol industry's efforts to promote responsible drinking must also be evaluated carefully. Much of its advertising promotes irresponsible and dangerous drinking. For example, a poster for
Pabst Blue Ribbon features a young woman speeding along on a bicycle with a bottle of beer where the water bottle is supposed to be. Obviously biking and drinking beer are not safely complementary activities.

Even some of the programs designed by the alcohol industry to educate students about responsible drinking subtly promote myths and damaging attitudes. Budweiser has a program called "The Buddy System," designed to encourage young people not to let their friends drive drunk. Although this is a laudable goal, it is interesting to note that none of the alcohol industry programs discourage or even question drunkenness per se. The implicit message is that it is acceptable to get drunk as long as you don't drive.

The alcohol industry programs do not offer abstinence as a possible choice. Miller's current "moderation" slogan is "Think when you drink." This is particularly ironic, given that the ability to think clearly is one of the first things affected by alcohol. Miller also has a campus alcohol education program that defines moderate drinking as four drinks a day (heavy drinking by any standards).

The current Budweiser "moderation" campaign says, "Know when to say when," as opposed to "Know when to say no." In the guise of a moderation message, this slogan actually suggests to young people that drinking beer is one way to demonstrate their control. It also perpetuates the myth that alcoholics are simply people who are irresponsibly engaging in willful misconduct, rather than people who are suffering from a disease that afflicts at least one in 10 drinkers. "Know when to say when" is purposefully vague and misleading.

The industry often targets relatively disempowered groups in society primarily women and minorities and associates alcohol with power. For example, a Cutty Sark Whiskey ad features a retired Black baseball player, Curt Flood, promoting its drink. The ad shows Flood holding a glass of whiskey with the text "Some people think you can't beat the system. Here's to those who show the way." This ad associates Flood and his successful athletic performance with his drinking Cutty Sark whiskey.

The link between advertising and alcoholism is unproven. Alcoholism is a complex illness and its etiology is uncertain. But alcohol advertising does create a climate in which abusive attitudes toward alcohol are presented as normal, appropriate, and innocuous. One of the chief symptoms of alcoholism is denial that there is a problem. It is often not only the alcoholic who denies the illness but also his or her family, employer, doctor, etc. Alcohol advertising often encourages denial by creating a world in which myths about alcohol are presented as true and in which signs of trouble are erased or transformed into positive attributes.

One of the primary means of creating this distortion is through advertising. Most advertising is essentially myth-making. Instead of providing information about a product, such as its taste or quality, advertisements create an image of the product, linking the item with a particular lifestyle which may have little or nothing to do with the product itself. According to an article on beer marketing in Advertising Age, "Advertising is as important to selling beer as the bottle opener is to drinking it. . . . Beer advertising is mainly an exercise in building images." Another article a few months later on liquor marketing stated that "product image is probably the most important element in selling liquor. The trick for marketers is to project the right message in their advertisements to motivate those motionless consumers to march down to the liquor store or bar and exchange their money for a sip of image."³

The links are generally false and arbitrary but we are so surrounded by them that we come to accept them: the jeans will make you look sexy, the car will give you confidence, the detergent will save your marriage. Advertising spuriously links alcohol with precisely those attributes and qualities happiness, wealth, prestige, sophistication, success, maturity, athletic ability, virility, creativity, sexual satisfaction, and others that the use of alcohol destroys. For example, alcohol is often linked with romance and sexual fulfillment, yet it is common knowledge that alcohol use can lead to sexual dysfunction. Less well known is the fact that heavy drinkers and alcoholics are seven times more likely than the general population to be separated or divorced.

Image advertising is especially appealing to young people who are more likely than adults to be insecure about the image they are projecting. Sexual and athletic prowess are two of the themes that dominate advertising aimed at young people. A recent television commercial for Miller beer featured Danny Sullivan, the race car driver, speeding around a track with the Miller logo emblazoned everywhere. The ad implies that Miller beer and fast driving go hand in hand. A study
of beer commercials funded by the American Automobile Association found that they often linked beer with images of speed, including speeding cars.

"It separates the exceptional from the merely ordinary." This advertising slogan for Piper champagne illustrates the major premise of the mythology that alcohol is magic. It is a magic potion that can make you successful, sophisticated, and sexy; without it you are dull, mediocre, and ordinary. The people who are not drinking champagne are lifeless replicas of the happy couple who are imbibing. The alcohol has rescued the couple, resurrected them, restored them to life. At the heart of the alcoholic's dilemma and denial is this belief, this certainty, that alcohol is essential for life, that without it he or she will literally die or at least suffer. This ad and many others like it present the nightmare as true, thus affirming and even glorifying one of the symptoms of the illness.

Such glorification of the symptoms is common in alcohol advertising. "Your own special island," proclaims an ad for St. Croix rum. Another ad offers Busch beer as "Your mountain hide-a-way." Almost all alcoholics experience intense feelings of isolation, alienation, and loneliness. Most make the tragic mistake of believing that alcohol alleviates these feelings rather than exacerbates them. The two examples above distort reality in much the same way the alcoholic does. Instead of being isolated and alienated, the people in the ad are in their own special places.

The rum ad also seems to be encouraging solitary drinking, a sign of trouble with alcohol. There is one drink on the tray and no room for another. Although it is unusual for solitary drinking to be shown (most alcohol ads feature groups or happy couples), it is not unusual for unhealthful attitudes toward alcohol to be presented as normal and acceptable.

The most obvious example is obsession with alcohol. Alcohol is at the center of the ads just as it is at the center of the alcoholic's life. The ads imply that alcohol is an appropriate adjunct to almost every activity from love-making to white-water canoeing. An ad for Puerto Rican rums says, "You know how to make every day special. You're a white rum drinker." In fact, less than 10 percent of the adult population makes drinking a part of their daily routine.

There is also an emphasis on quantity in the ads. A Johnnie Walker ad features 16 bottles of scotch and the copy, "Bob really knows how to throw a party. He never runs out of Johnnie Walker Red." Light beer has been developed and heavily promoted not for the dieter but for the heavy drinker. The ads imply that because it is less filling, one can drink more of it.

Thus the ads tell the alcoholic and everyone around him that it is all right to consume large quantities of alcohol on a daily basis and to have it be a part of all of one's activities. At the same time, all signs of trouble and any hint of addiction are conspicuously avoided. The daily drinking takes place in glorious and unique settings, such as yachts at sunset, not at the more mundane but realistic kitchen tables in the morning. There is no unpleasant drunkenness, only high spirits. There are never any negative consequences. Of course, one would not expect there to be. The advertisers are selling their product and it is their job to erase any negative aspects as well as to enhance the positive ones. When the product is a drug that is addictive to one out of ten users, however, some consequences go far beyond product sales.

Western culture as a whole, not just the advertising and alcohol industry, tends to glorify alcohol and dismiss the problems associated with it. The "war on drugs," as covered by newspapers and magazines in this country, rarely includes the two major killers, alcohol and nicotine. It is no coincidence that these are two of the most heavily advertised products. In 1987 the use of all illegal drugs combined accounted for about 3,400 deaths. Alcohol is linked with over 100,000 deaths annually. Cigarettes kill a thousand people every day.

A comprehensive effort is needed to prevent alcohol-related problems. Such an effort must include education, media campaigns, increased availability of treatment programs and more effective deterrence policies. It must also include public policy changes that would include raising taxes on alcohol, putting clearly legible warning labels on the bottles, and regulating the advertising.

The kind of public education essential to solving our major drug problem is probably not possible until the media no longer depend on the goodwill of the alcohol industry. For this reason alone, we need some controls on alcohol. One doesn't even have to enter into the argument about whether such advertising increases consumption. At the very least, it drastically inhibits honest public discussion of the problem in the media and creates a climate in which alcohol use is seen as entirely benign.
Author, lecturer, and media analyst Jean Kilbourne, PhD, is the creator of two slide presentations and two award-winning films focusing on alcohol awareness, wellness, sexuality, and women's issues.

References


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