

The importance of social responsibility....

Concern surrounding the health and social harms associated with heavy drinking has never been so high. In the United Kingdom, a surge in consumption during the 1990s has contributed to an escalation of alcohol-related health problems. Additionally, the loutish behaviour of the significant minority of young people who drink heavily is a menace to society.

Consequently, the activities of the entire industry are under intense scrutiny. Buoyed by their success on tobacco control, health campaigners have set their sights on alcohol. Tax increases, a 9pm watershed ban on alcohol advertising and an end to self-regulation are at the top of their agenda.

The industry knows it can no longer take its commercial freedoms for granted. The onus is on all companies involved in the production, sale and marketing of alcohol to demonstrate that they operate responsibly.

Drinks producers have, for a long time, abided by tough marketing regulations. Advertising is strictly controlled by the Advertising Standards Authority and all other drinks producer marketing by the Portman Group. Our Code of Practice on the Naming, Packaging and Promotion of Alcoholic Drinks applies to all alcoholic drinks sold in the UK. It prevents, for example, any marketing aimed at children or any association of alcohol with sexual or social success.

But passive observance of regulatory codes is not enough any more. The industry is actively promoting sensible drinking to its consumers. Increasingly, you will find that drinks containers display information to help people understand their alcohol content; advertising features reminders to drink responsibly; and there are ubiquitous references to a website, www.drinkaware.co.uk, where consumers can find comprehensive information about responsible drinking.

Most impressively of all, the industry has pioneered a unique partnership, the Drinkaware Trust. The Trust is funded entirely by industry but governed by a board comprising representatives of the industry, alcohol voluntary sector and health. Its role is to help change the UK drinking culture in a positive way through campaigning and education.

This education must be accompanied by proper enforcement of alcohol laws. Currently, many police forces are failing to use the wide range of powers at their disposal to tackle alcohol-related problems. It is astonishing, for example, that fewer than forty under-18s were cautioned or prosecuted for trying to buy alcohol in England and Wales during 2005.

Amid the media furore, it is important to remember that alcohol is still enjoyed in moderation by the vast majority. Besides, drinking trends suggest that the message is starting to get through. The number of adults drinking harmfully has been falling since 2001. Crucially, this positive trend is mirrored among young adults, an age group commonly associated with binge drinking.

Whether this will deter the policy makers from introducing stricter controls is another matter. The UK Government has commissioned an independent review into whether price, promotions and advertising have a negative impact on people's drinking. Surely, price cannot be the main factor in irresponsible drinking? If it is, why in so many European countries, where alcohol is cheaper, do they have far healthier attitudes to alcohol? If this review does, however, find a definite connection, the Government must consider minimum pricing legislation to navigate the minefield of competition law. Evidence on advertising indicates that it influences brand choice rather than increasing consumption or encouraging harmful drinking. This does not necessarily prevent activists from calling for bans of various sorts.

The crux of the problem, however, is not our alcohol policies but our drinking culture. Drunkenness is tolerated, often celebrated, unlike in many other countries where it is socially unacceptable. Better education and effective law enforcement can make harmful drinking socially unacceptable. Other policy measures, such as price increases and advertising bans, will fail to have any meaningful impact on levels of misuse.

David Poley
Portman Group Chief Executive

