

# Drinking games

When researchers were given access to thousands of documents from drinks firms, much was revealed about the underlying messages portrayed in alcohol adverts. Max Daly reports.

These days, restricted by a voluntary code of conduct, the advertising of alcoholic drinks is far more an exercise in branding, imagery and life-styling than it was in the past. Gone are the days of the 1970s and 1980s when beer, wine or spirits were blatantly promoted as a one way ticket to being cool or sexy. The hard sell on booze has become a more subtle affair, where a brand is associated with positive attitudes and emotions such as authenticity, strength and purity.

But, according to a report published as part of the government's investigation into the conduct of the alcohol industry, despite the veneer of innocence, the old, familiar messages are still being communicated. *They'll Drink Bucket Loads of the Stuff*, an analysis of internal alcohol industry advertising documents carried out for last year's House of Commons Health Select Committee report on alcohol, provided a unique insight into the £800m a year world of alcohol advertising.

Researchers from the Institute for Social Marketing at the University of Stirling were given unlimited access to the inner sanctum of the alcohol marketing industry – in the form of thousands of pages of paper and electronic documentation from four companies and their ad agencies in relation to the promotion of five brands

– Carling, Lambrini, Sidekick, Smirnoff and WKD – between 2005 and 2008. They included notes of meetings, client briefs, creative briefs, media briefs, advertising budgets and market research reports.

The report's author, Dr Gerard Hastings, concluded that the alcohol industry was side-stepping its own voluntary code of practice because virtually all the prohibited themes – advertising aimed at under-18s, encouragement of irresponsible drinking, linking drinking with social or sexual success or with masculinity or femininity – were being smuggled into ad campaigns via “camouflage and creativity”.

Hastings likened the tactics used by the alcohol industry, which strongly challenged the report, to the abstract campaigns used to advertise cigarette brands such as Benson and Hedges and Silk Cut before the ban on widespread tobacco advertising came into force in 2003. And documents obtained from drinks firms and their ad agencies also revealed that market research data on 15- and 16-year-olds was being used to inform campaigns and that there is a focus on promoting drinking to those just turning 18.

“Upcoming generations represent a key target for alcohol advertisers,” says the report. Although the documents

mainly refer to this group as starting at the legal drinking age, this distinction is sometimes lost. It is clearly acknowledged that particular products appeal to children. Lambrini, a fizzy pear cider which is 7.5% ABV, is referred to as a “kids' drink” in market research documents. Many references are made to the need to recruit new drinkers and establish their loyalty to a particular brand; WKD, for instance, wants to attract “new 18-year-olds”, and Carling takes a particular interest in the fact that the Carling Weekend is “the first choice for the festival virgin”, offering free branded tents and a breakfast can of beer.

Campaigns aspire to be associated with and appeal to youth: Carling wants to “become the most respected youth brand (overtaking Lynx)”, new media channels are used because they will appeal to and engage young people, and Lambrini's 2007 TV campaign set out to be “a cross between myspace and High School the Musical”.

The report noted that Lambrini's loss of its long-running strapline, ‘Girls Just Wanna Have Fun’ – banned by the regulator in 2005 for targeting young girls – was a constant source of regret for the drink's producers. Despite tenacious attempt to retain it, according to Hastings, “only when a young woman



[Rosi Boxall in 2008] died after a Lambrini drinking binge and the strapline appeared in newspaper coverage of the death did Lambrini feel there might be benefits in relinquishing it”.

The report’s author claimed that many documents showed that marketing campaigns aimed to suggest drinks were potent and that they would enhance the drinker’s social success. A creative brief from ad agency Cheethambell JWT for a 2005 Lambrini advertising campaign said:

*Drinking starts early! Early afternoon at the weekend or straight after work Monday*

*to Friday meeting your girly mates and getting on it is the only way forward. They’re on a budget when it comes to booze so they want something that tastes good but won’t break the bank. Lambrini is the perfect social lubricant. A light, easy to drink, affordable’ wannabe’ wine that gets their nights out or in off to a good start. They’ll drink bucket loads of the stuff and still manage to last the duration.*

The report goes on to suggest that ad agencies and alcohol producers were cynical about the people they were persuading to buy the drink: “18 – 24, low class (DE), renting or living with parents,

children under 15, Yorkshire bias, working part-time, earning under £10k... Heavy User of... Night Clubs, Crisps, Instant Snack Meals, Soft Drinks. It’s a wine isn’t it? 4% of Lambrini Girls think Lambrini is a perry which is fine by us. We won’t tell the other 96% if you don’t.”

The sponsorship and digital marketing activities of drinks brands also came in for criticism. A Carling document discussing its music sponsorship campaign, concludes: “Ultimately, the band are the heroes at the venue and Carling should use them to ‘piggy back’ and engage customers’

## FIGHTING SPIRIT

### Extracts from the 2010 House of Commons Health Select Committee report on alcohol.

In 1947 the nation consumed approximately three and a half litres of pure alcohol per head; the current figure is nine and a half litres. According to the General Household Survey data from 2006, 31% of men are drinking hazardously (more than 21 units per week).

The current system of controls on alcohol advertising and promotion is failing the young people it is intended to protect. Both the procedures and the scope need to be strengthened. The regulation of alcohol promotion should be completely independent of the alcohol and advertising industries; this would match best practice in other fields such as financial services and professional conduct. In addition, young people should themselves be formally involved in the process of regulation: the best people to judge what a particular communication is saying are those in the target audience.

The current controls do not adequately cover sponsorship or new media which are becoming increasingly important in alcohol promotion. The codes must be extended to address better sponsorship. New media presents particular regulatory challenges, including the inadequacy of age controls and the problems presented by user generated content. Expert guidance should be sought on how to improve the protection offered to young people in this area. Finally, there is a pressing need to restrict alcohol advertising and promotion in places where children are likely to be affected by it.

emotions”.

Beattie McGuinness Bungay (BMB), an advertising agency whose clients include Carling and Diageo, described digital marketing – such as text messaging, social networking and blogging sites – as “routes to magic” for alcohol advertisers. “Channels were recognised as having particular appeal to young people yet this is an area which presents particular challenges to the current system of self-regulation,” said the Select Committee report.

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Drink brands have a popular following on the ubiquitous social networking site Facebook, a site where most British teenagers are members. Between them, the UK Facebook pages for Smirnoff, WKD and Strongbow have more than 500,000 followers. Much of the content is oriented to young people and trendy DJ events. While users have to declare they are over 18 to access the sites, there are many spin-offs – such as a Cherry Lambrini site which has 8,000 ‘friends’ – which anyone can access. But a quick flick through the conversations on these sites reveal a somewhat less hip reality. “£8.97 for 24 cans of pure bliss,” writes Tom Burton, a late-teenage looking lad on the Strongbow cider site just before Christmas. “Have a good holiday on us,” reply the Strongbow ‘team’. When Tom’s asked where he got the deal, he replies, “Tesco Metro in Chesterfield”.

A report into the alcohol industry’s use of new media published in November by Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems warned: “The use of social networking sites to promote alcohol is a matter of serious concern due to the youth appeal of these sites, the difficulties associated with enforcing age restrictions, the relative lack of regulation and the sheer volume of promotional messages. The extensive use of new media to market

alcohol represents a proliferation of alcohol branded messages directed at consumers.”

The authors of *They’ll Drink Bucket Loads of the Stuff* concluded that the UK needed to tighten up the regulation of the alcohol industry and that an independent regulator should vet all alcohol adverts. “It is clear, then, that the background thinking and strategising revealed in the documents encompass many prohibited themes, including drunkenness, sex, social success and masculinity and femininity – which are then incorporated into advertising in ways that do not obviously transgress the codes. Sometimes this gamesmanship is all too obvious: the proscription of using Coleen Rooney, who at the time was only 23, in advertising for Lambrini is converted to the sponsorship of her television show Coleen’s Real Women.

“In other cases the subterfuge is more subtle, as when Carling’s planning documents reveal that its aim is to position the brand as a “social glue” and that it “celebrates, initiates and promotes the togetherness of the pack, their passions and their pint because Carling understands that things are better together” – then goes on to communicate this in a TV ad using a flock of starlings and the Carling logo recreated with the word ‘BELONG’. So clever is the treatment that the regulator rejected public complaints which have now been completely substantiated by the documents.”

Hastings says that the alcohol industry has adopted a similar strategy to that used amid mounting regulation of cigarette advertising 30 years ago. “This is reminiscent of latter day tobacco advertising for brands like Silk Cut and Benson & Hedges that became more and more elliptical and imaginative as the codes on content were tightened. Judging whether the resulting references breached content codes became an impossible task. Thus the self-regulatory codes do not protect young people; they just hone the advertiser’s skills – either in camouflage or creativity.”

The report drew a furious response from the industry. Alcohol company Diageo GB claimed the article was a gross misrepresentation and a distortion of the evidence it provided to the inquiry.

## SOFT SELL

### The voluntary code on advertising alcohol, meets the advert makers

#### **Voluntary code 1: Young people and the next generation**

Advertisements for alcohol must not appeal strongly to people under 18 or be associated with, or reflect, youth culture. No one who is, or appears to be, under 25 years old may play a significant role in any advertisements.

*Girls grow out of Lambrini. And then turn their back on it. We could maybe hold onto them a year or two longer with slightly premiumised image but we should not think about an older demographic per se.*

**Email from ad agency Cheethambell JWT to Halewood International (makers of Lambrini) in 2006.**

#### **Voluntary code 2: Drunkenness and excess**

Advertising must not link alcohol with brave, tough, unruly or daring people or behaviour; nor should it encourage irresponsible, antisocial or immoderate drinking (whether in terms of style or amount).

*"Shots used to crank up the evening, accelerate the process of getting drunk with less volume of liquid. Sense of danger. For a pleasure ride or to get blasted."*

**Slide from presentation by ad agency Cheethambell JWT for Sidekick in 2003.**

#### **Voluntary code 3: Sociability and social success**

Advertising must not link drinking to the social acceptance or success of individuals, events, or occasions. It should not imply that it can enhance an individual's popularity, confidence, mood, physical performance, personal qualities, attractiveness or sexual success.

*"To own all routes to sociability: football, music, and everything else that brings the lads together, is to dominate the beer market."*

**Ad agency Mobious for Carling 'sports strategy' document 2006.**

#### **Voluntary code 4: Masculinity and femininity**

Advertising must not link drinking with enhanced attractiveness, masculinity or femininity, nor with daringness, toughness, bravado, challenge, seduction, sexual activity, or sexual success.

*"Carling Commandments: Thou shalt never abandon your mates in favour of a girl, Thou shalt never been [sic] seen at a 'musical', 'thou shalt never desert thy mates in drunken distress', 'thou shalt always welcome a mate's mate'."*

**Ad agency Hill & Knowlton to Molson Coors Brewing Company, for Carling Football PR Plans for 2007. Friday 7 July 2006. Slide 8 of 25. Document A2, Folder 7 Sport Agency Response Documents 2006.**

Its managing director, Simon Litherland, argued that "inappropriate consumer views and early proposals" pitched in the marketing process were rejected at an early stage. "We are extremely disappointed that the confidential and commercially sensitive information shared with the committee, in good faith, has been made available for Prof Hastings's use in pursuing his own public agenda," he said.

David Poley, chief executive of Portman Group, a trade group of UK alcoholic drinks producers, said: "We are proud of the regulatory system for alcohol in the UK which is admired across the world. "Gerard Hastings trawled through thousands of pages of internal company marketing documents on behalf of the Health Committee. He

failed to find any evidence of actual malpractice. He therefore resorts to slurs and innuendos. We wish Gerard Hastings would publish his criticisms in an advertisement. The ASA could then rightly ban it for being misleading."

A few months before the HSC report, the British Medical Association had made similar noises and called for an outright ban on alcohol advertising like tobacco advertising. And later in 2010, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence added to calls for better alcohol advertising regulation, Alcohol Concern found that one million under-16-year-olds saw multiple drinks ads during the World Cup and an alcohol commission set up by the Scottish Labour Party called for a ban on alcohol brands sponsoring sports

teams, competitions and public events, such as Tennent's sponsorship of the T in the Park pop festival and Johnnie Walker's support of a golf championship at Gleneagles.

Fortunately for the alcohol industry, despite containing allegedly damning evidence of the industry's attempts to try and get across exactly the messages that public health experts want to avoid, the 'Buckets' report disappeared virtually without trace. A change of government four months after the Select Committee was published cannot have helped, but there is a suspicion that whichever political party is at Number 10, there will not be the stomach for a fight with such a powerful adversary as the British drinks industry.