

BRIGHTON: N.S. should question liquor marketing

August 9, 2013 - 7:39pm BY RACHEL BRIGHTON

Youth, women are sales targets for NSLC at a time when binge drinking on rise



Women are providing an increasing share of the Nova Scotia Liquor Corp.'s profits. (INGRID BULMER / Staff / File)

Routine binge drinking is on the rise in Nova Scotia, especially among young people, and women are closing the gap with heavy-drinking men.

In light of this, the province should loosen the pressure on the Nova Scotia Liquor Corp. to generate more revenue from alcohol sales.

The corporation's latest business plan identifies our aging population, and a shrinking portion of younger consumers, as a threat to sales growth because the younger crowd is among its best sales prospects. So are women.

Back in its 2009-10 business plan, the NSLC pinpointed females and young people — those under 45 — as “high potential” sales targets. Its business plan entailed tailoring store designs and displays, product selection, sales support and “impulse opportunities” to appeal to key customers.

For example, the corporation's five-year strategic plan showcases a flagship store at Mic Mac Mall in Dartmouth. A double-page spread shows purse-sized products, designed for women's tastes, arrayed in a brightly lit, pastel-coloured display resembling a cosmetics counter.

While our liquor corporation subtly pitches product in ways such as this, women across Canada are increasingly engaging in routine risky drinking sessions, according to the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, based in Ottawa.

Statistics Canada also reports that binge drinking in Nova Scotia, marked by five or more alcoholic drinks on a single occasion, at least once a month, moved up two percentage points from 2008 to 2012.

Among younger drinkers of both sexes, aged 20 to 34, the percentage of binge drinkers increased to 40 per cent from 32 per cent during this period.

While more males are heavy drinkers, and binge drinking has increased in both sexes, the ratio of female-to-male binge drinking is trending up. By 2012, the female rate of 14.7 per cent was half the male rate, but both rates were significantly greater than the Canadian average.

“We don't want people to drink more, but when they do, we want them to drink responsibly,” NSLC spokesman Mike Maloney said in an interview this week.

He also said the corporation does not target age groups or gender in its marketing, but “we respond to the market demand overall.”

Yet he acknowledged that store makeovers, and a concerted strategy to “co-locate” liquor stores with grocery stores, “do appeal to female demographic.”

To drive up revenues without encouraging heavier or more widespread consumption, the corporation is also promoting more expensive and diverse products.

Nova Scotia wine sales, for example, grew 25 per cent in the last financial quarter and 22 per cent in the past year.

Compared with beer and spirits, wine particularly appeals to women, according to figures in the corporation’s most recent annual report. Men outstrip women in purchases in all three product categories, but the margin is most slender in the case of wine.

Liquor producers are also targeting the key demographic of young females with pink-coloured drinks and bottles, labels such as Gi or the so-called diet vodkas and cocktails named Skinnygirl.

While the corporation insists it does not actively market products to a particular age group, it has greatly expanded its product offering to appeal to the more curious younger crowd. For example, Maloney said, younger drinkers share a taste for flavoured alcoholic beverages, while older customers tend to buy “traditional” products such as rum and beer.

Health researcher Samantha Cukier, who used to work for the provincial government in addiction services, points out that the liquor corporation is only one part of the onslaught of marketing tactics and promotions that is “normalizing” a drinking culture.

Cukier, who lives in Nova Scotia, is researching the influence of television viewing on drinking behaviour among young people as part of her doctoral studies at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

She says young women and adolescents are especially vulnerable to the positive portrayal of alcohol on television and the Internet in print and at sporting and social events.

Cukier warns that “the way that we’re drinking is harmful” and that “putting it near grocery stores ... will just continue to make it harmful.”

To break down the impression that drinking is a “normal” part of sports, socializing, romance and sex, she proposes stronger regulation of various forms of alcohol promotion, especially when children are exposed to the messages.

Nova Scotians still reeling from the tragic story of Rehtaeh Parsons, and the part alcohol may have played in the events leading to her death, may agree.

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