

Published 7/8/2011

## Young Drinkers Go For Shilled Brands

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**Lebanon** -- Underage drinkers tend to have a taste for specific brands of alcohol made by companies with big ad budgets, suggesting that marketing has a strong influence over underage drinkers despite the industry's attempt to prevent that from happening, according to a recent report co-authored by several Dartmouth pediatricians.

Among nearly 2,700 people between the ages of 16 and 20 who were surveyed across the country, two-thirds had consumed alcohol, and 68 percent of the drinkers cited a specific brand preference, according to the report, which appears in the July issue of the journal *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*.

Smirnoff and Budweiser led the way among both males and females, the authors said, although other heavily advertised brands such as Corona, Coors and Captain Morgan appeared as well. Naming a brand also was tied to higher rates of binge drinking, which is defined as having five or more drinks in succession.

The findings suggest that the industry's self-regulation of advertising is failing to work, the authors said.

"I think that they're targeting the young adult market and that the advertising is leaking over into the adolescent market," said James Sargent, who co-authored the report with Dartmouth pediatricians Sue Tanski and Auden McClure. The Dartmouth trio collaborated with the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

When it comes to advertising practices, the alcohol industry is essentially self-regulated. Trade organizations such as the Beer Institute and the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States ask members to adhere to a voluntary code of responsible advertising practices.

The code for liquor companies, for example, says that advertising and marketing must be placed in media only where at least 71.6 percent of the audience can be reasonably expected to be of legal drinking age.

Alcoholic beverage makers often include messages such as "drink responsibly" in their advertising, and require people to enter their date of birth when entering the company's website.

These efforts, however, are "swamped" by other advertising messages, Tanski said, many of which associate the alcohol brands with partying and drinking to excess.

"It appears that the standards for self-regulation are not really working to protect underage youth," she said. "So, perhaps, the standards should be tighter."

In an email to the *Valley News* yesterday, Distilled Spirits Council vice president Frank Coleman said the organization and its members continued to oppose underage drinking and have supported programs to combat the issue for decades.

He felt the industry's efforts to police itself worked and he took issue with the reports findings.

“[T]his advocacy-driven research suggests policy avenues that will have no impact on reducing underage drinking, but rather mislead the public and public officials and divert attention from strategies that are truly effective,” Coleman said.

The link between advertising and spending was not so clear-cut, he said. In 2009, Smirnoff was nowhere among the top-10 alcohol brands in terms of advertising spending, although Budweiser was at number four, according to figures provided by the Distilled Spirits Council.

Also, parents may be more of an influence on kids' brand preference than advertising campaigns, he said.

Most underage drinkers get their alcohol from parents and other adults, Coleman said, citing a recent survey by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Thus, it should come as no surprise that brands with a large market share are cited in the survey, he said. Those are the brands that appeal to the adults who are giving alcohol to kids.

“If anything, this survey reflects the brand choices of adults of legal purchase age,” he said.

That doesn't mean that the advertising messages aren't also influencing kids, Tanski said.

“The brands that kids preferred tended to be brands that heavily advertised,” she said, “suggesting that the marketing is working and that underage kids are not being protected.”

If the industry is serious about keeping young people from drinking, Sargent said, then it might take a page from the tobacco industry.

Compelled by stricter federal regulations, tobacco makers have been more vigilant than the alcohol industry at targeting advertising to people of legal age, he said. As an example, he pointed to Marlboro's website, which goes beyond asking for a person's age and requires registration on the site. That registration asks for name, mailing address and a driver's license number, which can be used to verify the age.

“I think the alcohol industry could do at least as good as the tobacco industry in restricting kids' access to these advertisements,” Sargent said.

The report is part of a larger program at Dartmouth Medical School to research the influence of mass media on risky behavior among young people. The work is funded by the National Institutes of Health.

Tanski said they would soon be looking at the content of television advertisements to see what may be “driving” the connection between underage drinkers and brand preferences.

As to Coleman's charge that the researchers were “advocacy-driven,” Tanski said she took no issue with that claim. The work is, indeed, advocating a position.

“I will accept the moniker of being advocacy-driven,” she said. “I advocate for kids.”

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