Informing the Community

Simon Chapman and Philip Rubenstein

When people buy liquor they buy a particular product with a certain volume of alcohol in it, the safe and dangerous consumption levels of which they are likely to be ignorant. The great majority of alcohol drinkers are likely to have taken no efforts to become informed about their pastime and in the health area one sometimes hears the ironical lament that so many are blissfully ignorant of the damage they are doing themselves. Recently increasing efforts have been made to inform people about the effects of alcohol, and especially about the amount of alcohol that can be drunk to enable the drinker to remain below specified blood alcohol limits.

Health workers seem to be becoming more excited and optimistic that widespread self-regulation of drinking is a likelihood. The quite simple intake/effect figures could be displayed as wall-charts at liquor outlets, or could be made compulsory questions for applicants for driving licences. All sorts of possibilities have seen the flowering of working party after working party, committee after committee, to develop the potential of these quite recent developments in the quantification of alcohol effects.

But all the planned strategies for public information and expectations about self-regulation are based on the assumption that knowledge is causally and importantly related to behaviour. It seems that in this respect, addiction workers have learnt little from the failure of the information-based illicit drug education campaigns of the late 1960s, and the bulk of this paper will examine some of the reasons for this.

When someone buys alcohol they are buying the means or the key to an altered state of consciousness — an altered experience of themselves. Andrew Weil argues convincingly that people have a profound, perhaps innate, desire to experience periodic altered states of consciousness. Psychoactive substances have been, along with the rituals of ecstatic religions, trance, meditation and dancing the most common routes to this desire. Now when someone in 1977 buys a dozen cans of beer it is true, but of least importance, that he is buying beer. What he is buying is the experience of beer or the means to the behaviour that beer in our culture will legitimise.

The liquor industry have known this for a long time and exploit it in their advertising. Very seldom does liquor advertising even mention properties intrinsic to the beverage itself such as taste, its thirst-quenching properties or its compatibility with certain foods. When this does occur it is always to serve the end of image or experience promised to the user of the product. So if wines are sometimes advertised in terms of their meal-enhancing potential it is almost invariably couched within a larger, more emotional promise of say, sophistication, high culture or good taste. Similarly, beer's thirst-quenching properties are mostly used to express a more primary myth of 'the big thirst' or the sporting life. The effect is that the intrinsic properties of the product are only used to enhance the underlying mythology of the product that is its real selling point in a competitive market.

Who are we concerned about in the problem of alcohol abuse, especially in its implications for traffic accidents? There is a PhD industry generating answers to this sort of question, supposedly in order that their findings will be useful to health and traffic authorities

---

4University of New South Wales, Sydney, New South Wales. 659
wanting to change the drinking and driving behaviour of those at risk. A thorough analysis of the successful promotion of drinking through advertising is an obvious way to obtain a sociology or personality of the drinker. This is because the only criterion that advertisers are finally interested in is behaviour — whether an advertising campaign succeeds in selling more of the product. They, unlike some health researchers, are only interested in measures of attitude, knowledge or intention for their utility in effecting behaviour (sales) and not as research goals in themselves.

So with a successful campaign, and these are easily recognised — they last — one has valid data on who we are dealing with, of who is at risk. It is axiomatic that an increase in consumption throughout a population is commensurate with an increase in the appearance of alcohol-related problems. So if an advertising campaign lasts, some group in the population has responded to the advertising. It has stimulated them to drink.

Considering advertisements for alcohol, especially for beer which is by far the most common drink implicated in traffic accidents, the general appeal is to the rather inhibited person, probably male, seeking release, acceptance, camaraderie and recognition. His experience of alcohol has been that it is consciousness altering and the folklore that he has been brought up in, which has been reflected and specified by advertising, has determined the direction or locus of that consciousness alteration. An Australian drunk is having quite different experiences to a Japanese drunk.

The Australian drinker and his image of himself has been well dealt with by many social commentators and is probably to many people a source of pride and security. The Australian advertising industry has recognised this pride in philistinism and capitalised on it together with a whole constellation of associated anti-hero traits.

On the other hand, health and traffic authorities have responded to the Australian drinker's unhealthy image of himself in two main ways. First, as mentioned, by appeals to his rational cognitive self through information, as if information about health and the law were of vital concern to him. Some assumptions under this information-giving approach are that Australian drinkers so value their health that upon learning that certain quantities of alcohol are damaging to it, self-regulation will follow. In this sense, any competing values or motivations besides health, are projected as needs of secondary importance to the drinker, when in reality they are less important to the committed health worker.

Secondly, the N.S.W. Department of Motor Transport conducted a mass media campaign that attempted to create social unacceptability of the 'slob' drinker. Both the information-type approaches and the Slob Campaign are considered by many people to be of questionable value in significantly altering drink-driving behaviour. The most often cited reason is that insufficient money (and so media exposure) has been made available to counter the million dollar investment that the promoters of alcohol have at their disposal.

It is argued here that the reason for failure goes much deeper than this, and is to be found in the very structure of governmental authority and in the sociological differences between the consumer mentality to which advertising is directed and the helper-authority mentality from which health education campaigns proceed.

Advertisers for the liquor industry know the fears and aspirations of the people to whom they aim their advertising. These people, the people who vote the new celebrities like Paul Hogan and Jeanie Little as 'personalities' of the year, the people who watch commercial television on which the advertisements are shown — are people who are mostly lower-middle or working class, are minimally educated, are socially and politically conservative, and above all, are people who until the advent of the glamourless TV personality did not identify (except in their fantasy life) with mass media images. The success of Hogan is his being a symbol of hope for every powerless, uncultured, gauche, semi-skilled suburbanite who can laugh at Hogan's totally successful contempt (and so ease) with any vestige of bourgeois lifestyle.

The discount house that uses over-weight, balding and lisping characters to endorse its products is again successful for the same reason. These characters are totally non-threatening
to the sort of person who would star-gaze at the traditional media personality built on glamour and sophistication. These characters endow a previously submerged stratum in our society with a positive identity and confidence to pursue previously forbidden behaviour.

The helping professions and the decision-making reaches of the Public Service are composed of people quite different to those towards whom the new advertising is directed. At least this would be so during the hours they occupy the role of helper or advisor. The sort of thinking that takes for granted that people are concerned about their health above all other considerations (hence, information should work), or that people prefer status to conforming mediocrity, or that slob drinking is obviously appalling, does not have its finger on the pulse of real people ‘out there’.

The truth is that many people find non-conformist behaviour, such as moderate or abstentious drinking, threatening. The Slob Campaign was asking people to reject people just like themselves which is the polar opposite of the appeal in the new advertising. The satirist Barry Humphries’ creation Barry (Bazza) McKenzie first found appeal in the English satirical magazine *Private Eye* which made its educated elite readership laugh at the boorish Australian neurotic slob drinker. Bazza wasn’t them, he was what they gladly felt to be above, someone whose gross differences made them feel comfortable. But when the films of the comic strip were shown in Australian cinemas, Bazza’s contemporaries sat alongside the Australian cultural elite and two kinds of laughter filled the air. One group laughing at their own behaviour, now an international image of Australia, and the other laughing at behaviour left behind or circumvented through a rise in class.

In this way health educators frequently make the mistake of talking to themselves, by constructing an evaluative loop in which their own values are reflected back to themselves. They fail to take the role of the other and to try and imagine what the needs and inner desires of a suburban problem drinker might be.

There are some fundamental differences between the organisation and decision-making procedures of private enterprise (such as advertising agencies) and Public Service authorities that are part of the huge differences in effectiveness of their respective campaigns, promotion and education. In large public institutions, decision-making is invariably done at the committee or working-party level. Usually their work is subject to planning, piloting, and approval stages often in combination taking many months. If a committee works in proper committee fashion, the usual result bears little semblance to any full idea of anyone on the committee, but emerges as a hybrid designed to appease the many personalities involved at both working and approval levels. It is often the ‘mediocre common denominator’. In contrast, private industry hires people on the basis of an assumed or proven talent and the end result is considered to be the product of a responsible individual. Talent at the institutional level is often stultified.

Part of the ideology of bureaucracy is that structure should exist in order to eliminate as much risk as possible from the end products of bureaucracy. There are procedural rules designed to facilitate this end and in the area of innovation involving any expenditure evidence of the success of the intended project is generally required before the project is begun. The canon ‘what evidence is there that this will work’ is imprinted into the subconscious of every good public servant. But the difficulty here, is that true innovation is always undertaken on the basis of incomplete information. There is educated guesswork involved. Private enterprise advertising takes this as cardinal, the Public Service as heresy.

In the advertising world it is sometimes said that governmental attempts at promoting a service or message amount to ‘memos to the public’. Exceptions are always noteworthy, partly because there is probably an expectation by the public that government attempts at communication will give new meaning to the word ‘bland’. Effective communication must address and operate in the affective domain, but committee thinking is heavily cognitive and sensible. In Freudian terms, private sector persuasions appeal to submerged or repressed desires — to the id. They reek of excitement, sexuality, self-indulgence and power. Messages from government bodies are super-ego based: they instruct and suggest ‘ought’ and ‘should’.
In transactional analysis terms, advertising talks to the child in us, government directs messages to our parental mode.

How then could health and traffic authorities use the mass media to advantage? Clearly an institutional rethink will need to precede any action that has any hope of countering some of the unhealthy behaviours implicitly and explicitly promoted by the liquor industry. The voluntary code of restraint of certain explicit messages in liquor advertising is a positive step, but will it really amount to anything given advertising’s ability to work implicitly and to create new myths, the strength of which are barely realised until they have become institutions in our culture? By the time advertising of alcohol is prohibited, the industry will, like the tobacco groups, have created living or enduring associations so that for example, one will be unable to watch a certain personality or watch a sport without associating it with liquor.

The distinct advantage that the liquor industry has over the health industry is that they have both a product and a set of promises about that product that is as varied as the changing cultural climate it must be sold in. If the mood of the times is tedium, booze advertising will offer change. If the mood is too much change, it will offer booze as a symbol of conservation (see some scotch and port advertisements). What product can the health lobby offer that can compete?

A lot of anthropological works suggest that cultures which have fewer drug and alcohol-related problems than others, are those in which the drug taking behaviour is ordered by prescribed ritual which may be occasion-based (such as Jewish drinking) or ceremonial (such as kava drinking). Now such exemplary drinking patterns are usually centuries old, and are found less often these days in advanced western industrial countries than in non-industrialised countries with living traditions. The Australian drinking tradition is also ritualised of course, but the ritual is morbid in its functions whereas the healthy drinking rituals of other cultures function according to themes of moderation, using alcohol as a symbol of some higher end etc.

The liquor industry’s key to sales is to break down rituals of moderation by replacing them with rituals that are built on indulgence. This is done by mythologising their products as keys to well market-researched emotional needs in the potential drinking population. The semiologist Roland Barthes\(^1\) argues that anything can become mythologised to become inseparably conceptually connected with anything else. This is what health and traffic authorities must come to understand and act on.

They must begin to create and foster myths that do two things. The first is to have a good look at all the various emotional desires or needs of people that are given expression in drinking behaviour and in drinking and driving behaviour. They should accept that these desires are real and activating first, and bad/unealthy second. The debate that distinguishes between needs and wants and concludes that wants are somehow lesser is an example of the unreal helper mentality at its worst. They should employ the best means possible to associate these desires (to mythologise them) into healthy drinking and driving practices. If people want power, sexual adventure, social ascendancy, sophistication and so on, then they must be promised these things in conjunction with a healthy message just as now they are offered them with the unhealthy one of alcohol.

The trickiest part of all will be to show moderation in drinking, instead of the trap of opting for the radical alternative, abstinence. This paper is not intended as a brief to an advertising agency, so to give suggestions as to what would be shown in such a campaign and to detail how the campaign would gel with an accompanying educational or recreational infrastructure is beside the point. To conclude, a successful counter-campaign to alcohol promotion would look like nothing ever seen before. This is why critical thinking about it in advance, premised on prevailing strategies, will abort it.
REFERENCES