

Alcohol Advertising

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The influence of alcohol beverage advertising on consumption and abuse is examined on the basis of scientific research and evidence.

Consumption & Abuse

Advertising increases alcohol consumption, which increases alcohol abuse....right? WRONG. There is no solid evidence from either scientific research or practical experience that this theory of advertising is correct.

A study by the Federal Trade Commission found that there is "no reliable basis to conclude that alcohol advertising significantly affects consumption, let alone abuse." 1

A United States Senate subcommittee reported in the Congressional Record that it could not find evidence to conclude that advertising influences non-drinkers to begin drinking or to increase consumption. 2

The United States Department of Health and Human Services in its report to Congress concluded that there is no significant relationship between alcohol advertising and alcohol consumption. It did not recommend banning or imposing additional restrictions on advertising. 3

A University of Texas study of alcohol advertising over a 21-year period found that the amount of money spent on alcohol ads had little relationship with total consumption in the population. 4

Studies in both Canada and the United States find no significant link between restrictions on advertising and alcohol consumption. 5

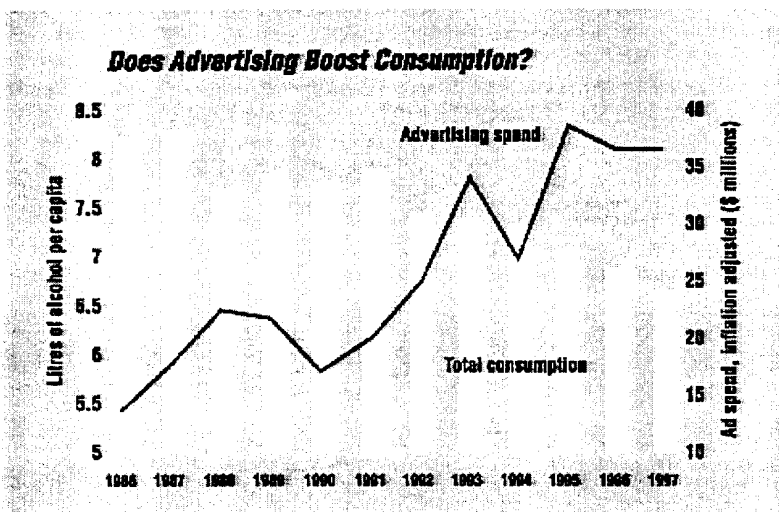
Alcohol advertising expenditures have increased, during which time alcohol-related traffic fatalities have declined. 6

The founding Director of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism recently pointed out that "There is not a single study - not

one study in the United States or internationally - that credibly connects advertising with an increase in alcohol use or abuse." [7](#)

The definitive review of research from around the world found that advertising has virtually no influence on consumption and has no impact whatsoever on either experimentation with alcohol or its abuse. [8](#) This is consistent with other reviews of the research. [9](#)

Advertising does not increase consumption. For example, alcohol brand advertising was first introduced in New Zealand in 1992. While advertising continues to increase, consumption continues to fall. [10](#)



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What Advertising Does

If advertising doesn't increase consumption, why bother to advertise? The answer is simple: to increase market share.

Scenario 1: Increase in Total Market

Total beer market sales	\$50,000,000,000
Brand X's 10% share of market	\$5,000,000,000
Total market grows by one percent to...	\$55,000,000,000,000
Brand X's 10%	\$5,050,000,000

Alcohol is a "mature" product category in that consumers are already aware of the product and its basic characteristics. Therefore, overall consumption is not affected significantly by advertising specific brands. 11

Instead of increasing total consumption, the objective of advertisers is to encourage consumers to switch to their brand and create brand loyalty. Thus, effective advertisers gain market share at the expense of others, who lose market share. They do not try to increase the total market for the product. An example can illustrate why they don't.

The total retail value of beer produced annually in the U.S. is about \$50 billion. If a producer's advertising campaign increases its market share by one percent, its sales would increase by \$500 million. However, if the total market for beer increased by one percent, a brand with a 10% share of the market would only experience a sales increase of \$50 million.

Clearly, a producer has a great incentive to increase market share, but little incentive (or ability) to increase the total market. For this reason, advertisers focus their efforts on established consumers. They seek to strengthen the loyalty of their own consumers and induce other consumers to try their brand.

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Young People & Commercials

Much has been made of the fact that many young people have greater recognition of some alcohol beverage brand labels than of former US presidents. 13 These reports make great press but what does it all mean? Probably nothing because there is no evidence that such recognition leads to experimentation, consumption, or abuse. Sometimes it even appears to be related to less drinking later. 14

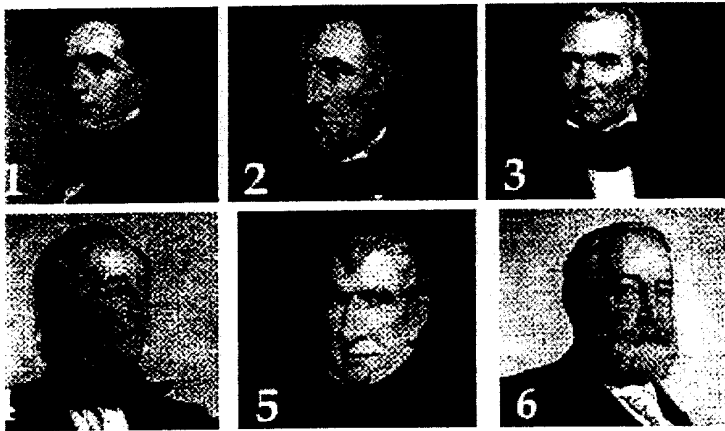
share is now...	
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Scenario 2: Increase in Market Share

Total beer market remains stable	\$50,000,000,000
Brand X's 10% market share increases one percent	\$500,000,000
Brand X's 11% market share	\$5,500,000,000

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Similarly, most adults are probably much better at identifying photos of popular entertainers than of William Henry Harrison, Franklin Pierce, Chester Arthur, John Tyler, or other former presidents of the US. That probably doesn't mean much either.

By the way, can you identify these presidents?

The answers are at the bottom of the page.

Hope you identified the presidents correctly. But if you didn't, don't worry. It doesn't mean that you've been seeing too many alcohol beverage commercials.

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A Flood of Commercials

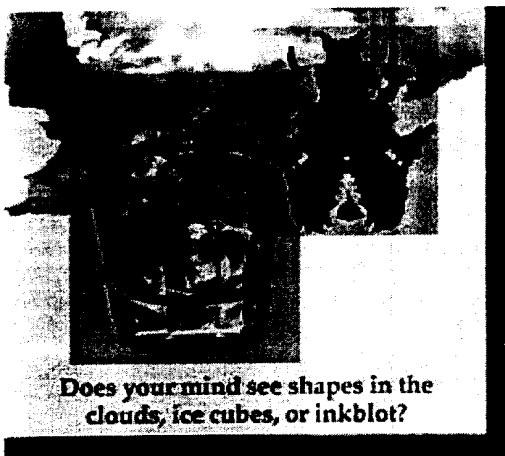
A widely reported "fact" is that by the age of 18, the typical young person will have seen 100,000 beer commercials. However, to see that many such commercials, it appears that a person would have to view television for about 161,290 hours or 18.4 years. ¹⁵ Thus, a person would have to begin watching TV 24 hours a day, each and every day, from birth until after age 18.

In reality, viewers are much more likely to see alcohol portrayed during TV programs than during commercials. For example, an analysis of prime time TV found that alcohol commercials appeared at the rate of 0.2 per hour while drinking portrayals during programs occurred 25 times more frequently, at five times per hour. ¹⁶

Perhaps those who want to reduce the presence of alcohol on television should propose eliminating the programming and let children watch commercials instead.

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Unidentified Printed Objects



You haven't noticed them?! All those swirls, squiggles and unusual shapes in ice cubes, on bottles, in liquid being poured, and elsewhere in alcohol beverage ads. The Center for Science in the Public Interest insists that "With little imagination, one can see some of these elements as faces, animals, breasts, penises, death masks, and other forms...." ¹⁷ This assertion may tell us more about the Center for Science in the Public

Interest than about the ads.

Most people can easily imagine or "see" faces, animals and other objects in clouds and inkblots, but the Center for Science in the Public Interest suggests that the "unidentified printed objects" in alcohol beverage print ads are intentionally placed there by advertisers, apparently to subconsciously seduce people to drink Astonishingly, it actually calls for an investigation of these sinister objects, including having "corporate executives testify under oath on the witness stand." ¹⁸ And while the Center for Science in the Public Interest is at it, perhaps it should call for a Congressional investigation of clouds and inkblots.

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A Function of Commercials

One of the main arguments against alcohol beverage ads on television is that they "normalize" drinking in the minds of young viewers. To the extent that this is true, the ads may be performing a positive role.

The commonplace nature of alcohol ads on TV serves not to glamorize the products, as some critics suggest, but to cast them as mundane consumer products, right alongside aspirin, cookies, and alkaline batteries. That's a constructive way for young people to view them.

On the other hand, if we treat beverage alcohol as a dangerous substance to be avoided and not even advertised, we inadvertently raise it up from the ordinary into the realm of the powerful, the tantalizing, and the desirable Big Deal. In so doing, we slip into the familiar, failed pattern of demonizing the substance of alcohol rather than discouraging irresponsible behavior.

We should help young people regard the substance of alcohol as neutral --- neither inherently good nor inherently bad. What matters is how it is used, and we must convey by word and example that the abuse of alcohol is never humorous, acceptable, or excusable.

Do alcohol ads portray the products being enjoyed in the most appealing settings and by the most attractive people? Of course they often do --- no less than do ads for cars, instant coffee and anti-fungal sprays. That normalcy of alcohol ads helps demystify the product --- which is a good place to begin encouraging realistic, moderate, and responsible attitudes about it.

Responsible attitudes toward alcohol are based on the understanding that such beverages are yet another part of life over which individuals have control, like exercise, personal hygiene, or diet.

If alcohol beverages are to be used moderately by those who choose to consume them, then it's important that these beverages not be stigmatized, compared to illegal drugs, and associated with abuse. They aren't dangerous poisons to be hidden from sight and become a subject of mystery and perhaps fascinating appeal. But that would be the message sent if alcohol commercials were banned from TV.

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Parental Influence

In spite of all the colorful rhetoric and emotional anecdotes, alcohol commercials do not cause young people to drink. The greatest influence of their beliefs, attitudes and behaviors are from their parents.

Parents are much more influential than they generally realize. For example, among six things that might affect their decisions about drinking, 62% of American youth aged 12 to 17 identified their parents as a leading influence ¹⁹ :

1. Parents (62 percent)
2. Best friends (28 percent)
3. Teachers (9 percent)
4. What they see on television (7 percent)
5. What they see in ads (4 percent)

It is parents, rather than alcohol ads, with the great influence over young people.

ANSWERS TO PRESIDENTIAL QUIZ:

1. Franklin Pierce
2. Zachary Taylor
3. James K. Polk
4. John Tyler
5. William Henry Harrison
6. Benjamin Harrison

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