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Alcohol industry concerns exposed

Curtin University of Technology researchers have uncovered some of the secret workings and concerns of the international alcohol industry.

Curtin's Professor of Health Policy, Mike Daube, described the findings as having "profound implications" for public health and policy makers.

"This research has exposed the cynicism of the alcohol industry and arguments and strategies they use to prevent any action that might impact on their sales," he said.

"We now know the international alcohol industry's top 10 concerns. The measures they fear most are higher taxes, curbs on alcohol advertising and sponsorship, strong health warnings and tough policing."

"They are also worried by community concerns about under-age drinking, binge drinking, drink driving, violence associated with alcohol consumption, and public education programs run by governments."

"The research also identifies some of the approaches alcohol companies take to countering pressure for action which range from direct opposition to diversion strategies, and links with other industries."

The research, *Access to Confidential Alcohol Industry Documents: from "Big Tobacco" to "Big Booze"*, was published in the latest issue of the Australasian Medical Journal.

Professor Daube said the top 10 alcohol industry concerns were:

- alcohol becoming a major issue on the public health agenda;
- "Big Booze" attracting the attention as "Big Tobacco";
- tax increases;
- controls on advertising and sponsorship;
- health warnings;
- tougher policing and reducing blood alcohol limits for drink drivers;
- litigation;
- independently run, well-funded mass media programs;
- alcohol seen as causing problems for the community, rather than just in "addicted individuals"; and
- raising legal drinking ages.

Professor Daube said the information was uncovered by Curtin's WA Tobacco Document Searching Program which looks at confidential tobacco industry documents that have been accessible since 1990s US litigation.

"We realised that some international tobacco companies have owned alcohol companies, so we could obtain information on this industry as well," he said.

“Some of the most valuable information about drinks industry strategies came from documents such as confidential briefing books prepared by the Philip Morris company for their CEOs when Philip Morris owned the massive Miller Brewing company.”

Curtin researcher Laura Bond said the alcohol industry was terrified of going down the same route as tobacco companies with “Big Booze” being seen in the same light as “Big Tobacco”.

“The research showed that the alcohol industry tried to play down their role in contributing to alcohol problems,” she said.

“Far from wanting to reduce the problem, their overarching strategy is ‘to fight aggressively, with all available resources, against any attempt, from any quarter, to diminish our ability to manufacture our products efficiently, and market them effectively’.”

“The alcohol industry opposes measures such as lowering blood alcohol levels or raising the legal age of drinking for fear of losing revenue.”

“They claim that industry developed education programs will help to address alcohol problems but research has shown that they are ineffective.”

The industry, according to Professor Daube, is desperate to argue that alcohol problems occur only among a small number of “problem drinkers”. They believe that drink driving action should focus not on general drink driving, but only on “the root of the drunk driving problem (repeat offender with a BAC of 0.17 and higher)”.

“It is remarkable that a major company briefed its CEO that ‘...most people can drive safely after drinking moderately; i.e. staying under) 0.10’,” he said.

“They are also worried about any attempts to place ‘restrictions on the use of athletes/celebrities’.”

“While the consequences of binge drinking are ‘tragic’, the answer for Miller Beer is that it ‘partners with many business and community prevention groups to promote responsible decision making and prevent under age drinking’.”

“This is an international industry, like the tobacco industry, with similar aims and strategies in all countries.”

“Now that we know the drinks industry’s greatest concerns, we know where best to target action that will reduce alcohol problems.”

The research was funded by Healthway, the WA Health Promotion Foundation.

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