

Selling addictions: Similarities in approaches between Big Tobacco and Big Booze

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RESEARCH

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Abstract

Background

The purpose of this research was to identify, through alcohol industry documents, similarities between tobacco and alcohol companies in approaches to evidence and counter-arguments to public health measures.

Method

A search of the tobacco document archives through the World Wide Web for alcohol industry documents was conducted. Alcohol-related search terms were entered into search fields of the tobacco document archives.

Results

The documents show that alcohol and tobacco companies have worked closely together, have shared information, share similar concerns and have used similar arguments to defend their products and prevent or delay restrictions being placed on their products.

Conclusion

This paper provides evidence that alcohol and tobacco companies are similar in a number of ways and there is scope to use these similarities in developing more effective public health approaches to addressing alcohol consumption and related harms.

Key Words

Alcohol, tobacco, industry strategies, policy, regulation

Background

The Master Settlement Agreement, reached in 1998 between a number of American States and major tobacco companies required that millions of previously confidential tobacco industry documents were to be made publicly available¹. Access to these documents has enabled public health advances in tobacco control². More recently, Bond and colleagues (2009) identified alcohol industry documents through the tobacco document archives showing the international alcohol industry's major concerns about public health advances, in relation to arguments and strategies used to prevent or delay restrictions being placed on their products³.

Co-ownership of tobacco and alcohol companies has facilitated third-party access to alcohol industry information through the tobacco document archives. The Philip Morris (PM) tobacco company purchased the Miller Brewing Company (MBC) in 1970⁴⁻⁵. PM company documents (which also include information about Kraft foods) are available in the tobacco archives³. Further access to alcohol-related materials has been made possible through documents from other industry groups including the Beer Institute⁶ and the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States⁷.

Public health parallels have often been drawn between the tobacco and alcohol industry⁸⁻¹². It has been documented that there is no safe level of smoking¹³⁻¹⁴, with clear evidence that there is also no level of alcohol use for which there is zero risk¹⁵⁻¹⁶. In Australia, 72.6% of the population (14+yrs) consumed alcohol at levels that pose low risk to long term health, and 10.3% consumed alcohol at levels considered to be risky or a high risk to their health in the long term¹⁷. However, unlike tobacco where there has been a steady decline in consumption, alcohol is consumed by some 80% of the population (14+yrs) and is widely accepted within the Australian culture¹⁷⁻¹⁸.

This paper presents, through the use of tobacco and alcohol company documents, evidence of the similarities between the tobacco and alcohol industry in terms of preventing and delaying public health measures. The companies have worked closely together, they have at times had common ownership, they have used similar arguments and strategies and they have similar supporters. The findings provide information about how the industries have attempted to

prevent and delay regulation of their products and the strategies used to maximise their marketing potential.

Method

A systematic search was conducted to uncover documents relevant to alcohol industry issues from the tobacco document archives. A number of document searching manuals guided the procedure^{1, 19-21}. A keyword search matrix was used to manage document findings by recording searched keywords and the number of industry documents retrieved. The search was conducted by entering key search terms into the Philip Morris Document Site; British American Tobacco Documents Archive; and the Legacy Tobacco Documents Library. Initial keyword search terms included 'Beer', 'Alcohol', 'Miller' and 'MBC'. Further search terms were identified by scanning documents retrieved in the primary search. Secondary search terms included: 'Beer Institute', 'Distilled Spirits Council' and names of individuals and consecutive Bates (reference) numbers. Document searching was conducted between December 2007 and February 2008; and again between March and July 2009.

A total of 156 documents were retained and evaluated for this search, with 29 being identified as relevant to alcohol industry operation. Thematic and content analyses were used to review document content. A number of key themes emerged including evidence of collaboration and partnerships between the industries, shared concerns, and similar approaches to issues of public concern such as advertising and marketing strategies, industry developed education campaigns and health warning labels. The advertising and marketing strategies theme was further categorised into the following sub-themes: product placement, marketing to youth, and targeting minority groups. Additional information was retrieved from journal articles and organisation websites were integrated to complement the industry documents and provide further context to alcohol specific issues.

Results and Discussion

Similar Concerns

Alcohol and tobacco industries are faced with legislative restrictions such as: advertising constraints; labelling regulations; supply and retail restrictions; and are susceptible to tax increases and disapproval from health advocates²².

Similarities can be drawn not only between the operations of the two industries from a public health perspective, but from evidence that the alcohol industry was aware of regulatory pressures being placed on them in a similar manner to those on tobacco companies³. A 1987 document from Dr Sharon Boyse of PM notes that: "The parallels with reports on cigarette smoking in the sixties and with suggested measures against cigarette smoking are of some interest and suggest that a little public attention may be beginning to be diverted to alcohol"²³. A presentation delivered by George Weissman (Vice Chairman of PM 1974-78) includes information about both the cigarette and beer divisions of the PM company: "As you know, we are

engaged primarily in the manufacturing and marketing of cigarettes and beer...Ironically, the fact that so many people enjoy our products is both the foundation of our success and the source of our problems"⁴. Weissman also acknowledges in his speech that selected people perceive the company's products [tobacco and beer] to be "morally suspect"⁴.

In order to overcome threats, PM tried to downplay the harms of its products. A speech by Hamish Maxwell (PM Corporate Affairs) acknowledged that:

...Many of the threats to us, P.M., arise from concerns which have lost touch with common sense and reality. People (and politicians) do need causes, and in a world which is generally more peaceful and affluent than ever before, there's a shortage of big causes. That's why we hear so much about really rather little causes: smoking, drinking, dietary hazards...²⁴.

Evidence of the Links

It is apparent from the documents reviewed that direct partnerships and consultation between alcohol and tobacco companies have assisted with strategy development to combat controls or restrictions²⁵, and to strengthen marketing strategies. A 1992 inter-office correspondence shows that the PM tobacco division and MBC began to share information in the areas of research and database segmentation: "PM has done quite a few presentations over the years that we can shake the dust off and share with Miller"²⁶. In 1995, these sister companies conducted 'Synergy' meetings where marketing options were discussed and the sharing of information and consumer databases took place²⁷.

To promote "cross-company synergies", Worldwide Regulatory Affairs (WRA) was initiated by PM to take "a liaison role, bringing the various players across companies together and creating the networks and communication vehicles" to share information regarding management of issues²⁸. A brief to the PM board described the role of WRA:

We participate in a broad coalition of organisations committed to defending commercial free speech, which includes member companies of the tobacco industry, allied industries like the liquor industry, the advertising industry, industry trade groups...²⁸.

A 1998 "Environmental Assessment" of Miller Beer shows how the alcohol division of PM used "Domestic Tobacco Proactive Efforts" to address issues such as proposals for the regulation of alcohol, tax increases and advertising, marketing and sales restrictions²⁵. The 'proactive efforts' included: ally development and maintenance (allies from MBC, Kraft and PM International); promoting personal responsibility; and legislative opportunities including bills on privacy and anti-discrimination (to argue that alcohol is a legal product and consumers have the right to use it)²⁵.

Further, the Corporate Affairs division of PM provided direction to the alcohol and tobacco companies^{24, 29}. In a PM Board presentation speech, the Vice President of Corporate Affairs, Alan Easton acknowledged that: "WE [sic] have scores and scores of trained professionals throughout the world adept at lobbying and carrying our messages to key decision makers"²⁹. During a PM Corporate Affairs Conference, Hamish Maxwell said: "We are seeking and retaining more qualified outside help and advice to make more effective our lobbying and our communications with our constituencies and the public"²⁴.

Common Approaches and Counter-Arguments

Many of the similarities between alcohol and tobacco operations are apparent from the PM CEO reports prepared for annual general meetings³⁰⁻³². These documents were prepared for the PM CEO and included premeditated responses to potentially controversial issues. The responses were developed to deflect concerns about tobacco, beer and food products and related issues including advertising, promotion, sponsorship, under-age consumption, tax increases and industry developed prevention and education campaigns³⁰⁻³².

Tax Increases

Increasing the cost of tobacco through tax has been found to significantly reduce tobacco use³³⁻³⁴. There is also evidence that the same applies to alcohol products³⁵⁻³⁶. The PM tobacco and alcohol divisions oppose proposals for tax increases to be placed on their products: "PM opposes all product-specific excise taxes, which are regressive and fall heaviest on middle and lower income taxpayers. They are unfair to consumers and the growers"³⁰. MBC argue against tax increases claiming that "the majority of people who drink do so responsibly" and it would be "unfair to penalize the majority to pay for the actions of a few"³².

To slow down increasing taxes on alcohol products PM "stress that Excise Taxes are regressive, forcing a disproportionate burden upon those least able to afford it"³⁷. These types of arguments are used by the industry to help rally for support from the public. Further strategies are used to engage distributors and other allied industries, for example, a letter retrieved from the PM archives was addressed to 'Miller beer distributors' and encouraged the distributors to call or write to state representatives expressing opposition to beer excise tax³⁸. It is also apparent that the drinks industry have created lobbying coalitions and partnered with other organisations, as the tobacco industry has done: MBC "oppose excessive tax increases by combining our efforts with various beer/alcohol beverage organizations, such as the Beer Institute and the National Beer Wholesalers Association, as well as grass roots organizations"³⁷.

Advertising and Marketing Strategies

Tobacco and alcohol companies ensure maximum sales and profit through careful advertising, product placement, target marketing and sponsorship³⁹. However, both the PM

tobacco and alcohol companies maintain in their arguments against advertising and marketing restrictions that: "Studies conducted by government and independent researchers conclude advertising affects brand performance, not consumption or abuse"^{32, 40}. The Distilled Spirits Council of the United States agreed that: "Scientific research has shown that there is no direct linkage between exposure to alcohol ads and the total consumption of alcohol beverages"⁷. PM advertises its tobacco products to "maintain customer loyalty and to encourage smokers of other companies' to switch to our products"^{30, 32}. Similarly, the internal alcohol documents show that MBC claims to advertise its beer "To encourage consumers of a legal drinking age who choose to enjoy beer, to select our brands of beer"^{30, 32}. The MBC also claim that advertising is used to "remind drinkers about the importance of consuming products responsibly"³², and that bans will not stop [alcohol] abuse³⁰.

A recurring theme found within the PM tobacco and alcohol documents is the referral to the First Amendment for protection against advertising restrictions: "Truthful advertising about legal products is protected by the First Amendment"⁴¹. PM also argues against approaches such as advertising restrictions on alcohol by claiming that such "band aid solutions" will not resolve critical issues such as "crime, illicit drugs, unemployment, poor delivery of health care, lack of quality education and economic opportunity"⁴⁰.

Marketing to Youth

PM claim they "do not want minors to smoke or drink alcoholic beverages", as they are "adult customs"⁴². Much research has already shown that both alcohol and tobacco companies target market their products to youth, for example, with alcopops (alcohol mixed with non-alcoholic beverages such as milk or soft drink) and flavoured cigarettes. These products are directed to the youth market and are popular among youth⁴³⁻⁴⁴. Hall and Room (2006) explain that young people are the future and best consumers of such products for these industries⁴⁵.

In a draft speech prepared by Steve Parrish for WRA, it is evident that the PM tobacco division have drawn upon business models from the beer division to address marketing to youth issues:

In developing effective programs to deal with the youth access issues in our tobacco business, we have begun to draw on very relevant models developed in our beer business. This is an example of the cross-company synergies we in Worldwide Regulatory Affairs have undertaken on issues management²⁸.

A 1982 document from the RJ Reynolds collection lists "Competitive Activity" for the "Younger Adult"⁴⁶. The document lists activities used by various industries to attract a youth market. "Miller Brewing, in 1977, began a promotional campaign to increase sales of products on campus. The gimmick was a contest among dorm floors,

sororities and fraternities to see who could collect the most Miller Beer cans and stickers from Miller kegs⁴⁶. The Joseph Schlitz, Heineken, and Lowenbrau brewers were also listed as having implemented specific youth-targeted strategies⁴⁶.

Understanding the importance of the youth market for its beer products, the MBC planned to delay increases in the minimum drinking age of 18 in 27 of the American states: "Strategically, we will be working behind the scenes to encourage the 27 states not already imposing a minimum drinking age of 21 to delay any enactment..."⁴⁷. Similarly, the tobacco industry was also aware of the importance of youth as consumers. In a 'confidential' research planning memorandum, Claude Edward Teague, Jr. who was Assistant Chief of Research & Development at the R.J. Reynolds tobacco company suggested that the industry was being "unfairly, constrained from directly promoting cigarettes to the youth market"³⁹. The document further suggested that for the company to prosper in the long term, new brands needed to be tailored to the youth market³⁹.

Targeting Minority Groups

There is evidence of both the alcohol and tobacco industries targeting minority groups. A paper by Balbach and colleagues (2003) revealed that the RJ Reynolds tobacco company developed strategies for targeting the African American population⁴⁸. Evidence exists that tobacco companies have targeted this group from as early as the 1960s⁴⁸. A PM tobacco document outlining a "strategic approach to new products" advises a need to develop brands for product or people segments in which PM is weak or non-existent: "Search for demographic weaknesses; e.g. PM underdeveloped among older smokers, blacks"⁴⁹. Other strategies developed to target minority groups include the strategic placement of billboards in inner-city areas, goodwill corporate donations, and the sponsorship of Latino and Gay and Lesbian groups^{9, 32}.

Similarly, there is evidence from the archives that PM has attempted to target market its beer products to minority groups⁴⁶. An inter-office correspondence document from MBC acknowledged: "A disproportionate share of total Miller volume is purchased by minority consumers"⁴⁷. This correspondence, with the heading 'Minority Relations' outlines the need for Miller to place emphasis on developing stronger relations with minority organisations and community leaders:

Existing programs of minority print media advertising, community involvement and cultural support within the black community will be enhanced. New or expanded programs targeted to the Hispanic community in key market areas are in development, and will include greater involvement with Hispanic print media, support of key business associations and organizations, and an increased visibility for Hispanic directed promotional marketing efforts⁴⁷.

A 1982 document from the RJ Reynolds collection includes "Competitive Activity – Industry Ethnic" which lists the company's activities to market its products to "Black" and "Hispanic" groups⁴⁶. The companies included alcohol manufacturers: Anheuser-Busch Inc, Adolph Coors, Joseph Schlitz Brewing Co., Carling O'Keefe Breweries, Molson Breweries, Miller Brewing Company, and tobacco manufacturers: Brown & Williamson, Philip Morris, and United States Tobacco⁴⁶.

Product Placement

A number of studies have found a direct relation between exposure to smoking in movies and smoking initiation among adolescents⁵⁰⁻⁵³. Similarly, research conducted in the US has found that exposure to alcohol use in movies is related to a significantly higher likelihood of onset of alcohol use among adolescents⁵⁴⁻⁵⁵. Exposure to alcohol use in movies has also been related to an increase over time in adolescent alcohol consumption⁵⁵⁻⁵⁶.

According to PM, product placement as a means of promoting tobacco and beer products does not occur: "PM USA does not seek to have any of its products, advertising, logos or trademarks placed in movies, television programming, theatre performances, or any other entertainment outlets, nor do we grant permission to do so"³². This is contrary to further reports found within the archives. A statement made by Hamish Maxwell (President and CEO of PM companies) during a 1983 marketing speech explains: "We must continue to exploit new opportunities to get cigarettes on screen and into the hands of smokers"²². In a similar manner, the MBC claim:

Miller responds to requests from movie companies which desire to have authentic products depicted in their movies as a natural part of a scene. What Miller pays for is to have our brand identified over someone else's³².

Public Awareness and Education Programs

Tobacco industry developed education programs have long been discredited^{57, 58}. Tobacco industry prevention programs do not reduce⁵⁷ and may even encourage youth smoking⁵⁸. In an RJ Reynolds public relations document, the tobacco giant outlines the "opportunities" for education programs indicating their role to "further shape public opinion – thereby influencing government decisions – through aggressive programs that address youth smoking, and at the same time, demonstrate that we support the laws and are responsible corporate citizens"⁵⁹.

Similar to the tobacco industry, alcohol companies fund public awareness and educational programs and work alongside health and safety groups to present a responsible public image⁴³. Hall and Room (2006) and Miller and Kypri (2009) have reviewed DrinkWise, an organisation established by the drinks industry, ostensibly to promote responsible drinking practices in Australia. Their programs were found to be ineffective if not counter-productive^{45, 60}. Alcohol prevention programs are often school or

community based and set out to change attitudes rather than actual drinking behaviours⁶¹. A document from the Beer Institute titled 'Preventing Alcohol Abuse' stated that: "The industry alone has spent over \$250 million over the past decade to fund research, public safety, education and prevention campaigns to curb alcohol abuse"⁶². Examples of alcohol industry programs included a cooperative effort by brewers Anheuser-Busch, Miller, Coors and Stroh to promote responsible consumption by adults, and to "fight drunk driving and underage drinking"⁶². Another document lists 'Underage Prevention Efforts' by MBC and includes a booklet "Let's Talk Over a Beer" which "sends a clear message that drinking beer...is an adult activity" and is used to facilitate parent discussion about the importance of responsible drinking with their children⁶³. Other 'prevention efforts' include college-based "alcohol awareness and health education initiatives", radio and television announcements for "21 means 21" and guides for retailers for the responsible service of alcohol and identification checking⁶³.

Health Warnings

The documents reveal that alcohol companies have been under pressure to adopt similar arguments to those used by tobacco regarding health warning labels. Health warning labels on cigarette packets educate smokers and non-smokers about the health risks of tobacco⁶⁴ and can increase quit attempts among people who smoke⁶⁵. British American Tobacco argued there was a lack of evidence that health warnings would be effective in informing consumers of the risks associated with smoking⁶⁶. PM claimed that it was unreasonable and improper to use regulatory power to undertake efforts to infringe upon trademarks and designs, and that health warnings would devalue the property of the manufacturer of a legal product raising issues under domestic and international law⁶⁷. "In order to be clear and readable, health warnings do not need to dominate the tobacco product package, overwhelm our trademarks or make the product's packaging shocking or repulsive"⁶⁷.

The alcohol industry also argues against proposals for health warnings on their products. PM believe that alcohol content labels are for informing consumers of alcohol content³⁰ and that "warning labels by themselves tend to stigmatize the product"⁶⁸. PM further claim that warning messages: "do not reduce alcohol abuse among any segment of the population" and that proposals for warning labels divert attention away from more effective programs³⁰. In a 1979 document, the Honourable Donald W. Riegle Junior (a United States Senator from Michigan) referred to health warning labels as a "saturation bombing technique" on consumers "which could result in all drinkers, whether they have alcohol problems or not, feeling guilty about their drinking". He further questioned the benefits of health warning labels: "Can anyone rationally believe that a warning label, which may only reinforce the guilt of the alcoholic, is going to motivate these addicted individuals to seek treatment for their disease? Clinicians as well as research scholars seriously doubt it"⁶⁹.

Conclusion

This paper provides evidence of the similarities in approaches adopted by the tobacco and alcohol industry in order to prevent and delay public health measures. It is clear from the documents identified that both industries use similar strategies to market their products through product placement, target marketing to youth and specific ethnic groups. They develop and provide potentially counter-productive public education campaigns so as to appear socially responsible and in an effort to deflect tighter controls on products. The alcohol and tobacco industries have demonstrated through the documents that they are opposed to regulations which threaten their sales and have used similar methods of lobbying and use of front groups to delay progress. Further, it can be drawn from these documents that the alcohol industry is concerned about public health groups and governments implementing similar strategies for alcohol products that have been used to regulate and control tobacco.

It is important to acknowledge that the documents presented in this paper are not representative of all alcohol industry documents available through the tobacco document archives. It is also important to note that the documents presented are only those that have been made available through the litigation process with tobacco companies.

These findings have implications for advancing public health measures for the control of alcohol by confirming the parallels between tobacco and alcohol industry operations and strategies to delay public health advances. The evidence drawn from these alcohol documents could lead to a similar Master Settlement Agreement occurring for alcohol, allowing for greater access to a larger pool of alcohol documents.

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