

Alcohol industry looks to boost drinks sales in Africa

Alcohol manufacturers are setting their sights on the growing African market to increase sales of their products, often using aggressive advertising tactics to lure new drinkers. Chris McCall reports.

Ugandans seem to like their alcohol, whether it is so-called rotgut made from bananas or *waragi*, also known as war gin. In some areas, virtual 24-hour access to alcohol sales, including cans or bottles of world-famous brands, is available. For the big alcohol producers, Africa is a growth market. Rogers Kasirye tries to tell Uganda's youth that alcohol may be bad for them, but he is fighting a losing battle against powerful interests.

Alcohol use in Uganda might be among the highest in east Africa. In Uganda, as indeed throughout low-income regions, the big players in the alcohol business have realised there is money to be made and market share to be won. Increasingly sophisticated marketing and advertising techniques increase sales, sometimes in ways that critics say would not be acceptable in Europe or other high-income regions. The health damage is often hard to quantify, but is obvious. "Alcohol is larger than water in this country. You can sell anywhere. You can sell in the markets, you can sell in the streets. Everyone can sell", Kasirye told *The Lancet*. "Every five minutes they are telling young people: drink."

Kasirye works for the organisation Uganda Youth Development Link, trying to promote awareness of the health risks of alcohol misuse. They fear a litany of inevitable health problems is occurring among young and poor people, many of whom may not have good access to health care. Some of these issues, such as the impaired effectiveness of antiretroviral treatment for HIV/AIDS, are potentially life-threatening.

But Kasirye and people like him are fighting the might, money, and influence of global marketing and advertising giants, who will

bring in much-wanted sponsorship to African sporting events or any other large gathering of people, if in return they can just advertise their products. Sponsoring a football match in soccer-crazy Africa is certain to get your message across, and the evidence suggests the strategy is working.

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Marketing to Africa

Innovative marketing ideas have been devised specifically suited to the African marketplace. Of those, the so-called spirit sachet is proving popular. Costing a tiny amount in Ugandan shillings, they come in 50 mL and 200 mL sizes, generally consisting of spirits, conveniently hanging in street stalls in a low-cost format very similar to the way shampoos, soaps, and washing powders are sold across Africa and other low-income regions. They may even be hanging alongside these products. It is a format designed to attract younger customers with modest but real buying power.

Not so long ago, Africa even had a fictional advertising character played by a British Jamaican man, who drank a brand of stout to enable him to undertake amazing physical feats. He was hugely popular and appeared in a movie. Sales of the branded drink soared across the continent.

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alcohol in the past, can now do so. Much of the traditional alcohol is locally brewed, but the big companies have realised they can lure this market over to their own products, and potentially attract new buyers as well.

"Where they suspect there will be many people, the alcohol company will come in as a sponsor", said Kasirye. "Alcohol has been used to lure girls into high-risk behaviour. There is a lot of alcohol poisoning in the villages. When they die, they think they have been bewitched."

But Kasirye's message is harder to convey, and less attractive, than the glitzy and attractive promotion and images from the alcohol companies.

Health effects

Despite few data, health monitors say some risks are quite clear. The risk to HIV/AIDS treatment, both through reduced effectiveness of antiretroviral drugs and reduced compliance with treatment, is the one that really stands out. Africa is the continent with the highest rates of HIV infection. Cheap generic antiretroviral drugs are now widely available, but they are only effective



Alcohol advertising billboard, Kampala, Uganda



if they are actually taken, and non-compliance is one of the biggest barriers to treatment.

Other problems include increased risk of tuberculosis, increased risk of domestic violence, higher rates of teenage pregnancy, fetal alcohol syndrome, and cirrhosis and liver cancer. These are all health problems known to be associated with increased alcohol consumption, both in high-income and low-income settings.

“Aggressive” marketing

Studies on health issues related to growing alcohol consumption in Africa and other low-income regions read surprisingly like a re-write of a global marketing strategy. The biggest issues are much the same: availability, purchasing power, level of use. In populations that traditionally do not heavily consume alcohol, economic growth means alcohol producers have potentially millions of new customers to capture.

In recent decades, the increasingly prosperous countries of the low-income regions have emerged as clear growth markets, with a focus on China, then southeast Asia and India, and more recently, on Africa.

“The big opportunities lie in Africa. That is where they are pointing to for their future growth and future profits. That is what they are telling their investors”, said Øysten Bakke, senior adviser on alcohol, drugs, and

development at Forut, a Norwegian organisation that closely follows the issue. “Many African countries have quite strong economic growth. They have a very young population and they have quite a significant number of people who don’t drink who are potential customers. About 50% of the world’s population do not drink alcohol. It is basically not part of their culture to do it. A big section of these are women around the world.”

“I think you are going to see quite an increase in general per capita consumption. I think you are going to see a reduction in the population who don’t drink alcohol.”

“We have clear evidence the industry is reliant on harmful use of alcohol for their sales and profits’...”

Many health monitors are now calling for a global framework agreement on alcohol marketing, similar to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. They are particularly concerned about the type of marketing used, and the advertising, some of which is clearly aimed at attracting new, young customers to the market. “It is quite aggressive”, said Bakke. “Some of it is quite across the line of what would be acceptable in the west.”

In most high-income countries, alcohol advertising is subject to fairly strict guidelines, although these are largely self-imposed by advertising industry bodies and drinks companies themselves. The European Advertising Standards Alliance (EASA) is one of the leading bodies on this initiative, although similar standards have been adopted in Australia and elsewhere.

Guidelines include drawing attention to the legal minimum drinking age, not encouraging excessive consumption, and that advertisements should not be placed in media where most of the target audience is likely to be under-age.

“EASA assists the alcohol sector in responding proactively to concerns about alcohol advertising, including in the development of strict guidelines and codes for their sector as well as through compliance monitoring and feedback”, Justina Raižytė, development and policy adviser at EASA, told *The Lancet*. “Advertising self-regulation has proven to be efficient and effective at member state level, but also across borders, because it is broadly accepted by the main industry stakeholders, as well as by the public. It is accountable, transparent, and has efficient enforcement mechanisms in place.”

Raižytė said only a small proportion of advertising complaints in European countries are related to advertising. However, not everyone agrees that self-regulation works. In many African countries, regulation in general is weak and critics say that the big alcohol firms have too much influence on government policy relating to alcohol.

“We have clear evidence the industry is reliant on harmful use of alcohol for their sales and profits”, said Sally Casswell, an expert on public health policy at New Zealand’s Massey University and chair of the Global Alcohol Policy Alliance.

Self-regulation clearly is not effective and the aim of the alcohol industry is to keep regulation to a minimum, Casswell said. Much of its public relations (PR) work is aimed at ensuring ineffective regulations do not change, she said. “All forms of marketing are largely unregulated and the industry works very hard to maintain this by promoting self-regulation—voluntary codes, which evidence shows do not make a difference. This has been, and continues to be, a priority for industry PR activity with governments around the world. It seems to be the number one threat to them.”

Chris McCall