

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING FOR THE NEXT MILLENNIUM

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING "TIMES, THEY ARE a 'changing" and with them are new shifts in alcohol marketing techniques. It used to be easy to gather community support to protest an offensive ad campaign, but how do you counteract the new marketing trend of "real life experiences"? How do you counteract traveling, alcohol-industry produced, one-time events?

So, what are some of these real life experiences? Attend the Jack Daniels Great American Tailgate party, or if you prefer, a Miller Beer sponsored trip to the Sports Illustrated swimsuit photo shoot. Participate in Smirnoff Ice's "Not Your Average Night" sweepstakes. Better yet, visit the Playboy web site to find Miller Beer's sexy "spin the bottle games" for your next party. All of these activities are designed, packaged and brought to you courtesy of the alcohol industry as a ploy to lure new and younger drinkers. As marketing strategies, they are both powerful and lucrative. They also present some new challenges for prevention activists.

There are more examples. Recently on the Miller Beer web site, you could enter to win a trip to "MGB Blind Date." This event will "feature a chart

by **Robin Wechsler**

Robin Wechsler is a community organizer and trainer. For the past 15 years she has helped communities to design and implement campaigns to prevent alcohol-related problems using a grassroots, "bottom-up" approach.



topping band in a small venue. There is one catch, you don't know (which band) is playing until the very moment the curtain rises." Incubus was one secret band playing to a raucous audience in the Bahamas. Truckloads of beer flow at the Blind Date events, perhaps a perfect opportunity for some responsible beverage service, but given the top-secret location of the event, it's a little difficult to organize concerned groups to advocate for on-site server training. By the time you have assembled the appropriate civic leaders to even discuss the problem, the event has come and gone.

These promotions are typical of the new wave of alcohol industry marketing. The shifts in marketing strategies are found everywhere and are not hard to document.



First, alcohol marketing has shifted from extolling the virtues of the liquid in the bottle to producers of real life "experiences," (like rock concerts, outrageous parties, sports competitions...) which ultimately both create and become our culture. Naomi Kein, in her book *No Logo*, sums it up perfectly, "the effect, if not always the intent, of advanced branding is to nudge the hosting culture into the background and make the brand the star. It is not to sponsor culture, but to be the culture." In this vein, Miller Beer does not just produce and advertise beer. They create ambitious rock concerts where the beer bottle and Miller logo can upstage the performers and musicians. Cutty Sark produces experiences that blend the worlds of alcohol, music, and pornography. In the old days, Cutty Sark simply claimed to make a superior whisky. If you play the current introduction of the Cutty Sark web page your screen will be filled with manufactured cultural experiences: Mardi Gras, trips to the Playboy Mansion, and on stage at a rock concert. In Cutty Sark's own words, the site is about booze, babes and bands. In the past, the ads and the companies simply promised high life and good times. Now the promise hits the streets creating nightmares for prevention activists.

Secondly, the alcohol industry is targeting young people with gusto and graphics. Kids, teens and young adults are customers. As a consumer group, they have billions to spend on goods and services. Moreover, while the alcohol industry claims that it does not want the lucrative underage market, their advertising practices tell a different tale. Guber and Berry in their book *Marketing To and Through Kids* spell out very precise steps to take to secure the youth market. They base their recommendations on current research studies and national surveys: use vivid flashy graphics, be interactive in nature, use community-building techniques and include clever games in your marketing ploys. The alcohol industry web sites incorporate all these gimmicks and more in their new campaigns.

Graphics: Alcohol industry web site graphic use bright colors and make noise. The sophistication of these sites evolves almost daily. They are seductive, exciting and provocative. For the industry to claim that these sites are developed with a mature audience in mind is ludicrous. Nothing could be as attractive to young people or teens then the spirits web sites.

Build Community: There are lots of opportunities to "join the club" or "become a member" like becoming a member of Cuervo Nation or joining the "Captains Crew" (Captain Morgan Rum). These gimmicks resonate well with a generation of young people who are seeking to identify or something to belong to.

Let's Play Games and Enter Contests: Young people have been weaned on contests by the food and cola industries. Alcohol advertising (disguised as a game or contest) is found everywhere. On the Captain Morgan web site, you can play the Save The Morganettes Game or you can play 'Slingin' the Brew' with Coors Light. Miller Genuine Draft is giving away a 2003 Harley-Davidson motorcycle

and Budweiser has many great prizes as part of the “Bud Family Open”. Contests are not a novel advertising venture, but they are definitely more interactive in nature, and the prizes are usually exotic trips that promise ultimate excitement and adventure. The alcohol industry is not content simply delivering a message to us, they want to be in relationship with us.

Think of the alcohol industry as an octopus. Their legs are creeping into every aspect of our lives, culture and traditions including our music, entertainment, our holidays and more. That which we hold as most near and dear is brought to us by Bud (plus Seagrams, and Jack Daniels...). This extension, or invasion, used to take the form of sponsorship. At least in the sponsorship scenario we were in control of the octopus, although for a price, we would display its logo at OUR events. Dissatisfied with such an uneven power arrangement, the octopus bypassed us, and took control of its fate (not to mention the size and placement of its logo). Today the alcohol industry designs, produces and calls the shots in an amazing variety of venues. Each one is bigger and better than the last.



How do communities reclaim their cherished cultural territory from the corporate alcohol giants? The alcohol super brands have unlimited funds and resources. In fact, the financial benefits from their aggressive marketing are enormous. The stakes remain high and the organizing challenges have grown. Here are a few challenges:

- The alcohol industry "manufactured" events occur on a single night, or over the course of a few days. Then they vanish from the landscape;
- The alcohol industry executives who dream up, inspire and sanction the events do not live in the community where the events take place;
- Sometimes the events are "top secret" until they occur (so the activists are not even sure what they are preventing); and
- By the time activists can organize to protest questionable images or content of a web site it has been redesigned (although the new "improved" web images may be more offensive than the ones you initially wanted to protest. Finally, web site content is difficult to monitor or control.

What Can You Do?

We need to expand our work to address the industry's latest antics. Our local or regional community groups must link up to form expanded state and national coalitions that can tackle "experiential" and youth oriented alcohol marketing.

Tried and true organizing principles tell us to select campaigns that are immediate, specific and winnable. Closing down a problem outlet or protesting an offensive billboard for example, meets these criteria. We can knock on our neighbor's door, conduct community meetings and meet in person with the individual who has the power to respond to our demands. We should never abandon these local organizing efforts. They do save lives.

PROMISING POLICIES

- Require the functional equivalent of a Conditional Use Permit (CUP) for any event involving alcohol sponsorship or sales on public property (e.g. parks, beaches, etc.);
- Alternately, ban any such events on public property;
- Require that all alcohol retailers (whether obtaining a regular or temporary permit to sell) receive approval through a CUP process before conducting any large event for the public that is funded in whole or substantial part by an alcohol producer. Key requirements would be sufficient notice to be given to the community so that protests can be submitted to the board reviewing the proposed event.
- Collect data on the new marketing venues;
- Target law enforcement efforts at these events, citing establishments that sell to minors or intoxicated persons;
- Demand action by the FCC to investigate the industry's failure to implement the proposed voluntary advertising practices guidelines in its 1999b report;
- Investigate shareholder actions; and
- Implement counter-advertising campaigns.

LET'S HEAR FROM YOU!

We welcome readers comments on topics presented.



Call us at
916.983.9506



fax us at
916.983.5738



or send an email to
cmkord@emt.org

prevention **Tactics**

is published periodically by The EMT Group, Inc., under its Community Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention contract with The California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs (DADP). The purpose of this publication is to help practitioners in the prevention field stay abreast of best practices emerging from current research and to provide practical tools and resources for implementing proven strategies.

The information or strategies highlighted in Prevention Tactics do not constitute an endorsement by DADP, nor are the ideas and opinions expressed herein those of DADP or its staff.

© 2003 by The EMT Group, Inc.

Permission to reproduce is granted, provided credit is given.

Author: Robin Wechsler

Graphic Design: Art Farmer Design

Editor: Chrissy Kord