

Putting a band aid on alcohol abuse?

 By [Odette van der Haar](#)

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The ban of alcohol advertising has been on the lips of government officials from not too long after tobacco advertising lost its public appearance rights in 1999. Now with political muscle behind the contentious restrictions bill, a full on ban of all alcohol advertising seems imminent.

Ministers have cited various reasons, from high road death tolls to increased incidence of abuse, especially among the youth. While evidence exists to support arguments on both sides of the fence, there are other issues at hand that one needs to consider, such as freedom of speech and whether a complete ban is a result of political tumult or a true solution.

Freedom of speech

Within the principles that the legislation will have to consider are our constitutional rights, and the most significantly affected by the proposed regulation is freedom of speech.

Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes: freedom of the press and media, and the freedom to receive or impart information and ideas. While alcohol products remain legal, the manufacturers of these products have a constitutional right to advertise their products.

The ACA recognises the spectrum of research results related to the effect of alcohol advertising on youth consumption and abuse in conjunction with the acknowledgement by various world organisations that a review of all findings is inconclusive.

Some of the damning reports may lend a degree of legitimacy to a decision to impose stricter regulations on alcohol advertising in order to curb further abuse - but is a complete ban on all advertising within this sector really necessary? The advertising and communications industry is, and has been for years, successfully self-regulating. Should co-regulation not be considered as a solution for better management and control of advertising of alcohol products?

Promised to present a broad plan

Late last year, minister of health Aaron Motsoaledi promised to present a broad plan that would not be limited banning alcohol commercial communications.

While an official plan has yet to surface, it would be incomplete if it did not include other control measures such as licensing of private producers and retailers; limits on the number and location of retail outlets; restrictions on days and hours of retail operation; beverage taxation; labelling laws; national alcohol prevention and education programs; and, lastly,

restrictions on alcohol marketing and advertising.

Another question: is advertising the only determinant of alcohol abuse incidence in any country? Advertising provides consumers of a product with choice - it does not force consumers to consume alcohol.

One has to consider that other factors have to be considered when addressing the issue of alcohol abuse, for example, the lack of sports and recreational facilities in communities and at schools, for the youth - not to mention parental and peer influences, which are proven to have a vastly more powerful psychological effect.

Do not necessarily yield the desired result

Evidence presented to the World Health Organisation by International Centre for Alcohol Policies (ICAP) proves that bans on alcohol advertising do not necessarily yield the desired result. Despite bans on broadcast advertising in Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Norway, none has achieved the hoped-for decline in consumption.

Alternatively, despite the repeal of an advertising ban on all types of beverage alcohol in New Zealand in 1992, there was no resulting increase in the consumption of distilled spirits. In fact, the already declining spirits market fell even further during the two years following the reintroduction of alcohol broadcast advertising.

ICAP also presented substantiation that advertising for alcohol beverages responds to trends in consumption, rather than actually leading them. Their market data analysis reveals that increases in consumption precede alcohol advertising expenditure increases, not the other way around. In other words, advertising is part of a producer response to consumer demand.

The Industry Association for Responsible Alcohol Use - ARA - has publically pronounced its support for any effective initiative put in place to address the problems of alcohol misuse and abuse; but it recognises that this "problem is multi-faceted and therefore a holistic approach is needed, rather than simply thinking that banning advertising or preventing sales on Sunday is the silver bullet to end the problem". So said Adrian Botha, public affairs consultant for the ARA.

Integrated strategy of co-regulation, partnership proposed

The ACA therefore proposes an integrated strategy of co-regulation and partnership with Government, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) and the ARA to garner results -including education and awareness of the effects of alcohol abuse and responsible advertising - rather a ban.

It is also important to point out that extensive self-regulation of liquor advertising in all its forms already exists in the ASA Code of Advertising Practice, which is highly respected and subscribed to by many professional bodies and their members, including the ACA.

ABOUT ODETTE VAN DER HAAR

Odette van der Haar joined Publicis as the MD from 1 September 2019, before which, she was the CEO of JWT Jhb. She was also CEO of the Association for Communication and Advertising (ACA) (www.acasa.co.za), the industry body of the SA advertising and communications sector, and previously headed up Sentech's Advertising, Events and Sponsorships portfolio...

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