

ALCOHOLIC DRINKS

**A survey of alcoholic
drinks advertisements**

December 1996

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1. SUMMARY

The alcoholic drinks industry determines the content of the rules in the British Codes of Advertising and Sales Promotion; it is therefore no surprise that they are strict. This is principally because the companies involved want to encourage sensible drinking as well as sales. Previous surveys by the ASA's research team have shown that most advertisers in this sector are acting responsibly and this survey is no exception. The breach rate is encouragingly low and the results are an illustration of the effectiveness of the self-regulatory system.

A sample was made up of all advertisements for alcoholic drinks appearing from the national newspapers and a selection of regional titles, consumer magazines, and trade magazines, during the last two weeks of June 1996. A total of 359 advertisements were found; these included some advertisements which appeared more than once in the sample. The analysis of these advertisements provided the following findings:

1. Of the total number of advertisements, 94 (26%) appeared in the national press. The regional press and magazines each constituted 16% of the entire sample. 119 (33%) of the sample advertisements were found in two specialist wine publications, none of these broke the Codes.
2. Other than the disproportionate number of advertisements for wine in the two specialist magazines, beer was found to be the most heavily featured product category in the general press, accounting for 24% of the total number of advertisements. This is in contrast to previous ASA surveys, normally conducted pre-Christmas, which have found spirits to be most widely advertised. Unsurprisingly, the seasonal factor accounts for the appearance of more beer advertisements, since these are more commonly advertised in the Summer. Those for spirits and liqueurs are more prevalent in December.
3. The level of compliance found in the sample was high with 98% acceptable. Of the total 359 advertisements in the sample, only 6 (2%) broke the Codes. This accounted for 4 individual advertisements. These figures are encouraging and show that the alcoholic drinks industry is observing the self-regulatory system and generally complying with the Codes.
4. No single medium was considered especially troublesome because the overall breach rates were so low.
5. The product category with the most breaches was beer, although this reflects the large number of beer advertisements in the sample. Three out of the four advertisements breaking the Codes were for beers. One was considered socially irresponsible because it encouraged excessive drinking. Another was in breach because its dominant theme was the

strength of the advertised beer. A third advertisement, also for beer, featured a woman who appeared to be under the age of 25.

6. Only 12 advertisements in the June sample were for alcoholic carbonates (alcopops); ten of these were in the trade press. None of them broke the Codes. In view of the public and media interest in this issue during the Summer, a separate cut was commissioned in October 1996. Only three additional advertisements were found and none of them broke the Codes.

The ASA has received a small number of complaints about these products but most of them have concerned the packaging and marketing of the drinks, which fall outside the scope of the British Codes of Advertising and Sales Promotion. In these cases we have referred complainants to The Portman Group, which has recently published its Code of Practice on the naming, packaging and merchandising of alcoholic drinks, and deal with complaints of this nature. However, during 1996 the ASA Council has upheld complaints about two advertisements which were thought to be aimed at consumers under the age of 18; one used a cartoon character and another featured models who appear to be under 25.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 Background

There has been considerable public and press interest in alcoholic drinks during 1996. The main concerns have centred around the issue of alcohol consumption and young people. Alcohol consumption in general in the UK is high and although the majority of people limit themselves to the recommended weekly amount of 28 units for men and 21 units for women, research estimates that 27% of men and 13% of women drink more than this¹.

The rise of a new category of product on the market, the alcoholic carbonate (commonly known as 'alcopops'), has fuelled debate about how alcohol should be advertised, if at all. Several groups have called for an outright ban on alcoholic drinks advertising. The alcohol industry has responded by promoting The Portman Group's new Code of Practice which offers guidelines on how alcohol should be responsibly marketed, packaged and merchandised.

The Portman Group acknowledges that criticism has been directed at the drinks industry for attracting young people and encouraging under age drinking². Alcoholic carbonates have brought this issue to the fore but the problem is not a new one.

Studies have suggested that drinking can begin at age 10-12, and by 12-14 almost all youngsters have had some experience of alcohol³. One survey conducted in 1992 found that there was no significant increase in alcohol consumption when people reach the age of 18⁴.

This is obviously a sensitive issue and the alcoholic drinks industry remains responsive to the possibility of European Union constraints on their advertising. As a result, the rules in the British Codes of Advertising and Sales Promotion relating to this area remain strict and comprehensive at the insistence of the industry.

In the ASA research team's last survey on this issue, published in April 1995, we found a low breach rate of 3.5%. However, the findings of the National Advertising Review (NAR) revealed a surprising increase to 30%. Alcoholic drinks advertising was the product category with the highest breach rate in that survey. As a result, the 1996 research project looked at a Summer sample to see if the NAR was revealing a new, worrying trend or a temporary hiccup in the usually excellent performance of this sector.

The Summer sample has provided us with a different selection of products than those usually advertised in December and we are pleased with the return to the high compliance levels that we normally find in this sector.

2.2 The rules

The Advertising Standards Authority promotes and enforces the highest standards in all non-broadcast advertisements in the UK. It operates in the public interest and in co-operation with the advertising industry. It ensures that everyone who commissions, prepares and publishes advertisements observes the British Codes of Advertising and Sales Promotion.

The British Codes of Advertising and Sales Promotion contain specific rules relating to alcoholic drinks. These include:

1. Advertisements should be socially responsible and should not encourage excessive drinking. Advertisers should not suggest that solitary drinking is advisable¹.
2. Advertisements should not be directed at people under the age of 18 either through choice of media or style of presentation. As a result, the ASA will generally advise against the use of cartoons, real or fictitious heroes or toys and games. Models shown drinking in advertisements should be over the age of 25².
3. Advertisers should not suggest that any alcoholic drink can enhance mental, physical or sexual capabilities, popularity, attractiveness, masculinity, femininity or sporting achievement³.
4. The alcoholic strength of a product must not be the dominant theme of an advertisement. Drinks should not be presented as preferable because of their high alcohol content or intoxicating effect⁴.
5. Drinking alcohol should not be portrayed as a challenge, nor should it be suggested that people who drink are brave or daring. Advertisers should not portray drinking as the reason for success of any personal relationship or social event⁵.
6. Advertisements for alcohol must not depict activities or locations where drinking alcohol would be unsafe or unwise. Advertisements should not associate the consumption of alcohol with operating machinery, driving, or any activity relating to water or heights⁶.

2.3 Survey objectives

The survey objectives were:

- to check how far alcoholic drinks advertisers are complying with the requirements of the British Codes of Advertising and Sales Promotion;
- to identify the nature of alcoholic drinks advertisements and any emerging trends; and,

- to identify any potential problem areas.

3. METHOD AND SAMPLE

A cut was commissioned of all advertisements for alcoholic drinks appearing over the last two weeks in June 1996 from the following media:

- all national daily and Sunday newspapers, including supplements;
- a selection of regional newspapers;
- a cross section of consumer and leisure magazines, including womens', mens', style and special interest titles;
- a selection of trade titles.

A full list of titles is contained in the appendix.

A total of 359 advertisements were collated, including duplicates. The advertisements were broken down into the following product categories:

- Beers, ales and cider
- Wines, including sparkling wines
- Fortified wines
- Liqueurs
- Spirits
- Alcoholic carbonates
- Various products: these included advertisements for off-licences, supermarkets and wholesalers

Each individual advertisement was examined and assessed under the Code's requirements for alcoholic drinks.

The total number of times an advertisement appeared was considered important as this would influence the size of the audience reached and the impact of the advertisement. As a result, duplicates of advertisements were retained in the sample.

4. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1 Context

The sample was taken from the press in June in order to assess whether there were any notable differences in compliance levels or advertising trends according to the time of year. Traditionally the ASA has conducted its alcoholic drinks surveys in December and certain differences are apparent between this survey and the last one which was conducted in December 1994. These points are commented on later in this section.

Fig 1. Advertisements, including duplicates, broken down by product category and media type.

	<i>Magazine</i>	<i>National</i>	<i>Regional</i>	<i>Specialised</i>	<i>Trade</i>	Total
<i>Alcopops</i>	2	0	0	0	10	12
<i>Beers</i>	25	29	15	0	16	85
<i>Fort Wines</i>	0	0	0	2	0	2
<i>Gen Retail</i>	1	14	23	0	1	39
<i>Liqueurs</i>	0	0	0	1	0	1
<i>Spirits</i>	11	16	21	1	2	51
<i>Wines</i>	19	35	0	115	0	169
TOTAL	58	94	59	119	29	359

In total there were 359 advertisements in the sample, including duplicates. Of these, 26% appeared in the national press. The regional press and magazines each constituted 16% of the entire sample.

There were 119 advertisements in the sample which appeared in specialist press such as Wine Magazine and Decanter, these accounted for 33% of the sample. The specialist press advertisements did not include claims about the products and were generally a simple statement of the availability of the product. None of them broke the Codes. In order to ensure that the sample was representative of the advertisements likely to be seen by the general public, these 119 specialist press advertisements have been kept as a separate item in the figures.

4.2 Comparisons with previous surveys

The sample showed that there are some notable differences in the advertising of alcoholic drinks according to the time of year. In this June sample there were significantly fewer advertisements for spirits (29 compared to 97 in December 1994), and there were very few advertisements for fortified wines or

liqueurs, 3 compared with 22 and 45 respectively in the December 1994 sample. Spirits was the largest product category in the December sample and the advertising concentrated on the festive traditions of alcohol at Christmas. In the Summer sample however, beers tended to be advertised as a thirst quencher.

The surprisingly high breach rate for alcoholic drinks in the National Advertising Review in 1995 is difficult to explain. The number of questionable advertisements in our other surveys has remained consistently low and this most recent sample shows an even smaller number of breaches.

4.3 Levels of compliance

The primary purpose of this survey was to establish whether alcoholic drinks advertisements are being prepared and published in line with the Codes. There were 359 advertisements in the sample only 6 advertisements, including duplicates, were found to break the Codes. These breaches accounted for 4 different advertisements.

Fig 2 Advertisements, including duplicates, broken down by media and compliance classification:

	<i>Acceptable</i>	<i>Breach</i>	TOTAL
<i>Magazine</i>	54	4	58
<i>National</i>	94	0	94
<i>Regional</i>	58	1	59
<i>Trade</i>	28	1	29
<i>Specialist</i>	119	0	119
TOTAL	234	6	359

Given that the number of problem advertisements was so low, no specific conclusions can be drawn on the choice of media. The media category with the highest number of breaches was magazines. However, this was due to the fact that one advertisement which was in breach of the Codes appeared three times in magazines. As the table above shows, the only media which did not publish any contravening advertisements were the national and specialist press.

The table below shows that the product category with the highest breaches was beers. This corresponds with the higher number of beer advertisements in the sample overall. Two of the unacceptable advertisements were for the same advertiser, an off-licence. The first of these was for a multi-buy promotion on beer and featured a cartoon drawing of a man with a large 'beer belly' drinking from a beer bottle, with a line of bottles next to him. This was considered to break the Codes because it encouraged excessive consumption.

The second advertisement by this advertiser was for a multi-buy promotion on champagne. The advertisement featured a number of cartoon characters who appeared to be coming out of a champagne bottle, these characters were clearly inebriated. This advertisement was considered to be socially irresponsible and encouraged excessive consumption¹.

Fig 3 Advertisements, including duplicates, broken down by product category and compliance classification:

	<i>Acceptable</i>	<i>Breach</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>
<i>Alcoholic carbonates</i>	12	0	12
<i>Beers</i>	80	5	85
<i>Fortified wines</i>	0	0	0
<i>Gen. retail</i>	39	0	39
<i>Liqueurs</i>	0	0	0
<i>Spirits</i>	50	0	50
<i>Wines</i>	53	1	54
<i>Specialist press advertisements</i>	119	0	119
<i>TOTAL</i>	352	6	359

Another issue raised was the use of the strength of a product as the main theme of the advertisement. One advertisement fell into this category by showing the ABV percentage strength as the main platform of the advertisement. This advertisement appeared in a trade publication and it was felt to be a clear breach of the Codes².

The final advertisement called into question was also for beer and featured a model who appeared to be under the age of 25. Considering the current debate about the alcoholic drinks industry appealing to young people, the ASA is always cautious when dealing with issues of this kind. This advertisement appeared three times in the sample and constituted half of the breaches¹.

4.4 Trends and observations

In addition to the analysis of those advertisements which were found to break the Codes, it is interesting to note which of the advertisements were considered borderline but on balance found to be acceptable.

There were two campaigns which featured people working with machinery or in other potentially unsafe situations, such as near water. While these were

questionable under the Codes², the research team considered that they were not in breach because it was clear that the people featured in the advertisements were not drinking.

Other advertisements raised the issue of alcohol in relation to image-enhancement and sexual success³. Three advertisers came fairly close to the line by using attractive or strong people in a way that might imply that the drink enhanced these attributes. In these cases the advertisements were just acceptable.

The ASA takes account of the choice of media in assessing the impact of an advertisement. There was one trade magazine advertisement which would have breached the Codes if it had appeared in the consumer press because the strength of the beer was emphasised in the advertisement⁴. However this advertisement was targeted at publicans and not at consumers and the dominant theme was the product's profitability rather than its strength. It was therefore considered acceptable.

The relationship between alcohol and sport can be a contentious one. Advertisers can use sport in association with alcohol as long as they do not imply that the drink will enhance a person's sporting performance⁵. In this sample there were nine advertisements which associated alcohol and sport to a greater or lesser extent; all were acceptable. For example, one advertisement showed a bottle of beer placed next to an American football and a helmet. This approach is acceptable because there was no implication that a player's performance was enhanced by drinking the beer and the product was clearly being advertised in terms of its thirst quenching qualities.

An advertisement for an off-licence which appeared in the sample for a promotion on beer featured the strapline "Adventures Guaranteed" and this presented an interesting question in relation to the Codes¹. In this case the claim referred to the overall shopping experience and not to the adventures one might experience as a result of drinking the advertised beer. It was therefore felt to be acceptable.

5. COMPLAINTS

As with all our research projects, the ASA examined this survey in the context of complaints received. The ASA received a total of 12,804 complaints in 1995; 3,562 of these were upheld. Of the total number of complaints received, 182 related to alcoholic drinks advertising. The Authority investigated 48 of them relating to 19 advertisements and asked for 8 of these to be withdrawn or amended.

The complaints that were formally investigated fell mainly under two sections of the Codes; the rules for alcoholic drinks, and those relating to taste and decency. Those which were considered under the alcohol section were varied and did not show any particular trends. Upheld complaints included an advertisement which featured a person in a swimming pool drinking the advertised product. This broke the Codes because it depicted an activity where drinking alcohol is unsafe or unwise. Another advertisement, for beer, investigated under the same clause featured a model in a swimsuit and a leather jacket, sitting on a motor bike. Although the advertisers had included the statement "Remember - never drink and drive", the ASA considered the approach to be inappropriate.

Another contentious issue amongst complainants related to encouraging under-age drinking. Complaints were received about two advertisers who had used young models. Those received about an advertisement for vodka were upheld because the models appeared to be under the age of 25 which is not acceptable under the Codes. The ASA expressed concern that this advertisement was likely to appeal to those under 18 and asked for it to be removed.

Although complaints have risen overall since 1994, there has been a disproportionate rise in the number of complaints investigated by the ASA relating to alcoholic drinks. In 1994, 4 complaints (excluding duplicates) were formally investigated. In 1995 the figure rose to 19 and the rise appears to be increasing further in 1996. However, for an industry which spends over £140 million on advertising each year, the number of complaints is relatively low.

It is interesting to note that the nature of complaints about alcoholic drinks advertisements in 1995 differs slightly from those for 1994 which were discussed in the last ASA survey in this sector. Previously, complaints about alcoholic drinks advertising were mainly concerned with matters of factual accuracy and taste and decency, not the specific rules on alcohol in the Codes. This was not the case in 1995. Of the 19 complaints which were formally pursued, 11 were considered under the alcohol section of the Codes.

6. ALCOHOLIC CARBONATES

In the last year alcoholic “soft” drinks have been headline news and there has been much public and industry discussion about new products on the market and how these products should be advertised. This sector of the industry is now estimated to be worth over £200 million a year¹. Alcohol Concern described alcoholic carbonates as “a cynical attempt to hook young people on booze”². In this survey we set out to assess the level of advertising for these products and whether they comply with the Codes.

In our sample, taken in June 1996, there were 12 advertisements for alcoholic carbonates (including duplicates). Ten of these appeared in the trade press and none of them was considered questionable under the terms of the British Codes of Advertising and Sales Promotion. In view of the fact that alcoholic carbonates have been so widely discussed during the Summer, we commissioned a second sample from the same media during one week in October 1996. We wanted to see if the frequency or content of advertisements for these products had changed. Only three advertisements were found, two of them appeared in trade publications and none of them breached the Codes.

The relatively small number of advertisements found in these samples is reflected in the number of complaints about these products received by the ASA. Between September 1995 and September 1996 there have been 23 complaints to the ASA about alcoholic carbonates, the majority of these fell outside the Codes’ rules and were related to the nature or naming of the products rather than the advertising of them.

During 1996 the ASA Council upheld complaints about the use of a cartoon character in association with an alcoholic drink. Complaints were also upheld about an advertisement for a bottled cider which was considered to be socially irresponsible and targeted at consumers under the age of 18.

The potential problems of advertising alcoholic carbonates have been widely discussed in the national and trade press. The primary concern is that these products, by their very nature, will appeal to children. Arguably, if a product is designed to appeal to an 18 year old then it runs a high risk of attracting the attention of those under 18, aspiring to adult activities. One recent survey found that alcoholic lemonade was the second most popular drink after Coca Cola amongst children aged 12-15³.

In response to these concerns The Portman Group published their Code of Practice on the naming, packaging and merchandising of alcoholic drinks in April 1996. This specifies that alcoholic carbonates should not be described using terms which are associated with soft drinks or confectionery. The Code also prohibits the use of images or designs which may appeal to those under 18 in the packaging or marketing of a product. Under the terms of the new code, The Portman Group have upheld complaints about the use of cartoon

characters in association with these products and packaging has been redesigned.

Advertisers have responded positively to the new guidelines. The code of practice appears to have been embraced by the industry, and individual manufacturers have agreed to change contentious marketing techniques.

The ASA has received relatively few complaints about this issue and there have been very few advertisements to complain about. Certainly, there has been little need to promote the existence of these products because of press coverage. Equally, it is possible that the industry is wary of fuelling public concern by producing advertising which may be controversial. In any event, judging from the findings of this survey, the ASA has found advertisers to be as responsible with "alcopop" advertising as they are with other products. The ASA will continue to advise the manufacturers of 'alcopops' to contact the Committee of Advertising Practice Copy Advice team before placing advertisements to minimise the possibility of a problem under the British Codes of Advertising and Sales Promotion.

APPENDIX

Publications included in the sample

NATIONAL NEWSPAPERS

The Daily Express
The Daily Mail
The Daily Mirror
The Daily Telegraph
The Financial Times

The Guardian
The Independent
The Star
The Sun
The Times

The European
The Independent on Sunday
The Mail on Sunday
News of the World
The Observer

The People
The Sunday Express
The Sunday Mirror
The Sunday Telegraph
The Sunday Times

MAGAZINES

19
Amateur Photographer
Arena
Auto Sport
Autocar & Motor
BBC Gardeners World
BBC Good Food
The Banker
Bella
Best
Big
Brides
Camcorder User
Car
Caterer & Hotel Keeper
Chemist & Druggist
Clothes Show
Coin News
Commercial Motor
Company
Computer Weekly
Cosmopolitan
Country Living
CTN
Decanter

The Economist
Elle
ERT
Esquire
Essentials
The Face
Family Circle
FHM
Fleet Car
Forecourt News
Forecourt Trader
Good Housekeeping
GQ
Hair Flair
Harpers & Queen
Health & Fitness
Hello
Hi-Fi News
Homes & Gardens
House & Garden
House Beautiful
ID
Ideal Home
Insurance Age
Investors Chronicle

Just 17
Licensee
Living
Looks
Majesty
Marie Claire
Mean Machines Sega
Media Week
Mizz
Money Management
Money Marketing
Money Observer
More
Mother & Baby
Motor Transport
My Guy
New Woman
Options
Parents
Peoples Friend
Performance Car
Post Magazine
Practical Parenting
Practical Photography
Prima
Private Eye
Publican
Q
Radio Times
Readers Digest
Sainsbury's Magazine

Scot Mag
She
Sky
Slimming
Smash Hits
Supermarketing
Take a Break
Tatler
Time Out
Toy Trader
Travel Trade Gazette
Travel Weekly
Trucking
TV Times
Ulster Grocer
Vanity Fair
Video Camera
Vogue
Weight Watchers
What Car
What Hi-Fi
What Mobile
What Video
Wine
Woman
Woman & Home
Womans Journal
Womans Own
Womans Realm
Womans Weekly

REGIONAL NEWSPAPERS

Aberdeen Press & Journal
Birmingham Evening Mail
Birmingham Post
Brighton Evening Argus
Bristol Evening Post
Cambridge Evening News
Chichester Observer
Colchester Evening Gazette
Cornish Guardian
Crawley News
Cumbrian News & Star
Daily Record
Derby Evening Telegraph

Edinburgh Evening News
Evening Standard (London)
Glasgow Evening Times
Glasgow Herald
Gloucester Citizen
Huddersfield Daily Examiner
Kent Messenger
Kent/Sussex Courier
Lancashire Evening Post
Leicester Mercury
Lincolnshire Echo
Liverpool Echo
Milton Keynes Gazette

Newcastle Evening Chronicle
Newcastle Journal
North Wiltshire Gazette
Northern Echo
Plymouth Evening Herald
Southampton Evening Echo
Southend Evening Echo
Southern Evening Echo
Sunday Independent
Sunday Post
Surrey Advertiser

Surrey Mirror
Swindon Evening Advertiser
The Scotsman
Watford Observer
West Morning News
West Sussex Gazette
Western Daily Press
Western Mail
Worcester Evening News
Yorkshire Post