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Alcohol ads spill a message all over kids

December 15, 2002 | By Bob Condor.

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Watching television at David Jernigan's home typically is fodder for lots of conversation. Jernigan is the father of an 18- and 20-year-old and, lucky for them, research director of the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at Georgetown University.

The family talks about the TV ads for beer, distilled spirits and the newer category of sweetened malt beverages and "lemonades." "Sometimes I conduct an instant focus group. I ask who this ad is aiming to reach," said Jernigan, 46, an associate professor and sociologist who specializes in the public health issues of alcohol.

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Jernigan characterized the around-the-TV conversations as "part of a journey we have been on together." He admitted to providing "plenty of statistics" to his kids about the unhealthy aspects of underage drinking.

Jernigan's case keeps getting stronger. The American Medical Association released new scientific evidence last week showing that alcohol can stunt brain development in underage drinkers. Cutting-edge neuroimaging techniques and psychological tests revealed that adolescents who drink regularly have brain structures 10 percent smaller in regions governing memory and higher-order thinking.

Even in a follow-up three weeks later, abstinence had not returned the brain to normal ability to learn or retain new information, said Sandra Brown, a researcher at the University of California at San Diego.

Alcohol use plays a sinister role in the three leading causes of death among youth, including unintentional injuries (most notably motor vehicle fatalities), suicide and homicide. Jernigan can point out other nasty numbers. Americans who begin drinking before age 15 are four times more likely to become alcoholics than individuals who don't imbibe until the legal age. Since 1995, there are 900,000 new drinkers taking "more than a sip or taste" regularly between the ages of 12 and 17, significantly more than can be explained away by population growth.

Perhaps Jernigan's most convincing evidence comes from how alcohol is advertised and marketed. The Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth will unveil its newest findings about television advertising on Tuesday, as a companion report to one released in September on magazine advertising.

Expect this week's TV summary to be just as disturbing as the magazine side. Jernigan and his colleagues said young people under the legal age of 21 are exposed to 45 percent more beer ads and 27 percent more hard-liquor magazine images than people of legal age. In the newer "malternatives" category, youth see 60 percent more ads.

"Magazines are flying under the parental radar," Jernigan said.

He explained the process. Though media buyers can buy ad space with specific demographics (such as young adults interested in music), there always is some "spill" in which other readers or audiences are "accidentally hit" with the alcohol messages. What the Georgetown researchers found is that the spill factor consistently flows to 12- through 20-year-olds.

"Youth are systematically overexposed to alcohol advertising," Jernigan said.

One major reason is that distilled-spirits makers are "taking off the gloves" to mimic the aggressive marketing strategies of beer companies, Jernigan said.

"It's an industry that has long contended 'alcohol is alcohol' and 'a drink is a drink is a drink,'" he explained. The Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth, supported by \$10 million in grants from The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, will continue its audit of alcohol advertisers with a radio-ad report in early 2003, then a closer look at sports marketing and movie placements. Jernigan makes no apologies to any tasteless jokes about party-pooping or teetotaling.

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"We have made a decision as a society that young people don't have the ability to judge how to use alcohol in a safe way," Jernigan said. "What we have found so far is we need more policing of the ad environment, not less."

That children on average now take their first drink as 12-year-olds is another sobering thought. The American Medical Association isn't even waiting for Tuesday's report. The AMA chairman, Dr. J. Edward Hill, last week called for all alcohol advertisers to refrain from showing any commercials on network or cable television until after 10 p.m. or on any program with 15 percent or more underage viewers. It also asked alcohol marketers to cut the frogs, lizards, cartoons, mascots and celebrities from commercials.

"We'll take this issue as far as we have to," Hill said in a phone interview. "There are clearly economic implications for the alcohol industry [and its media partners], but we have to weigh it against the potential

harm to children. Our latest research shows the health problems might be worse than we even thought."

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