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ADVERTISING | June 23, 2003

Brewers Are Urged To Tone Down Ads

Advocacy Groups Take the Industry to Task Over Commercials Depicting Racy Behavior

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By BRIAN STEINBERG and SUZANNE VRANICA | Staff Reporters of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

NEW YORK -- Turn that music down! The parties and fun behavior depicted in a series of popular beer ads have grown too loud for several advocacy organizations, who complain that brewers are pushing too hard to attract young drinkers by promoting over-the-top, racy commercials.

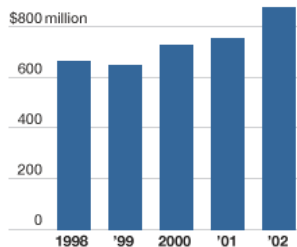
"Sex seems to be on everyone's mind in the beer business these days," says George Hacker, director of the Alcohol Policies Project at the Center for Science in the Public Interest. "It's the particular portrayal of essentially drunken, riotous behavior by young people that is so problematic."

Mr. Hacker, who also serves on the Coalition for the Prevention of Alcohol Problems, in late May sent a letter to [Adolph Coors](#) on behalf of that organization. The letter takes issue with a number of ads Coors has aired in recent months, including one that asked the question "Why do we party?" The response: "Because we can-can-can!"

Coors says it agreed not to run the ad any longer after a consumer brought it to the attention of the Better Business Bureau as part of an internal program that Coors has in place.

CASH ON THE BAR

U.S. TV spending by leading seven brewers



Source: TNS Media Intelligence/CMR

The Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth, a watchdog group at Georgetown University in Washington, has sought to put a cork in beer and alcohol ads by chronicling how such marketing reaches youngsters. Among the group's findings: One-quarter of alcohol advertising on television in 2001 was more likely to be seen by youths than adults. Last week, the group reported that black youths see more alcohol-related advertising than their peers do. An earlier study came to a similar conclusion about Hispanic youths.

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The TV industry has much riding on these discussions. Anything that curbs beer advertising is likely to have a ripple effect on broadcasters and cable networks. The seven top beer brewers last year spent an estimated \$874 million on domestic TV ads, including network, syndication, cable and spot TV. This was about 31% more than they spent in 1998, when TV ad expenditures totaled \$662.7 million, according to an ad-tracking research firm owned by Taylor Nelson Sofres.

Beer ads have been part of American commercial culture for decades, spawning memorable figures, images and slogans such as the Budweiser frogs and lizard, the Swedish Bikini Team and "Tastes great! Less filling!" These days, Coors offers up buxom female twins, while SABMiller's Miller Brewing has struck a chord with its "Catfight" ads showing scantily clad women duking it out. The racy ads may be creating friction among brewers, because of the attention some of the marketing is bringing to the highly scrutinized industry. Though the ads have generated buzz and controversy, they haven't always translated into better sales.

The Beer Institute, a malt-beverage trade association, says beer commercials aren't supposed to employ any language, music or cartoon character intended to appeal to consumers below legal drinking age. For that matter, according to the code, beer ads can't use Santa Claus, either.

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The Federal Trade Commission is looking into beer-marketing practices, part of a larger examination of alcohol marketing directed by Congress. The results should be available in August.

The beer industry also is keeping a close eye on a study currently being conducted by the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, which seeks to develop a strategy to reduce and prevent underage drinking. The study, requested by Congress, also is slated for release in August.

Brewers say consumers enjoy their marketing efforts. "Neither the government nor advocacy groups have been anointed as the culture police in the United States," says Jeff Becker, president of the Beer Institute, in a statement.

Write to Brian Steinberg at brian.steinberg@wsj.com and Suzanne Vranica at suzanne.vranica@wsj.com

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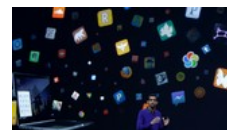
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