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FTC Eyes Youth Appeal Of Alcohol Web Sites

By Ann M. Mack

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Advertising & Branding

The Federal Trade Commission's Division of Advertising Practices plans to examine the Web sites of several alcohol marketers in the wake of a study showing that the sites attract a high percentages of minors.

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Mary Engle, associate director of advertising practices at the FTC, said the process could result in recommendations to marketers on how to change their Web sites. She would not confirm which sites the FTC will investigate.

Bacardi.com, Skyy.com and the Anheuser-Busch site BudLight.com are three likely to attract the FTC's attention—according to a study by the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at Georgetown University, those sites had the highest percentage of underage people making an in-depth visit during the second half of last year. The findings, released earlier this month, showed that 59 percent, 47 percent and 34 percent of visitors who looked at three or more pages on those respective sites were underage. Overall, minors initiated 13.1 percent of in-depth visits to the 55 branded alcohol sites included in the study.

"[Alcohol] Web sites continue to be a cyber playground, with many features attractive to youth," said CAMY executive director Jim O'Hara, citing content such as customized music downloads, instant-messaging accessories and games including putt-putt golf, football and spin the bottle.

As teens start to log more hours surfing the Web than watching television, CAMY and other groups are calling for more self-policing by the alcohol industry on the largely unregulated medium. "The industry should remove themes, music, language and attractions that clearly appeal to underage people," said Jim Hacker, director of the Alcohol Policies Project at the Center for Science in the Public Interest.

Representatives from Bacardi, Skyy and A-B all emphasized that they are responsible companies and only target consumers over age 21, pointing to their online age-verification systems. "Our Web site speaks to a sophisticated audience," said a Skyy rep, noting that the most frequently visited section explains how the vodka is made.

The Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, in turn, questioned CAMY's methodology, saying that its Web-traffic figures differ from some marketers' self-reported numbers. The research firm that measured the site visits, comScore Media Metrix, stood by its weighted data, derived from a panel made up of 1.1 million U.S. participants accessing the Web from home, the workplace and colleges.

"The CAMY report shows by their own data that 86.9 percent of the visitors to [alcohol] Web sites were over 21. Period," added the Distilled Spirits Council's Frank Coleman, svp for public affairs. "That's really the other shoe for us."

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