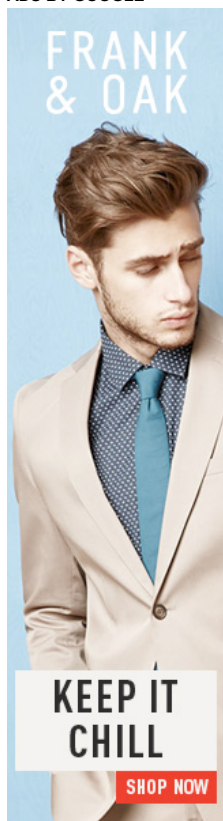


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# THE MEDIA BUSINESS: ADVERTISING; Is the alcohol industry pitching products to young audiences? Congress hears two views.

By Nat Ives  
Published: September 10, 2003

THE battle over alcohol marketing and under-age drinking erupted again yesterday, as two significant reports to Congress gave ammunition to each side.

The first report, from the Federal Trade Commission, concluded that the industry does not intentionally market its products to young people. The second, from the National Academy of Sciences, described how alcohol marketing does reach young audiences, and it laid out broad proposals to counter under-age drinking, including potential tax increases and a national ad campaign.

The alcohol industry claimed vindication in the first report but criticized the second.

"The F.T.C. basically said the alcohol and beer industries are doing a pretty good job," said David K. Rehr, president of the National Beer Wholesalers Association in Alexandria, Va. "The N.A.S. has kind of packaged 20-year-old ideas and said this is how we should fight under-age drinking."

Critics of the way alcohol is marketed took the mirror-image view. "The F.T.C. report was pretty much a recitation of the facts the industry provided them," said Jim O'Hara, executive director at the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at Georgetown University.

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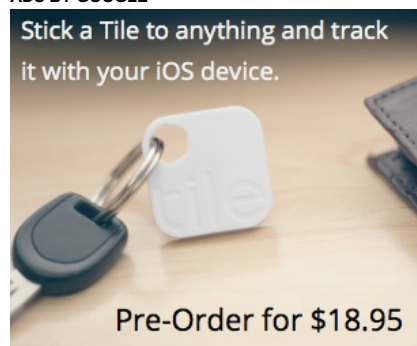
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The second report, Mr. O'Hara said, calls for the industry as well as communities and parents to act responsibly and be held accountable. "The report is right on the money there."

The dueling reports were both requested by Congress, and it is not clear how much impact they will have.

But Senator Christopher J. Dodd, Democrat of Connecticut, said in a statement that he would use them to build momentum around efforts to curb under-age drinking. "These aren't just numbers on a page," he said. "They represent real people and real stories showing that under-age drinking is taking a terrible toll on our nation's youth."

The Federal Trade Commission was asked to study the impact on under-age consumers of ads for flavored malt beverages, as well as compliance with the commission's 1999 recommendations for industry self-regulation. What it found, for the most part, were good intentions and proper behavior.

There was no evidence, it said, that big marketers targeted under-age consumers when advertising flavored malt drinks like Smirnoff Ice and Bacardi Silver. The commission also found much improvement in alcohol marketers' efforts to place ads so they reach mostly adults.

In its last report to Congress on self-regulation in 1999, the commission criticized as too weak guidelines intended to restrict alcohol advertising to shows and publications where at least half the audience was over 21.

The new report found that the companies it surveyed complied with the 50-percent rule in nearly every case.

"The F.T.C. concluded that our advertising targets adults, and it says our self-regulation is rigorous and effective," said Frank Coleman, senior vice president and spokesman at the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, a lobbying group for hard-liquor companies.

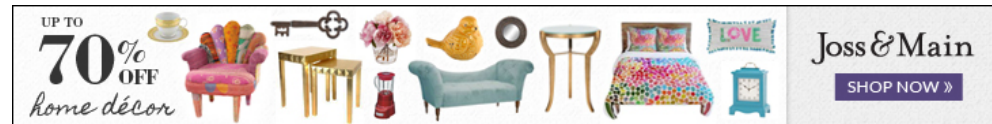
The Distilled Spirits Council and the Beer Institute, another trade group, said yesterday that it had shifted from the 50-percent rule to a 70-percent rule.

The report gave further comfort to a beer industry that has been criticized this summer for a wave of commercials featuring full-figured twins, raging party scenes and women wrestling in wet cement.

"Despite some conspicuous ad campaigns with juvenile themes," the report said without naming names, marketers regularly adjusted or pulled ads that were deemed to appeal strongly to minors.

Still, the commission found, "a visible minority of beer ads feature concepts that risk appealing to those under 21."

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