



Dr. George Askew's Remarks

Alcohol Marketing in the Digital Age Webinar

May 18, 2010

Thank you – it's a pleasure to be with you today and I am honored to be asked to weigh in on this important issue for our youth.

I'm George Askew, deputy CEO of Voices for America's Children. Voices is the nation's largest network of child advocacy organizations, with more than 60 member groups across the country. I am also a board certified pediatrician who continues to practice medicine part time and the parent of two teenagers.

As a children's doctor, I derive great pleasure from improving children's health and wellbeing one child at a time. However, I devote the vast majority of my professional time outside of clinical practice walls as a child advocate. In this role I can help millions of children at once through public awareness and government action. And if there's one child health problem that needs our collective efforts as advocates to raise awareness and spur government action, it is alcohol abuse.

Alcohol is the most widely used substance of abuse among America's youth—more than cigarettes or marijuana. About 5,000 young people die each year from underage drinking incidents, including 1,900 on the road, 1,600 from violence, and at least 300 from suicide. It also increases the risks of physical and sexual assault, injury, and contracting Sexually Transmitted Diseases, including HIV.

Excessive alcohol use harms people from all walks of life and age ranges, but children are particularly susceptible. Youngsters are drawn to risk-taking and very sensitive to the effects of alcohol. We all know this.

But they are also susceptible to the *allure* of alcohol. A feeling of identity and belonging is universally important to people of this age. Identity and belonging are also the touchstones of alcohol advertising, which fills screens – from TVs to mobile phones -- with images of conspicuously dressed, fun-loving cliques of young people.

Alcohol advertisers have always sought to create an alternate reality for their products. With the advent of online social spaces, they literally *have* created these alternate realities, full of color and far from parental supervision. Utilizing Facebook, Web forums, and the techniques of online social games, these advertisers are in the places that children already are or typically seek out.

Most of these sites make only token efforts to discourage youth from joining. "Enter your year of birth," an intro page will typically say. This is at best a disingenuous effort by webmasters who know that anyone underage will almost certainly lie. Who wouldn't,

when their interest is piqued, push forward? Certainly not most young people, who are often at their lifetime peak of risk-taking, curiosity, and eagerness to be seen as mature

That's why I was surprised by this study, both as a child advocate and a children's doctor. It details the elaborate worlds advertisers create with their expanded digital toolset. The result is often more immersive alcohol advertising that is more accessible to underage youth than ever. And, with this medium's ability to target market, it has the potential to engage youth more emotionally at a time in their lives when emotions rule and self-control is not fully developed.

A huge body of scientific data shows us that adolescence is a time of huge structural and functional changes in the brain. Judging risks and benefits requires an extraordinary dependency of multiple brain structures, the circuitry of which grows well into the third decade of life. The normal emotional instability that comes with development of mature brain pathways makes mistakes in judgment all the more likely. The bottom line is that advertising of the immersive, personal, and emotional sort one finds online can have a dangerous level of influence on our young.

When the product being advertised is itself uniquely dangerous – and illegal -- for youth, we have a clear call to action. Read the report and consider its recommendations; it's time the Federal Trade Commission used its power to investigate these new marketing techniques, and if necessary, regulate to better protect the young from alcohol advertising.

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