



LIQUOR ADVERTISING

To ban
or not
to ban



HEALTH minister Aaron Motsoaledi and social development minister Bathabile Dlamini are not alone in their desire to see the prohibition of the advertising of alcohol. Earlier in the year, readers of this magazine expressed their aversion to the inclusion of advertisements promoting alcohol in *Agenda* (and requested that such material be excluded from the publication). Both the above-mentioned ministers and those readers who wrote to *Agenda* on the subject believe that the barring of advertising will help control the abuse of alcohol in South Africa.

This, on the face of it, seems simple enough. The primary objective of advertising is, after all, to increase sales and when more alcohol is sold, the incidences of abuse are likely to rise accordingly. There is, however, another side to the argument, which, insist experts, has far-reaching consequences.

That we should be concerned about the high levels and cost of alcohol abuse in South Africa is not in dispute. A national survey conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council in 2009 found that the burden of alcohol on the country is high. Hazardous or harmful drinking

Pressure is mounting from government to ban alcohol advertising but opponents insist the move would cost the country and its inhabitants dearly, and have little effect on alcohol abuse.

PENNY HAW examines arguments from both sides.

and binge drinking are associated with indiscriminate sex among people living with HIV, road accidents and fatalities, homicides and foetal alcohol syndrome.

“Go to areas in Northern Cape and Western Cape and you will see many families affected by foetal alcohol syndrome, which is a very preventable form of intellectual incapacity,” says Motsoaledi. “On average in other countries, it affects 20 people per 1 000. In areas like the Western Cape, it is already at 104.”

Indeed, the increase in cases of abuse of alcohol is widely accepted as a matter of grave concern. What is however fodder for vociferous debate is whether the prohibition of alcohol advertising would have any impact on the problem and whether the cost of said prohibition could, in any way, be justified.

Supporters of the ban believe that exposure to alcohol advertisements is directly linked to drinking, particularly among adolescents. Their arguments inevitably include quotes from organisations like the World Health Organisation’s European Charter on Alcohol, which says, “All children and adolescents have the right to grow up in an



Aaron Motsoaledi

Chris Moerdyk



environment protected from the negative consequences of alcohol consumption and, to the extent possible, from the promotion of alcoholic beverages.”

Those in favour of prohibition – notably Motsoaledi, Dlamini and social development department chief director, Connie Nxumalo – also repeatedly cite South Africa’s successful campaign to reduce the use of tobacco as evidence that a ban on alcohol advertising would be effective. Tobacco advertising was prohibited in the country in 2000. Since then, says the South African Medical Research Council, prevalence rates for cigarette-smoking have continually inched downward.

Opponents of the prospective ban argue, however, that it is misleading to parade the effects of the tobacco advertising ban as indicative of what might happen if alcohol advertising is prohibited.

In fact, says marketing and media analyst Chris Moerdyk, the comparison is futile owing to “notable discrepancies such as laws prohibiting smoking being different from laws prohibiting drinking; the social unacceptability of smoking versus the social acceptability of alcohol consumption; and the imprecise

calculation of the effect of the advertising ban on smoking given the growing incidence of the consumption of contraband cigarettes in South Africa (estimated at 20% of total) thereby making an increase/decrease in the incidence of smoking immeasurable in real terms”.

As part of the requirements of her MBA, concluded at the USB in 2010, Charlaïne Opperman investigated the marketing of wine in South Africa. The results of her study, she confirms, indicate that advertising plays a minor role in influencing drinking choices.

“My research showed that people make drinking choices based on what dominant and/or influential people in their social circles do. That’s not to say that advertising has no effect, but I do not believe that banning alcohol advertising would have an impact on the abuse of alcohol by South Africans,” says Opperman.

Lecturer in oenology at the University of Stellenbosch, Marianne McKay concurs, “I’m an oenologist, not a sociologist but my experience and understanding of wine consumers is that they’re not widely swayed by advertising. Many who abuse alcohol are not

influenced by brands, so I wonder if banning alcohol advertising would address the real problem in a meaningful way.”

Adrian Botha, spokesperson for the Industry Association for Responsible Alcohol Use (ARA), believes “no convincing evidence exists that banning advertising reduces consumption”. Established in 1989, ARA is an industry association whose members include the major manufacturers of alcohol beverages in South Africa, such as South African Breweries Limited (SAB), companies represented by the South African Liquor Brandowners Association like Distell, Brandhouse, KWV, and DGB, the members of VinPro and Cellars SA, E Snell & Co and many others.

Although Moerdyk concedes that the banning of alcohol advertising would reduce consumption by 5% to 8%, he insists that there is no evidence to suggest that a ban on advertising would have any effect on alcohol abuse.

He cites various examples of countries that have banned advertising completely or have assumed strict control over content of messages and images, none of which report

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reduced abuse of alcohol.

"In Norway, for example, which strictly [prohibits] advertising for alcoholic beverages, research has found that consumption has been steadily increasing," Moerdyk says. "Canada conducted several studies of alcohol advertising bans which had been implemented in some of its provinces. In Manitoba, a seven-year long beer advertising ban did not reduce beer sales but actually increased them."

But it's not only about how effective the ban may or may not be. Moerdyk says an outright advertising ban would cost the industry R2,6-billion as the result of the loss of revenue from above- and below-the-line advertising, sponsorship, sports development leveraging and events. He predicts job losses of approximately 2 500 low-earner employees, primarily in the print and out-of-home (outdoor) sectors, as well as sports marketing and management companies. With an unemployment rate of 25,7%, that's something South Africa can ill-afford.

"And because job losses will be at lower levels of employment, you could extrapolate the knock-on effect to 30 000 people not having breadwinners," says Moerdyk.

Despite their strident resistance, opponents of the advertising ban concur that they will support any effective initiatives to address the problems of alcohol misuse and abuse. But, they say, the problem is multi-faceted and, as such, a holistic approach is required to end the problem.

Head of media and communications for SAB, Robyn Chalmers puts it as follows: "SAB shares the concern of government regarding the unacceptable level of alcohol abuse in South Africa and we look forward to working with government to put measures in place to fight the abuse of alcohol. We strongly believe that measures are needed to tackle alcohol abuse in South Africa, but believe that there are more effective ways than imposing restrictions on alcohol advertising and licensing, increasing consumption age limits and raising taxes on alcohol, which have largely failed to have the

desired results internationally. SAB believes that the more effective way to address alcohol abuse is through targeted interventions focusing on those drinking patterns that are associated with harm. Proven approaches include improved education, good enforcement and strong self-regulation."

These approaches, she says, are driven by SAB's "ongoing alcohol strategy", which includes its recently launched Responsible Trader Programme and No Regret Friday initiative.

The debate is far from over. But, despite being widely criticised for his call for an advertising ban, Motsoaledi is determined not to back down until his mission is fulfilled.

"I won't pull back on the issues of alcohol, smoking and the high medical costs in private hospitals because health is a human rights issue and differs from other commodities, hence I won't stop making noise on these issues," he says.

And, if *Agenda* readers' call for this magazine to prohibit advertising of alcohol is anything to go by, Motsoaledi and his team are not alone. **a**

• *A proposal presented to parliament on 30 August 2011 indicates that the government task team investigating restrictions on alcohol advertising will probably not recommend an outright ban. The proposal calls for "significant" restrictions on alcohol advertising and possibly a ban in particular segments of the media. Special adviser to social development minister Bathabile Dlamini, Za ne Dangor says the task team set up to probe the issue has adopted the approach that it is a public health issue rather than one of cost to the economy. The team, he says, is looking at models followed by other countries (including France) where restrictions, rather than complete bans on advertising, have been instituted.*

Stellenbosch University – at the heart of the matter

Located in the heart of the winelands of South Africa, Stellenbosch University has a long and proud relationship with the country's more than 350-year-old wine industry.

In fact, the country's own varietal Pinotage was created by the University's first professor of viticulture, Abraham Izak Perold, in 1925. Since then, many of South Africa's leading winemakers, viticulturists, oenologists, marketers and wine entrepreneurs began their illustrious careers by studying viticulture and oenology at the University.

As a conscientious knowledge leader in the science and management of wine and alcohol, Stellenbosch University is mindful of its responsibility to uphold the positive cultural heritage of winemaking in and around Stellenbosch. As such, the University continues to do its part to promote world-class wine as a powerful draw card for brand South Africa.

Correspondingly, Stellenbosch University, which includes the USB, supports the responsible consumption of alcohol and the continued growth of this industry in a sustainable and accountable manner.

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