

# How can we tackle our drinking culture?

David Poley

Chief Executive, The Portman Group

The stark implications of some people's destructive relationship with alcohol surround us. The Department of Health estimates that the heaviest drinking 7% of the population account for one-third of all the alcohol drunk in the UK, an incredible amount. The harmful consequences of their drinking are placing an immense strain on our public services. Alarming, the number of alcohol-related hospital admissions in England is heading rapidly towards one million annually. It is clear we urgently need to cut the excesses of the significant minority of the population whose drinking is out of control.

The Portman Group, as the dedicated social responsibility organisation for UK drinks producers, is at the forefront of the industry's efforts in this area. We work with drinks producers to raise their standards of social responsibility. Our Code of Practice on the Naming, Packaging and Promotion of Alcoholic Drinks sets minimum standards for all drinks producers in the UK. The Code, for example, prevents drinks producers from undertaking marketing that appeals particularly to under-18s or encourages excessive drinking. A recent report by management consultants, KPMG, acknowledged that our Code and its accompanying independent complaints process have led to an improvement in standards of alcohol marketing. Despite this, we remain vigilant to prevent irresponsible examples of marketing from slipping through the net.

Our work is funded by nine of the largest drinks companies, together manufacturing over 60% of the alcohol sold in the UK. These companies are anxious to inform and educate the consumers of their products. For example, they unit label their drinks and promote extensively the alcohol information website, [drinkaware.co.uk](http://drinkaware.co.uk), which they helped to establish. They also have collectively committed to providing over £2 million a year in funding for the Drinkaware Trust, an exciting charitable initiative that brings together industry, health professionals

and the alcohol voluntary sector and which aims positively to change the drinking culture through education.

Without doubt, other sectors of the industry must also raise their game to tackle excessive and under-age drinking. There should be no hiding place for retailers who flout the law by selling alcohol to under-age customers or to people who are drunk. Furthermore, the Government is currently examining mechanisms for restricting irresponsible promotions.

At the same time, police forces should be doing more to enforce current alcohol laws. Some appear reluctant to tackle drunken revellers, perhaps for fear of being branded as 'fun police'. This lax approach is epitomised in London where the number of people prosecuted for being drunk and disorderly has fallen by a third over the last decade. Another worrying indicator is that only 34 under-18s have been prosecuted for attempting to buy alcohol in England and Wales since 2004.

Some politicians and health campaigners argue that alcohol misuse should be tackled by raising prices, for example through the introduction of minimum pricing, but the evidence in support of this is patchy. The Government has commissioned the University of Sheffield to review the impact of price and promotions on alcohol-related harm. Their emerging findings are that although increasing prices will reduce the nation's overall consumption, the impact is likely to be greater on responsible drinkers than on those whose behaviour most needs modifying.

The behaviour of friends, colleagues and families is significant in reinforcing social norms. Research, commissioned by the Advertising Association, has found that the vast majority of heavy drinkers think their friends binge drink, compared to fewer than half of those questioned who drink in moderation. Similarly, peer influence extends to the work environment with 65 per cent of binge drinkers considering that most or all of their colleagues drink heavily with



only 34 per cent of moderate drinkers sharing this view.

Regrettably, drunkenness is glamourised in certain sections of the media. Images of inebriated celebrities in some newspapers create the impression that getting drunk is a reflection of social success. Portrayals of alcohol misuse are also prevalent in television programming. These are often condoning, and occasionally encouraging, of such behaviour. Strict advertising rules ensure that drinks producers show and encourage only responsible drinking but unfortunately the wider media are not bound by the same principles.

Achieving social change will be extremely difficult but is not impossible. The analogy with drink-driving is telling because it demonstrates how social attitudes to alcohol can be influenced. Thirty years ago, drink-driving was prevalent until hard-hitting educational campaigns combined with robust enforcement of the law changed the culture. Consequently, the number of people killed per year in drink-drive accidents has fallen by two thirds.

A similar approach can make drunkenness socially unacceptable. The Government's Know Your Limits campaign and the work of the Drinkaware Trust will be pivotal in changing attitudes and behaviour. Additionally, many of the largest drinks companies have their own dedicated marketing campaigns to challenge people's attitudes to alcohol. Better education alone, of course, will not succeed. But if this is accompanied by effective law enforcement, improved industry standards and more people accepting responsibility for their drinking, we can make a difference.