Addressing Sensitive Consumer Issues: An Australian Perspective

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Paper presented at the World Brewing Congress 2000, Orlando, Florida, USA.

ABSTRACT

As stake-holders in the brewing industry we all believe beer to be a wholesome and nutritious beverage which, properly used, can enhance the enjoyment of many social situations. However, beer is under challenge. The industry must, therefore, not only ensure that beer is recognized as a safe and nutritious beverage but work to protect and enhance its overall image. One only needs to look at the wine industry to see the benefits of the images of moderation and health which have been so well associated with that product.

Keywords: alcohol, health, food, consumer issues

INTRODUCTION

Beer not only faces many of the same concerns which affect the broader food industry but also some problems which pertain specifically to it. If one first looks at those factors which impact from outside the industry, the principal one is the declining faith of consumers in the safety of what they eat and drink. This has been shaken by a number of events, some local and some international in scope, but all of which act to sensitize consumers. Dioxin in foods in Belgium, B.S.E. in the U.K., E. coli problems in the U.K., Canada and the U.S.A., benzene in mineral water and more recently in soft drinks, and concerns about the safety of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) have all brought into question the integrity of the food chain. The growth of the organic food segment of the market, the demand by consumer groups for effective regulation and policing, and the demand for greater information about the composition of foods are all consequences of these “food scares.”

Beyond these food industry issues which impact on beer by raising concerns about the integrity of processed foods, beer, as a traditional beverage, faces some particular concerns of its own, and will face more in the future. The past has seen a number of issues including the addition of cobalt to beer to improve foam but which resulted in unforeseen heart problems, and nitrosamines, a consequence of improving analytical methodologies.
The present has among its issues the increasing threat from pathogenic micro-organisms, mycotoxins, GMOs and alcohol-related health issues. The changing nature of these concerns tells us that new issues will emerge, some of which will be foreseeable and some of which will not be. The latter is typified by the recent issues with carbon dioxide purity. Given that carbon dioxide is ubiquitous in the beverage industry, who would have anticipated that there would have been problems with carbon dioxide quality. In one case, the presence of carbonyl sulphide led to a sulphidic off flavor in a major brand of soft drink in Belgium and, in a second, benzene contamination in U.K. soft drinks led to consumer concern, in both cases leading to a major product recall.

It is certainly difficult to anticipate problems in materials or processes such as these, although we can anticipate that they will occur. But there are some issues which with good networking and good intelligence we should be able to foresee.

In such issues geography is no longer a factor; bad news does travel fast. Although Australia is at the other end of the world, news arrives there just as quickly as any other place on the globe, and the need to develop a response is just as pressing. Further it needs not only to be a response but to be coherent and uniform. It is useful, therefore, to look at how we might prepare for such issues. The approach is relatively simple:

- Monitor the external environment
- Address the issue and develop a response
- Communicate

### Monitor the External Environment

Developing relationships/networks allows far wider access to information. The Australian Associated Brewers Inc. (AAB) is one such vehicle. The AAB, the national brewing industry organization, which was established to provide a mechanism for dialogue on non-competitive issues, incorporates a Technical Committee. This allows the industry to monitor the activities of the Australia New Zealand Food Authority which regulates the composition, labeling, etc. of foods, including alcoholic beverages, to address food integrity concerns and other issues of a technical nature facing the industry. Responses on such matters are developed and communicated as the response of the Australian Brewing Industry.

But awareness demands much wider horizons. The AAB has attempted to address this by establishing direct linkages with sister organizations. In the United Kingdom, the Brewers and Licensed Retailers Association (B.L.R.A.), in Canada, the Brewers Association of Canada (B.A.C.) and in New Zealand the N.Z. Beer Wine and Spirits Council (N.Z.B.W.S.C.) perform similar roles. These linkages not only include a yearly face-to-face meeting to cover issues of mutual interest, but also the direct exchange of the minutes of the respective technical committee meetings.

The annual meetings (the International Scientific Advisory Group meetings) which originated at the time of the nitrosamine issue, not only cover matters of general interest such as changes in water quality regulations, agrochemical permissions, and labeling, but have also addressed other issues such as alcohol and cardiovascular disease, antioxidants and health, and possible phyto-oestrogenic activity from hop components.

### Address the Issue and Develop a Response

Awareness in itself is not enough. Understanding the issue and then ensuring that appropriate work is under way to resolve the issue (at least in the longer term) and to be able to satisfy consumer concerns which might arise is the correct approach. Several examples of such an approach are discussed below.

Given the changing nature of micro-organisms, and the evolution of E. coli 0157:H and similar organisms, the view that beer is an inherently safe beverage needs to be reviewed on a continuing basis. Pasteurization certainly provides surety that there will not be contamination in the package, as should microfiltration. But beer in process and beer in keg provides a medium which, theoretically at least, might be open to infection. This scenario has been researched at BRI. While the findings do show survival of the organism in beer, particularly in low alcohol beers, there does not appear to be immediate cause for concern. However, there is a need to monitor the food spoilage literature for the appearance of new pathogens which may not only survive but grow under the pH and alcohol conditions of beer.

A second issue which has been researched extensively by BRI is that of chloropropanols, particularly 2-chloro-1-propanol (2-MCP), initially at least considered to be a genotoxic carcinogen. This compound is formed by the roasting of barley/malt and can be present in ppb levels in roasted malts and barleys. The initial view of the U.K. Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Foods (MAFF) was that 10ppb maximum should be regulated for foods and food ingredients. As a consequence, 2-MCP in roasted barleys/malts would have become a major issue for U.K. brewers. Extensive research has not been able to reduce the 2-MCP formation and subsequent re-evaluation of the carcinogenicity of this material has also suggested that it may not be genotoxic. BRI has been significantly involved in representations to MAFF which have seen the proposed guidelines being loosened.
BRi also provides technical support for industry issues. Any food product is a difficult analytical matrix and beer is certainly no exception. Calling in an outside analyst is generally not the way to obtain accurate analytical data in a timely fashion. In the case of the benzene contamination of carbon dioxide which led to a widespread recall of soft drinks in the U.K., BRi was able to validate an analytical method on short notice, in turn demonstrating that any contamination of beer was at levels less than what was considered safe. A useful service to have.

In a similar way, when the issue of mycotoxins (ochratoxins) in grain was raised, BRi provided an analytical service to allow confidential examination of company products. The AAB took advantage of this service to examine a range of products over a two-year period establishing that at least in a broad sense, this was not a concern for the Australian industry.

Understanding the issues in this way facilitates the development of a response. “We are aware of this issue, but the data we have indicates that there is no problem with our products, work is under way to eliminate the problem.” A far better response than “we don’t know.”

COMMUNICATE

Armed with the appropriate information it is far easier to deal with difficult issues. There are certainly cases, however, where the information which a company has, or indeed does not have, makes it difficult to deny that an issue exists. In such cases, experience has shown that being open results in far better response from the public. Certainly no one wishes to continue or exacerbate the issue more than necessary but smoke screens rarely work for long. There are also times when being pre-emptive can be beneficial.

Earlier I noted that the GMO issue has not gone away in North America, but in the U.K., Europe and Australia, the issue is the subject of wide debate. Given that corn grits are not used, Australian brewers do not face the same issue as those using non-segregated corn. Barley and wheat, the source of glucose/maltose syrups, are non-GMO, as are hops. GMO yeasts are not in use. As a consequence the only potential GMO issues for Australian brewers are process aids and additives. This is a simpler situation than faces brewers in a number of countries.

Given the above and that there is strong sensitivity to the issue, the Australian brewers have gone to the media stating that the industry does not use and is not planning to use GMO-based materials until the safety and environment concerns associated with these materials are resolved. The door has not been firmly shut as the industry believes the technology ultimately will achieve acceptance.

LOOKING AT THE POSITIVE SIDE

The above discussion has been largely directed at managing potentially difficult issues. There is a need to balance the books. The wine industry, both directly and indirectly, has managed to create an image for wine as a ‘healthy beverage.’ That beer has not been able to create a similar image is an issue for concern. Statements by the industry are obviously not the solution as they are seen to be self-serving. It is providing commentators and the medical profession with the appropriate data.

In this respect, AAB maintains a Medical Advisory Group of three eminent members of the medical profession to advise the industry of implications of recent medical research. The U.K., B.L.R.A. maintains a similar group in the past, as does New Zealand. The Canadian and some U.S. brewers contribute to the Alcoholic Beverages Medical Research Foundation (A.B.M.R.F.) based in Maryland, which in turn provides funding for research on psychological, physiological and health issues associated with alcohol consumption.

The medical groups associated with the industry have a long established yearly “International Medical Advisory Group” meeting which rotates around the four countries and provides a forum to share recent developments in the alcohol research area.

The most recent meeting in Melbourne in 1999 was productive not only in bringing people up to date on significant research developments but also in obtaining press coverage on various beneficial aspects of beer consumption. The appropriate use of the media can assist in bringing recognition that beer, and not just wine, has a number of health benefits. While alcohol itself is probably the principal agent in this, the continuing association of the polyphenol content of red wine with health raises the issue of whether the polyphenol content of beer may also be a contributing factor.

While not directly a health issue, underage consumption of alcohol continues to attract bad publicity for the industry. In response, the AAB funded at arm’s length an alcohol education curriculum called “Rethinking Drinking - You’re In Control” designed for use in schools. This curriculum acknowledges that there will be drinking under the legal age, but focuses on harm minimization. It uses young people themselves to address the effects of misuse. The result has been a program taken up by more than 1700 schools and more than 250,000 Australian young people annually who are exposed to at least some parts of the program. Given that it was launched nationally by the Federal Health Minister, the credibility of the program is strong and reflects positively on the industry. The Federal Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs has since decided to fund a further development of the program for use in indigenous communities. It has attracted attention at the Advisory Group’s meeting and is the model for programs in other member countries.

Consumer queries also raise issues where the industry can usefully enhance its image. Two that are frequently raised as issues are the acceptability of beer consumption for those with either diabetes or coeliac disease. While both are issues that ultimately need to be resolved between the patient and doctor, the industry can work with the appropriate advice groups to ensure that people are suitably advised. That will in some cases simply mean pointing people to the appropriate information.

Sometimes this can be done in a way that saves the industry considerable expense. The Australia New Zealand Food Authority recently raised a proposal to require foods containing components triggering adverse reactions to be labeled appropriately. Such components obviously include nuts, sulphur dioxide, aspiratame, etc., but also cereals which affect those with coeliac disease. These include wheat, barley, rye, triticale and oats, all of which contain gluten or gluten-like proteins likely to cause difficulty for anyone suffering from coeliac disease. The AAB Technical Committee put an alternative proposal to A.N.Z.F.A. that it would work with the Coeliac Society to develop a targeted education program acknowledging that all beers contain some gluten-like proteins from barley and hence may be a con-
cern for coeliac disease sufferers. The wording of the consequent information sheet was agreed with the Coeliac Society. Although perhaps erring on the side of caution, it avoided the not insignificant costs associated with labeling changes and ultimately was a significant plus for the industry.

The industry has also addressed the issue of server responsibility by development of a further program “No Worries” directed to those serving alcohol. This was launched by the Federal Health Minister and has found wide acceptance, even to the point of it being adopted by the South New Wales police force as part of its own training program.

CONCLUSION

This discussion has focused on communication. Particularly in those countries where the consumer is increasingly aware of issues linking health and food/food components, and more likely to make decisions on this basis, there is a need to ensure that the positive aspects of beer consumption are widely recognized.

We all know that beer is nutritious and wholesome. What we do not need is for the industry to become involved in an issue which reflects badly on beer itself. No doubt there will always be problems with specific brands from time to time, but the image of beer itself needs to be protected. Maintaining awareness through company relationships, the broader food industry, the medical profession and the community, can only help by providing timely information so that at least some of the time the industry is ahead of the game.

Beyond that, there is a need to get the message out that beer is not just a good product for a hot day but one which has health benefits. With pro-active programs, there is an excellent opportunity for the brewing industry both in Australia and internationally to improve the image and positioning of beer.