

Social Responsibility trends

By Gordon Broderick

Social attitudes towards alcohol change over time. In Australia from the 1890s to the 1920s the temperance movement had a significant influence. These attitudes had largely moderated by the 1970s and 1980s. However, over the last decade or so there are signs of a 'new temperance movement' evolving. Even within relatively short timeframes, say 5 to 10 years, attitudes towards alcohol can shift.

In an attempt to gauge the social climate regarding alcohol and social responsibility, in May 2002 a DSICA member, Diageo, commissioned market research to assist in their understanding of community attitudes. Several questions in a subsequent study conducted in December 2006 were repeated to identify any changes in community attitudes. The questions were: whether alcohol is perceived as an issue within the wider context of all societal problems; identification of specific alcohol related issues; who should be responsible for such areas; and who is it that is concerned. In addition, the 2006 survey also asked questions relating to awareness of alcohol content in various drinks and awareness of the taxes on alcohol.

In answer to the question "what are the issues or concerns faced by yourself or Australian society in general, which you feel are important to deal with now, in order to make it a better place to live in", the number one issue mentioned was the environment and pollution at 32%, which jumped by 23 percentage points from 9% in 2002. Another emerging issue was Racism which has increased from 2% to 12%. Other important issues mentioned were crime (15%), immigration (13%), drugs (11%) and education (11%). As in 2002, the issue of alcohol consumption is quite low at 5% and drink driving is even lower at 2%.

Persons interviewed who thought that alcohol was an important policy priority were more likely to be age over 30, female, those that drink infrequently, those with children under 18, and lower income earners (51% with household income under \$35,000 compared with 7% with household income over \$100,000).

Drink driving is the key alcohol related issue requiring action. Other issues seen as somewhat important including under-age drinking, binge drinking and alcohol related health risks. The issues of irresponsible female drinking, the legal drinking age and pub opening hours had relatively lower importance. Across the board those most likely to have concerns with alcohol were aged over 50, females, infrequent drinkers and lower income earners (below \$35,000). In addition, those living in regional areas are more likely than those living in metro areas to rate behavioural effects and alcohol related risks as very important.

The 2006 study also found that in most cases the individual is seen as having primary responsibility for the various alcohol related issues, although any change to the legal drinking age and pub opening hours are seen primarily as the responsibility of the government and underage drinking is seen to be primarily the responsibility of the parents/family.

In terms of beverage type, the study revealed that over 56% of people believe that some types of alcohol are more likely to cause problems than others. These people are likely to be aged over 50, lower income and living in a regional area. Spirits and premixed drinks were seen equally as the type of alcohol which contributes to social issues, followed by beer which while still seen to contribute to social issues is not seen to contribute to the same extent. Wine is seen by the majority as causing few or no social problems.

Perhaps not surprisingly, there is some confusion over how alcoholic drinks are taxed in Australia, over a quarter (26%) of people say they do not know how alcohol taxes are applied and only 14% correctly mentioned that the tax on alcohol in Australia is based on the type of alcohol. Thirty percent of those surveyed incorrectly believe the tax on alcohol is at different levels in different states, 20 per cent believe that it is based on the amount of alcohol in the drink, and around 11 per cent believe tax is based on the cost of the drink.

The study also revealed that around 75 per cent of persons were not sure about the alcohol content of particular beverages, implying that the standard drinks message is still not widely understood.

In summary the research finds that despite the recent rash of articles appearing in the media, the concern regarding alcohol as an issue for the community has remained fairly stable since 2002, and is rated far below community's concern about the environment or racism. Those most concerned about alcohol issues are most likely to have concerns with alcohol were aged over 50, females, infrequent drinkers and lower income earners. The study also revealed that the community have a poor understanding of alcohol taxation and the alcohol content of particular beverages.

DSICA's mission is to create an informed political and social environment that recognises the benefits of moderate alcohol consumption, encourages responsible community attitudes towards alcohol, and challenges the prejudices and inequities faced by the spirits and liqueurs industry. The results of the study broadly suggest that there is still a wide level of uncertainty in the community regarding alcohol generally and spirits in particular. In line with DSICA's mission, we will continue working hard to educate to community.