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Marin Voice: Alcohol ads teach teens lessons no one should have to learn



By [Carson Benowitz-Fredericks](#)
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I still remember the store where I was able to buy alcohol as a 17-year-old.

My instincts at the time told me it would be easy for me to get alcohol there, and I was right. They asked me my age, I lied and walked out after buying a bottle. The store was small and sparse; it had two racks of snack foods and a fridge in the back for sodas.

The counter had small “airplane bottles” of liquor on top of it, and wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling shelves of hard liquor and then-ubiquitous flavored “wine” products like Mad Dog 20/20 and Brass Monkey. The only other things on the wall were ads. They depicted young people with bottles amid a very 1990s urban grit. The ads spread across every available inside surface and blanketed the windows.

What I did not realize at the time was that my instincts were trained by the alcohol industry. “Big Alcohol” spends at least \$3.45 billion dollars annually in marketing, \$1.2 billion of which goes to store-based ads.

Community health advocates are familiar with youth-oriented television campaigns and mascots. But a recent RAND Corp. survey shows that kids are much more likely to be exposed to alcohol ads in stores and on the street than on television. The investment in these ads by Big Alcohol pays off.

Study after study has linked exposure to alcohol advertising with youth drinking. Kids who are exposed to more ads are more comfortable with peers drinking, more likely to binge drink and more likely to drink dangerously later in adolescence.

This drinking is facilitated by “alcopops,” hard seltzers, cocktails-in-a-can and similar strong, cheap alcoholic products that are intended to be easy to drink for people not used to the taste of alcohol. This kind of dangerous drinking when young is often associated with alcohol-use disorder when older. And, of course, adults with alcohol-use disorder buy more alcohol from the industry — if they make it that far.

Alcohol use is associated with the three leading preventable causes of death in adolescents: suicide, homicide and motor vehicle accidents. In these cases, Marin’s reputation of being sleepy and suburban does not provide protection. The county’s alcohol-impaired driving fatality rate is persistently above the state average. I can certainly remember losing teenage peers on the freeway.

The risks from advertising exposure have long been recognized by tobacco control advocates. Using California’s Lee Law, which mandates that no more than 33% of stores’ outside windows be covered in advertising, groups have successfully restricted outdoor tobacco advertising and seen dramatic reductions in youth smoking.

But, [in a 2020 survey](#) of risky practices in San Rafael stores that sell alcohol, Alcohol Justice found that more than 54% had outdoor alcohol advertising and one in three stores were in violation of the Lee Law. Looking inside, 61% of stores sold multiple kinds of youth-friendly products, including alcopops, which are considered to be the market successors to flavored wines like Mad Dog.

The survey identified 11 stores in the city as engaging in particularly reckless alcohol sales practices that put youth lives at risk. Seven of them (64%) were within a mile radius of San Rafael High School.

With a clear link drawn between advertising, store environment, adolescents’ desire to drink and the risks that accrue as they get older, persuading these stores to adopt a healthy sales and marketing environment has the potential to protect thousands of Marin teens.

We can start by enforcing the Lee Law, or even strengthening its limitations to no more than 15% advertising on outside windows. As a next step, we can ask stores to pull the youth-friendly alcopops, hard seltzers, cocktails-in-a-can and other youth-oriented products off shelves.

Kids learn readily and quickly. If allowed, Big Alcohol is prepared to take over their education. Imagine the benefits of being a youth with no instincts regarding buying alcohol at all.

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