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Anheuser-Busch Ropes White House Into Vaccine-Based Marketing and Data Collection Scheme

Beer Companies Ignore Alcohol Effects on COVID Immunity

SAN RAFAEL, CALIFORNIA (June 4, 2021) – The COVID-19 pandemic has been a tragedy, a challenge, and a generation-defining disaster. Thanks to a boost from the White House, global megabrewer Anheuser-Busch InBev (ABI) has embraced it as something more: a marketing opportunity. As state and federal public health agencies struggle to distribute the COVID-19 vaccine, ABI has announced a beer giveaway if 70% or more of the country receives a vaccination. The White House has unquestioningly amplified that announcement.

Not only does this giveaway provide free advertising for ABI, it gives them an unparalleled opportunity to harvest Americans' personal information. To claim the free ABI product, consumers must not only provide name and date of birth, but also a photo—which has encoded information about their location and even the settings on their smartphone. This is not so Budweiser can verify vaccine status (it is illegal for them to do so), it's so they can continue to laser-target marketing and, in the end, sell more beer.

In a company [press release](#) touting their "[Let's Grab A Beer](#)" initiative, Belgium-based ABI's new CEO Michel Doukeris says "...we are committed to supporting the safe and strong recovery of our nation." "It's just a slap in the face to those in recovery from alcoholism to hear that kind of self-serving rhetoric," said Bruce Lee Livingston, Executive Director / CEO of Alcohol Justice. "If Mr. Doukeris truly wants to help our nation and not just exploit COVID for market share, he should simply direct the funds that they would spend on free beer and donate them to the country's most deserving hospital emergency departments dealing with an epidemic of alcohol-related harm every day of the year."

The White House's decision to include ABI in its announcement of a National Month of Action to promote COVID-19 vaccinations gives a veneer of respectability to the promotion. However, the megabrewer may be overstating the closeness of its relationship with the Biden administration. This disingenuous language around vaccine outreach is not new for the company. They garnered accolades for announcing—via a Super Bowl ad—that Budweiser would be donating its Super Bowl ad time to vaccine awareness campaigns. It did not mention that it would still be running ads for Bud Light and other ABI products.

"AB-InBev has spent the last 15 months capitalizing on the pandemic to advance its strategy to deregulate alcohol and increase sales. This is yet another example of putting corporate benefit over public health and safety," said Nicole Holt, Chair, U.S. Alcohol Policy Alliance.

"[Let's Grab A Beer](#)" is a marketing and data collecting scheme, not a heroic act by ABI. In fact, their cost is no more than any seasonal advertising campaign. According to Alcohol Justice estimates, the over-the-counter price of a bottle of Budweiser for every unvaccinated American would be \$144 million. That is less than 10% of their estimated domestic marketing budget of \$1.5 billion.

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“ABI and the Biden administration join a worrying group of governmental and commercial interests offering alcohol to incentivize vaccinations, including ersatz “craft brewer” Sam Adams and the state of New Jersey,” said Carson Benowitz-Fredericks, research manager at Alcohol Justice. *“This creates numerous problems for public health advocacy.”*

First, ABI and its allies are #COVIDwashing. For the past 15 months, the United States has been awash in alcohol companies trying to increase their profits amidst spikes in binge drinking and psychological distress. State governments have been complicit in this, culminating in legislative disasters like California's current attempts to massively deregulate alcohol sales. And the worst companies (ABI, you're up again) have attempted to directly tie alcohol to public health.

Second, [alcohol use has likely worsened the scope of the pandemic](#). Alcohol suppresses the immune system, making heavier drinkers more likely to contract the virus and develop higher viral load. Densely packed bars and clubs have created the ideal spaces for person-to-person transmission, especially when intoxication makes it easier to neglect social distancing, masking, and other protective behaviors. On top of that, alcohol causes inflammation, and inflammation of the lungs—specifically, suffocation as inflamed lungs fill with pus and fluid—is the primary driver of death from COVID-19. (The [“Director’s Blog”](#) by George Koob, PhD, of National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism is helpful background.)

But the third and worst aspect of this is the threat that [alcohol may impair the development of immunity](#). Heavy drinking very clearly inhibits immune response, and having a strong initial immune response is fundamental lasting immunity. It is not clear that one free beer makes a difference, but following it up with two more incontrovertibly prevents the body from reacting properly to viruses *or* vaccines.

The pandemic still blazes worldwide, including in the United States. The vaccine shows promise to slow the tide of harm. The country still needs real leadership to help its people, however, without promoting Big Alcohol. After all, the alcohol industry are merchants of harm that every generation experiences, and for which there will never be a vaccine.

The public is encouraged to TAKE ACTION here: <https://bit.ly/3g910yN> or Text the word JUSTICE to 313131, to tell the White House and ABI’s Michel Doukeris that the promise of a free beer will not solve the COVID pandemic or any other problem for that matter. ABI should contribute funding to hospitals that deal with alcohol-related harm on a daily basis instead of encouraging more alcohol consumption with marketing masquerading as public health incentive.

For more information on Alcohol Justice campaigns and projects: <https://alcoholjustice.org/>



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