



Insider tells of young drinkers being targeted Industry accused of exploitation

By **JILL STARK**
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AN ALCOHOL company insider admits the industry deliberately targets young people by sweetening ready-to-drink "alcopops" to mask the taste of alcohol

Mat Baxter, a marketing executive behind vodka-based drink Absolut Cut, said the market was booming for high-strength, pre-mixed spirits that "get young people drunk faster"

Cheap, sugary drinks packaged in bright colours are the best way to start people drinking early in adulthood said Mr Baxter, a partner in media planning agency Naked Communications marketer of Absolut Cut, a pre-mixed, stubby-sized, vodka-and-citrus drink.

Critics of the alcohol industry say it is the first time an insider has acknowledged that the industry knowingly targets young people, a practice alcohol companies have consistently denied. Health officials have long held concerns about sweet, pre-mixed spirit drinks, which they say appeal to under-age drinkers as well as young adults

Absolut Cut, a ready-to-drink (RTD) beverage with an alcohol content of 5.5 per cent, was recently scrapped by its Swedish owners as part of an overhaul

Mr Baxter said it was a sign that Australia's RTD market —

described by some in the industry as the "binge drinker" category — was dominated by stronger, 7 per cent alcohol drinks with appeal to young people on a budget

"It's one of the few drinks where you don't necessarily know you're drinking alcohol and that's a conscious effort to make those drinks more appealing to young people," he said

"(The) drinks are very much about masking the alcohol taste," he said. "When you're young, your palate is tuned for sugary drinks"

Young people could buy three drinks with 7 per cent alcohol and get the same effect for less outlay than if they bought five 5.5 per cent drinks, he said

The drinks industry has long denied deliberately targeting young people

Mr Baxter originally made his comments in a trade magazine, and amplified them to *The Age*. Appalled health groups say the comments prove the industry encourages alcohol abuse.

"They know that binge drinkers are using this product to get off their face really fast. If they have a duty of care for the consumers, why don't they take them off the market?" said Geoff Munro, director of the Community Alcohol Action Network

"The alcohol advertising code states that alcohol must be marketed in a mature and respon-

sible way"

VicHealth chief executive Todd Harper accused companies of exploiting young people

"Unfortunately it's a reflection of the system that we have where the alcohol industry regulate their own marketing activities"

Craig Sinclair, director of the Cancer Council Victoria's education unit, said heavy drinking increased the risk of a range of cancers. Marketing to young people had grave consequences "They're really trying to create a culture of binge drinking and to grab them as soon as they're supposedly of legal age to do so"

The 2005 national survey of alcohol use by secondary school students showed that 47 per cent of girls aged 12 to 17 and 14 per cent of boys that age had drunk pre-mixed spirits in the previous week

Recent Australian Bureau of Statistics figures revealed a 9 per cent jump in the amount of RTDs on the market between 2005 and 2006. Mr Baxter said Australians were the highest RTD consumers in the world but said there was no overt marketing that encouraged irresponsible drinking; the industry was simply responding to consumer demand.

The Distilled Spirits Industry Council and Maxxium Australia, Absolut's Australian distributor, did not return calls



Sweet temptation: An insider admits manufacturers mask the alcohol in high-strength, pre-mixed drinks to make youthful consumers

PHOTO: GUY LAWRENCE