

How the Alcohol Industry Steers Governments Away From Effective Strategies to Curb Drink Driving

Governments must stay vigilant to protect public health. One way to prioritize their people's well-being and safety: keeping drink driving control efforts free from alcohol industry interference.

Traffic crashes kill an estimated [1.19 million people worldwide each year and injure 20 to 50 million more](#), ruining lives and devastating families. Driving under the influence of alcohol, or drink driving, is a key risk factor responsible for 27% of all road injuries.

Mass media campaigns have [long been used as a tool](#) to address health risks—including road crashes—by increasing knowledge, changing attitudes, raising personal risk perceptions and shaping social norms to promote safer behaviors. In road safety, communication campaigns have the most influence on behavior when deployed in conjunction [with sound legislation and dedicated law enforcement](#). Evidence suggests that a single well-designed and implemented road safety campaign can reduce crashes by [8.5% to 9%](#). For campaigns focused on drink driving, the crash-reduction effect can be even higher, reaching up to [13%](#), and in both cases, the effect is multiplied when campaigns are run at regular intervals.

WHO has reaffirmed the value of road safety mass media campaigns in national and local road safety strategies. Their comprehensive [mass media campaign toolkit](#) formalizes a methodology combining social-behavioral theory and lessons learned from direct implementation.

However, when profit-driven alcohol industry actors lead mass media efforts, the campaigns often lack the evidence-based strategies needed to actually reduce drink driving. Instead, they focus on improving the companies' public images while subtly promoting their products. This conflict of interest undermines effective interventions, as the industry offers governments worldwide lucrative but counterproductive collaborations.

Recognizing the potential harm of these alliances, Vital Strategies, a global public health organization that has supported government-led road safety programs in over 20 countries, conducted an [in-depth analysis](#) of alcohol industry-sponsored drink-driving campaigns. This analysis provides evidence that these campaigns miss the mark on trying to reduce drink driving. And they are fundamentally misaligned with best practices for reducing alcohol consumption, particularly among young audiences, at a time when mounting evidence shows the serious long-term health harms of alcohol (see box).

Alcohol Is Harmful to Health

In recent years, research has increasingly revealed the harmful effects of even low levels of alcohol consumption. [WHO declared in 2022](#) that no amount of alcohol consumption is “safe.” The increased risk of cancer and other health problems starts at very low consumption and rises rapidly after that. [WHO's June 2024 “Global status report on alcohol and health and treatment of substance use disorders”](#) notes that the average daily consumption per capita “is associated with appreciably increased risks of numerous health conditions and associated mortality and disability”. An estimated 2.6 million people died of alcohol-related causes in 2019—that's five deaths every minute.

Instead of focusing on public safety, industry-sponsored campaigns often prioritize corporate interests, leading to diluted messages that fail to adequately address the risks of driving after consuming alcohol.

Vital Strategies researchers examined 32 campaign ads disseminated between 2006 and 2022 across 14 countries. The advertisements were collected by a combination of crowdsourcing from in-country teams and internet searches. On the surface, these campaigns seemed to be aimed at deterring drink driving. Many were developed in partnership with government or traffic police, especially in the Asia-Pacific and Latin America regions. The majority (18 out of 32) were supported by three of the largest global beer manufacturers: AB InBev, Heineken and the German Brewers Federation (Deutscher Brauer-Bund e.V.).

Analysis of the content and style of these ads showed that they were generally ineffective gestures of “corporate social responsibility” designed to burnish the companies' images while primarily serving their own interests by normalizing and promoting alcohol consumption.

WHAT WORKS: Depicting the consequences of drink driving is key to inspiring behavior change.

Since 2010, Vital Strategies has supported governments in planning and implementing more than 100 [road safety campaigns](#) across over 20 countries with Bloomberg Philanthropies funding. Vital has collaborated with in-country partners to conduct research and evaluation studies to identify the most effective messages, communication approaches and execution styles to influence change in targeted road safety behaviors.

Based on this evidence and experience, and on best practices as recommended by WHO, Vital Strategies has identified three key factors for making a drink-driving message resonate with drivers—essential for convincing drivers to stop this dangerous behavior.

First and foremost, the campaigns need to **focus on the tragic, preventable consequences of drinking and driving**. Effective ads need to tell a story that shows a clear link between the drinking—even a small amount of alcohol—and the impairment in driving ability that led to a crash and its consequences.

Industry-sponsored campaigns rarely address the severe harms of alcohol and drink driving, despite the evidence. Research shows that increasing perceived threats and personal risk perceptions—such as being caught by police or suffering health harms or injuries—and shifting social norms is key to driving positive behavior change (Elder et al., 2004; Witte & Allen, 2000). This highlights the importance of clearly communicating the real dangers of drink driving in public health campaigns. Studies further indicate that inducing a certain level of anxiety or fear can effectively motivate behavior change, particularly in the context of drink driving (Elder et al., 2004; Witte & Allen, 2000). In Vital Strategies' analysis, only one industry-sponsored ad, from Poland, graphically depicted a crash as a direct result of drink driving, while more than half of the ads failed to mention any consequences at all. This omission significantly undermines the campaigns' ability to influence behavior effectively and calls the ads' intent into question.

Second, a **strong, clear and specific behavioral call to action** consistent with the story is required: Never drink and drive. Evidence shows that when a fear-arousing message is accompanied by specific information about actions that people can take to protect themselves, then the desired behavior changes can be maximized (Witte & Allen, 2000). However, Vital found that one-third of taglines or slogans in the industry-sponsored campaigns failed to support, or outright contradicted, the road safety call to action to never drink and drive. For instance, some ads are punctuated with a winking slogan that promotes the brand and the products while underplaying the safety message: “Budweiser reminds you, drink responsibly and use a designated driver” is too vague to be an effective deterrent. An ad that proclaims, “Heineken, open your world,” leaves the vague “drink aware” tagline dwarfed by the brand’s logo.

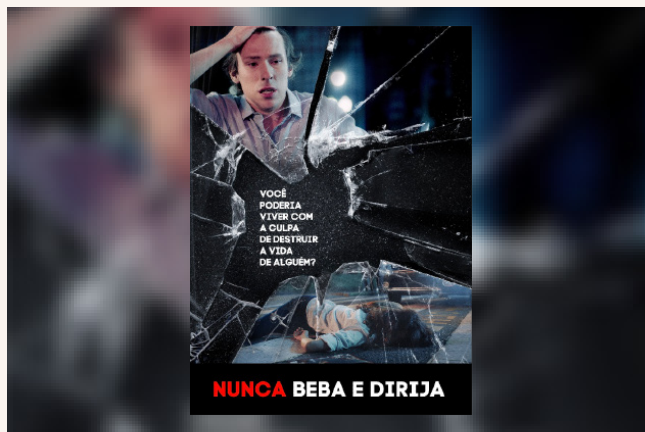


Heineken “Father & Son 2019” campaign end-frame dominates to ultimately create brand preference.

Third, an effective drink driving message should have a **serious tone and strike an emotional chord**. The viewers should see realistic characters they can relate to and see themselves and their loved ones as at risk. The ads should make them feel the harm to the victims, their families and their futures, or the pain and guilt they would feel if they were to cause a tragedy, as well as the legal consequences of drinking and driving.

Case Study: São Paulo

The 2019 São Paulo, Brazil campaign [“Never Drink and Drive”](#) graphically depicted the lost future of Ana, a young woman hit by a car driven by Rodrigo, who drove home after drinking beer with friends. The ad asked viewers, “Could you live with the guilt?” The post-campaign evaluation showed that 95% of campaign-aware respondents agreed that the campaign helped them understand the consequences of not following drink driving rules on their lives and the lives of others. Four out of five drivers (81%) who had seen the campaign reported feeling concerned about driving after consuming alcohol, and 87% said that the campaign made them more likely to avoid driving after drinking. This media campaign, which ran alongside strict enforcement measures in April-May 2019, contributed to a decline in the percentage of intoxicated drivers, from 0.6% in August 2018 to 0.23% in August 2019, as registered by the city.



São Paulo “Never Drink and Drive” campaign poster. Translation: Could you live with the guilt of destroying a life? Never Drink and Drive

The evidence suggests that the most effective campaigns are paired with enhanced enforcement by police: Drivers who see the ads then see a police presence and feel themselves at real risk of getting caught if they drink and drive. Earned media, such as news stories about the enhanced enforcement, support this messaging.

Governments that follow these best practices—developing campaign strategy based on crash and social-behavioral data analysis, conducting formative studies with drivers to refine messages and execution style, combining mass media advertising and police enforcement, and committing to strong, sustained campaigns—have seen positive results.

Case Study: Victoria, Australia

In 1989, the year that the Transport Accident Commission in Victoria, Australia, launched its first drink-driving campaign, “If you drink then drive, you’re a bloody idiot,” 114 drivers and riders died in road crashes in which a driver had an illegal blood alcohol concentration. The impact of the campaign was immediate: Road deaths dropped 37% in the following 12 months. Between October 2006 and November 2007, the number of lives lost had dropped to 59. The media efforts resulted in drink driving [being widely recognized](#) in society as a major road crash risk.

The evidence is clear: Well-executed, evidence-based drink-driving campaigns can help to reduce alcohol-related crashes and save lives.

What Industry-Sponsored Ads Promote

Most industry-sponsored ads lack the key features of effective evidence-based drink driving campaigns. As well as promoting the companies’ brands and encouraging sales, these campaigns have another insidious effect: They reinforce the industry’s efforts to normalize drinking as a natural, even essential, component of socializing with friends and family. By showing beautiful, happy people, including celebrities, they glamorize alcohol use as part of “the good life.”

For example, in a 2020 Heineken ad aired in Europe in the #WhenYouDriveNeverDrink campaign series, former Formula 1 driver Nico Rosberg and his father, Keke Rosberg, compete good-naturedly in leisure activities, such as fishing and tennis, to see who would win driving privileges. Only near the end does the ad even mention alcohol consumption—and then it turns out to

be a promotion for Heineken’s zero alcohol product. The call to action “When you drive, never drink” doesn’t appear until the final seconds of the 90-second ad. A 2020 Budweiser campaign aimed at Gen Z with an e-sports theme featured popular Chinese rapper and dancer Wang Ziyi traveling into the e-sports virtual world and using e-sports stunts to avoid drinking and driving.

A popular theme in industry-supported campaigns is to encourage drinking while promoting alternatives for getting home, such as calling a taxi or appointing a designated driver (where one person in a group stays sober to get everyone home safely). These ads show groups of happy friends socializing with alcohol consumption as a key activity—reinforcing the idea that alcohol is a normal part of a fun social life. However, WHO concluded in [their 2022 drink-driving manual](#) that there’s no evidence for the effectiveness of “designated driving” campaigns. [Research shows](#) that these types of messages are ambiguous—even “strategically ambiguous” to promote a positive corporate image. “Responsible drinking” means different things to different people, rendering the message ineffective in changing drivers’ intentions to not drink and drive. This message encourages people who plan to drive to do the minimum: drink “responsibly,” which can mean drinking less rather than not at all.

In contrast to Vital Strategies’ evidence-based recommendations, industry-sponsored drink-driving spots have featured mixed messages, uneven tone and—perhaps worst of all—subtle but steady enticements to consume the products. Of the 32 industry-sponsored campaigns analyzed, a majority featured an upbeat tone and showed alcoholic beverages being purchased, held or poured into a glass by happy-looking people. In other words, they were hard to distinguish from the positive, fun, or humorous tones found in actual alcohol advertisements—which is de facto what they are.

For the alcohol industry, partnering with governments to conduct these campaigns offers an unparalleled opportunity to positively portray their products. Nearly all ads (91%) were accompanied by alcohol beverage brand logos. With a government imprimatur, alcohol companies promote themselves as “socially responsible” and at the same time, get a chance to put their product in front of millions of viewers. This is in direct opposition to WHO’s recommendations in their SAFER [initiative](#) to restrict or ban alcohol advertising, sponsorship and promotion. Some countries have put those recommendations into action: For example, in Norway, direct advertising and promotion of alcoholic beverages is banned, and alcohol products can’t be visualized when marketing other goods and services.

Those who profit from selling alcohol have no place in safe-driving campaigns.

Fool Me Thrice

This is not the first time Vital Strategies has called out an industry for promoting its harmful products while making toothless efforts toward promoting health. Vital Strategies' 2017 report "[Fool Me Twice](#)" described how Big Food uses tactics refined by the tobacco industry to promote "healthier" alternatives while pushing back on common-sense public health policies.

Big Food has long deflected from its health harms by half-heartedly imploring its customers to exercise more (see: McDonald's and its mid-2000s "[Go Active With Ronald McDonald](#)" initiative). Furthermore, Big Tobacco has become infamous for recasting itself as a steward of "[smoke-free](#)" [engagement](#) with its electronic nicotine brands in order to sell more electronic cigarettes. The central argument is used to divert attention away from evidence-based solutions, costing lives in the process.

Evidence suggests that effective drink-driving campaigns paired with enforcement contribute to a [13% reduction in crashes](#). If ineffective industry-sponsored drink-driving campaigns are conducted instead, the result is missed opportunities to save more lives on the roads.

With these challenges in mind, Vital Strategies calls on governments to take responsibility for safeguarding public health interests in the face of significant interference from the alcohol beverage industry.

Recommendations

Responsible governments have a clear path to reducing drink driving and the injuries and deaths that result—and that path must steer clear of the alcohol industry.

- 1. Government, transportation agencies and public health advocates should learn about alcohol industry tactics in sponsoring drink-driving advertisements that serve as marketing tools for their products and alcohol use.**
- 2. Governments should not be engaged with the alcohol industry and should prevent companies from sponsoring drink-driving ads.**
- 3. Local and national governments should include communication as an integral component of comprehensive road safety strategies and assign sustainable funding, so they are not reliant on alcohol industry funding.**
- 4. Mass media campaigns aimed at preventing risky behavior, including drink driving, should follow best practices, with evidence-based design and messages. Social behavioral research should be part of campaign development and evaluation.**

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