

What's in a name? Sexism in craft beer marketing

By Kathleen Spero

The Brewers Association, the national organization that represents 3,800 small and independent craft brewers in the United States, made headlines this April when it revised its Marketing and Advertising Code to address growing concerns about sexist marketing in the craft beer industry.

Alcohol advertising in the United States has largely been governed by voluntary advertising and marketing codes adopted by the three major alcohol supplier trade groups – the Beer Institute, the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, and the Wine Institute. These codes contain provisions relating to the content and placement of alcohol marketing efforts, but the primary focus is to avoid targeting those below the legal drinking age. The Beer Institute Advertising and Marketing Code, which is directed to U.S. beer manufacturers of all sizes and to beer importers, cautions against “language or images that are lewd or indecent in the context presented and the medium in which the material appears,” but stops short of expressly

addressing sexist images and names.

The Brewers Association first promulgated voluntary marketing and advertising guidelines specifically for the small and independent craft beer community in February 2008, which have largely been reflective of the approach taken by The Beer Institute. However, the most recent updates to the Brewers Association Marketing and Advertising Code now add new recommendations – elimination of offensive or sexist names and labels. Specifically, these updates advocate against advertising and marketing that contains “sexually explicit, lewd, or demeaning brand names, language, text, graphics, photos, video, or other images that reasonable adult consumers would find inappropriate for consumer products offered to the public,” as well as branding that contains “derogatory or demeaning text or images.”

Additionally, during an April 12, 2017, press briefing held during the Craft Brewers Conference in Washington D.C., the Brewers Association announced it would be taking steps to prevent craft breweries with offensive or sexist names and labels from marketing their products using the trade association’s intellectual property. As part of the new guidelines, the Brewers Association will create an independent panel to review the brewery and beer names of World Beer Cup and Great American Beer Fest award and medal winners. If the name is determined to be inappropriate, breweries will be prevented from using the Brewers Association award designation in their marketing materials.

“We want our members to be responsible corporate citizens,” said Bob Pease, Brewers Association President and Chief Operating Officer. “We want to err on the side of tolerance. It’s not going to be black and white. There’s a subjective element to that, and the Association, we’re going to find ways to be inclusive. But at the same time, we do think this step is the right thing to do and shows the leadership that is needed. But it’s gonna be sticky. It’s going to be hard.”



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Controversy over sexist and offensive beer names is nothing new. Le Corsaire, a brewery based in Quebec, Canada, drew the ire of the Quebec Council on the Status of Women in 2013 for its beers “The Hooker” and “La Tite Pute” (“The Little Slut”). Likewise, MobCraft Brewing in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, found itself on the wrong side of controversy for its beer “Date Grape,” which was selected as part of the brewery’s practice to allow the public to vote for beer names (MobCraft has since apologized and discontinued the beer name, and has implemented a review process to vet names before allowing the public to vote.)

Certainly, there is a difference between advertising that utilizes “sex” and “sexy,” and beer names and labels that dehumanize women and/or condone non-consensual and violent encounters. Beer is, after all, a product where overconsumption can lead to inhibition and loss of control, and the Brewers Association clearly feels the industry needs

to do more in terms of self-policing. The Brewers Association may also be encouraging its members to look at the bottom line, and develop a brand identity that appeals to women as both consumers and producers of craft beer.

It remains to be seen how these new guidelines will be implemented, and what factors will be considered in the subjective review process adopted by the Brewers Association. In an industry that relies on puns and paronomasia, it is likely the Brewers Association will soon be confronted with this issue, and may find themselves saying, “I shall not today attempt to further define the kinds of materials I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it.”

Kathleen Spero is an attorney for *The Craft Beery Attorney APC*, a boutique law firm based in San Diego.



KATHLEEN SPERO

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