

Who is the biggest drug pusher in New Zealand?

Drug pushing. Sounds serious.
But what exactly is drug pushing?
Here is a standard definition:

“Encouraging people to use a drug, and then supplying them that drug for money”.

So what is a “drug”? We have all been quietly lulled into thinking that drugs are only illegal pharmaceuticals such as methamphetamine, heroin and LSD, and that legally commercialized drugs such as nicotine, and especially alcohol, are just normal grocery items.

But everyone knows, when they think about it, the biggest drug problems in New Zealand are associated with nicotine and alcohol use. Over 20% of citizens are addicted to tobacco and about 5000 die from smoking cigarettes each year. Although the rate of alcohol addiction is about a quarter that of nicotine and the death rate a fifth, the number of heavy drinkers is huge, numbering approximately 700,000 – the total population of Wellington and Christchurch combined. Alcohol is by far the most commonly used recreational drug in New Zealand, but also the drug that causes the most amount of damage. For instance, there are 70,000 physical and sexual assaults each year associated with alcohol use.

So those who deal in alcohol are the biggest drug pushers in New Zealand.

Pushing drugs sounds like something that should be actively stamped out rather than encouraged, but should this really be extended to alcohol?

Published research using the same criteria used for classifying illegal drugs in terms of risk to public health - Class A (very high risk), Class B (high risk) or Class C (moderate risk) - shows alcohol comes out as a Class B drug, on par with morphine and ecstasy. Alcohol is “high risk” because of its strong association with injury, crime, violence, chronic disease, brain damage and death. Drug pushers dealing in morphine and ecstasy are not causing more risk to public health than pushers of our favourite recreational substance – alcohol.

So who amongst the various alcohol pushers is the Mr Big – the biggest drug pusher in New Zealand?

Excluded from this present discussion are the obvious contenders at the top of the drug world; the alcohol producing and marketing companies, such as Lion Nathan and Dominion Breweries. These players have a well known dominant role in marketing a heavy drinking culture in New Zealand, using high-impact media such as TV, movie advertising, billboards and sport sponsorship, linking alcohol to fun, social success and being cool, just like British American Tobacco have done for nicotine. This present discussion is examining the next tier down. Who is the biggest drug pusher in New Zealand, dealing in drugs at street level?

One way of determining this is to examine the volume of alcohol advertising in the daily publications with the greatest circulations in New Zealand. These publications are the four daily newspapers; the New Zealand Herald (190,000), the Dominion Post (100,000), the Press (90,000) and the Otago Daily Times (45,000).

Twelve days were randomly selected over the 12 weeks from Monday 16th November 2009 to Sunday 8th February 2010 – ie five weeks before and after the two-week Christmas/New Year period – and each edition of these four daily newspapers was searched for alcohol advertising on that day.

The total size of all advertising by each alcohol advertiser was first worked out and then two key statistics were derived: 1. the total size of the alcohol advertising; and 2. the percentage of total advertising that was alcohol. The findings are in Table 1.

Overall, there were 14 advertisers of alcohol in at least one of the four main daily newspapers in New Zealand in the time period examined. The total size of advertising space dedicated to alcohol by all advertising combined during this 12 week period was 86,345 square centimetres, equivalent to 37 and a half full-page adverts. The majority of the total alcohol advertising was by supermarkets (62%) with dedicated liquor outlets accounting for the remainder (38%).

Of the 14 advertisers, only three advertised across all four of the main daily newspapers during the sampling period – New World, Countdown/Woolworths, Superliquor – and these emerge as the three main alcohol advertisers based on total area of advertising. New World is clearly out in front as number one, followed by Woolworths/Countdown and thirdly, Superliquor.

As expected, the dedicated liquor suppliers devoted 100% of their advertising budgets to alcohol. However, between 30 and 40 percent of the total advertising of the top three drug pushing supermarkets (New World, Countdown/Woolworths and Supervalu) was devoted to alcohol.

Table 1: The top alcohol advertisers in the four main New Zealand newspapers (November 2009 – February 2010)

| | Total alcohol advertising (sq cms) | % of total advertising that is alcohol | Number of newspapers advertised in |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| New World | 28,071 | 35 | 4 |
| Woolworths/Countdown | 17,963 | 39 | 4 |
| Superliquor | 17,096 | 100 | 4 |
| Montana | 5,786 | 100 | 3 |
| The Mill | 5,760 | 100 | 3 |
| Supervalu | 3,504 | 31 | 3 |
| Liquorking | 2,160 | 100 | 3 |
| Henry's | 1,800 | 100 | 2 |
| Pak 'n Save | 1,783 | 17 | 3 |
| Four Square | 1,022 | 22 | 2 |
| Fresh Choice | 983 | 9 | 3 |
| Glengarry | 276 | 100 | 1 |
| Blackridge | 83 | 100 | 1 |
| Amisfield | 58 | 100 | 1 |

Have supermarkets decided that over a third of their marketing priority will be devoted to pushing alcohol? As part of the current review of the liquor laws, the Law Commission attempted to find out how much of the turnover of supermarkets was from liquor sales. This information was not forthcoming from the drug pushers, but the percentages of advertising budgets in Table 1 give a clue to what the figure might be. Another clue is the proportion of floor space in supermarkets dedicated to liquor. Have you noticed how this has slowly expanded over the last few years? Perhaps these businesses will soon be essentially liquor outlets that secondarily sell groceries and other commodities.

Who owns New World supermarkets? New World supermarkets are one of the three main brands of the New Zealand owned Foodstuffs (the others being Pak 'n Save and Four Square) and there are 134 of these top drug pushing outlets throughout New Zealand.

Also vying for top place as the nation's biggest drug pusher is Woolworths/Countdown owned by Progressive Enterprises in Australia. Alcohol appears to be even more important to the business of Woolworths/Countdown than New World's given the higher percentage of total advertising being alcohol, nearly 40%.

Supermarkets are one of the most common ordinary places that people of all ages visit in our modern communities. Virtually everybody goes to at least one supermarket every couple of weeks. And it is almost impossible to shop at a supermarket and not be confronted by the presence of alcohol. Enter most supermarkets these days and you are met head-on at the front door by alcohol advertising or cheap alcohol product and generally both. The whole population is being marched past seductive alcohol promotion on a regular basis. And remember, this is promotion of a drug on par with morphine and ecstasy. Imagine how you would feel, if when you went for your next trip to the local supermarket, perhaps accompanied by one of your children, and instead of all the alcohol at the front of the store, you are faced by cheap packets of ecstasy with enticing accompanying advertising promising the good life and being a cool, glamorous, sexually attractive person if you purchase a good supply of the drug for the week.

So what's to be done? The government has a golden opportunity this year to bring about change to our alcohol dominated society and all the accompanying alcohol-related damage by passing new laws governing the supply and sale of alcohol, based on the Law Commission's "first principles" review.

The solution is not banning alcohol. The solution is curbing the excessive commercialization of alcohol that exists at present, exemplified by supermarkets. The answer lies in exerting much stricter control on the supply and sale of alcohol, ie exerting much stricter control on the drug pushers. In fact, there is a growing movement in New Zealand to return all supermarkets to their drug-free status of 20 years ago.

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