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A booze buzz for teenyboppers?

Anheuser-Busch product so adorable it draws fire from alcohol abuse camp

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Updated: 7:06 a.m. MT April 3, 2007



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With prom season and all its attendant hazards around the corner, some law enforcers and health advocates are adding one more cause for parents to worry — a new alcoholic beverage called Spykes that is sized, flavored and priced in a way that critics say is aimed at teens.

Spykes, made by Anheuser-Busch, is a malt beverage with 12 percent alcohol content — about the same as wine. It comes in mango, lime, melon and chocolate flavors and is infused with caffeine as well as the herbs ginseng and guarana. Sold in 2-ounce bottles that go for 75 cents to a dollar apiece, Spykes “gives kick to your beer, flavor to your drink, and is a perfect shot,” according to the promotional Web site, www.spykeme.com.

It’s also cute — about the size of a nail polish bottle — so it can easily slip into the tiniest clutch purse or tuxedo pocket.

“It’s the perfect drink for a child,” lamented Judi Vining, coordinator of the Coalition to Prevent Underage Drinking in Long Beach, N.Y. She has started a campaign to alert parents and law enforcers in her area, and persuade retailers not

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April 3: NBC's Peter Alexander reports on a new alcoholic beverage that some parents claim is marketed towards teens.

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"Prom season and graduation season are coming up," said Vining, who notes how easy it would be to conceal Spykes. "It's scary. We don't want to see people die."

Anheuser-Busch rejects the criticism, saying Spykes is merely its response to "contemporary adult consumers" who it says are "looking for innovative alcohol beverages to match their active lifestyles." The company's communications office said no one was available to be interviewed but supplied written comments attributed to vice president of consumer affairs, John Kaestner.

At bars, alcohol hooks up with caffeine

Beer-based Anheuser-Busch is seeking to tap into a larger trend in the market that is seeing consumers veer away from domestic beers toward imported beers and fancier drinks.

At the same time, there is soaring demand for caffeine-fueled energy drinks, which are especially popular among teens. And as it happens, energy drinks have become enormously popular as mixers with alcohol on the bar scene.

"The energy drink market is taking off, with Red Bull as the lead," said James Mosher, who works on alcohol policy at the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation. "A big part of the market is using energy drinks as a mixer with booze with the idea that the caffeine will keep you partying all night."

Anheuser-Busch is not alone in premixing the stimulant caffeine with the sedative alcohol. In July, competitor Miller Brewing paid \$215 million for the company that created Sparks, an orange-flavored drink that has about 6 percent alcohol content along with caffeine, ginseng and guarana.

Another company, Highenergy Holdings, is offering P.I.N.K vodka, which contains caffeine and guarana and is advertised as a "Vodka + Red Bull alternative."

The 16-ounce Rockstar Energy Drink, with even more caffeine (plus taurine, guarana, ginko and milk thistle) swept the high school and college scenes after its debut in 2001. Now the privately owned company has a new version, Rockstar 21, which contains 6 percent alcohol by volume. That drink has drawn fire because the packaging for its alcoholic version is similar to that of the non-alcoholic drink.

'Reckless at best'

Anheuser-Busch notes that Spykes is clearly marked as containing

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alcohol. The company also cites its contribution of more than \$500 million dollars to programs for preventing alcohol abuse, including underage drinking, since 1982.

"That said, the way to prevent underage drinking is not by limiting product choices for adults," the company statement said. "Rather, the solution is to prevent youth access to alcohol by training retailers to properly check IDs, supporting law enforcement officials in enforcing underage-drinking laws, and encouraging parents to set rules and consequences for their sons and daughters."

That argument has done nothing to cool the anger over the introduction of Spykes bubbling away on an Internet mail list for professionals in the drug and alcohol abuse field. Many of these people were already concerned about the impact of alcohol-energy drink blends on teen drinking. But Spykes' size, coloring and exotic flavors make it singularly offensive to them.

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"Introducing these products when our country is already so awash in underage and destructive drinking can be considered reckless at best," wrote a contributor who identified himself as Alan Markwood, prevention projects coordinator at Chestnut Health Systems in Bloomington, Ill. "Hard to imagine the alcohol execs are really that out of touch with the damage they are doing by introducing products like this."

Law enforcers also are warning of the potential for youth abuse of the product.

"These new products appear to be marketed for young people," warns a bulletin on Spykes issued in February by the Michigan State Police Tri-County Narcotics Team. It puts officers on alert that Spykes "could/will be easily overlooked by patrol officers, especially in a woman's purse."

A blog published by the Oregon Partnership, a non-profit for drug and alcohol awareness, calls on consumers to write Anheuser-Busch in protest.

CONTINUED: WORD-OF-MOUTH MARKETING

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Teens are believed to make up 12 to 20 percent of the whole market, said Mosher, the alcohol policy expert. And the sooner you start drinking the more likely you are to be a heavy drinker as an adult.

"That's why we are so alarmed at their market of products so clearly tailored to the youth palate and culture," he said.

Word-of-mouth marketing

Beyond the design of the product, critics have been unable to produce evidence that Anheuser-Busch is marketing the drink to teens. The company has done virtually no traditional marketing of Spykes since its introduction in 2005. It was only made available nationwide in 2006, and distributors are mainly making the pitch to retailers.

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"We know consumers like to discover new things and be the first to share this news with their friends, so we are building interest for Spykes mainly through word-of-mouth," wrote Suzanne Sierra, communications director of Anheuser Bush Consumer Awareness & Education. "This is by design to help spread the news for this brand."

As her comment suggests, the Internet is a being used as a primary conduit for the buzz about this buzz. The promotional Web site, www.spykeme.com, specifies that users must be 21 years of age to

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look at its content.

But then, it's the Internet. After typing in an appropriate date of birth, users can post messages about Spykes and related topics. A sample of posts gathered early this month indicates that readers are juvenile, though not necessarily underage:

Laura: This stuff is sweet! It comes in a tiny little bottle you can take with you...so cute!

MurMur6: I wonder if it still tastes good if you heat it up lol

EINina2000: I agree with Laura... the bottles are adorable

MyTy: I'm gonna try putting one in the microwave...see what happens? lol

Stevie7: Actually this is my girlfriend's favorite too...she takes them in her purse everywhere.

The critics are not waiting to find out if the marketing strategy works.

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Mosher of the Pacific Institute says Spykes resembles what he calls the "alco-pops" that came out a decade earlier — hard lemonades, for instance, that masked the flavor of the alcohol. Those, he says, turned out to be enormously popular with 13- and 14-year-old girls. But when that fad hit, he says prevention efforts were behind the curve.

"We didn't get at this until they were through the distribution system," he said. "We don't want to do that with the (alcoholic) energy drinks."

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