

Digital Media Sends Liquor Cos on a High

Making the Most of It

ALCOHOL companies have been using surrogate advertising to promote their brands

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DIAGEO, Kingfisher, Budweiser, Tuborg, SAB Miller, I Brands, Johnnie Walker are all active on Facebook and Twitter



Lack of clear rules helps cos promote products on FB, Twitter

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Bengaluru | Mumbai: Liquor companies, which got around a ban on promoting their products by resorting to surrogate advertising, are now using the digital medium liberally, taking advantage of the absence of clear guidelines. Indian alcohol companies have been using Twitter and Facebook for a while now to directly promote their brands and have now graduated to branded content on the digital platform.

In a variation of the concept of in-film branding, the UB Group, maker of Kingfisher beer, recently tied up with The Viral Fever, a digital content company, to produce a web series called Pitchers and has extended the contract for two more seasons. We are living in a media dark era. Hence, we are organically weaving the product into the story to

avoid obvious advertisement, said Samar Singh Shekhawat, vice-president, marketing, UB Group. Pitchers is a five-part series on four friends trying to launch a startup.

UB Group tied up with The Viral Fever to produce a web series called Pitchers

With more than 10 million viewers, the show fetched a rating of 9.7 out of 10 on Internet Movie Database website. By producing the show, UB Group put the concept of surrogate advertising on the back burner and brought a new wave in liquor advertising in India,

said a top media planner. The digital guidelines are fluid and there are no strict rules on what can or cannot go online. Liquor companies are using it to their advantage to promote brands, the media planner said.

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Rules banning the advertising of liquor products in India are about half a century old and predate the digital era. Alcohol companies have used surrogate advertising to promote brands in the form of mineral water, soda or music CDs.

In the absence of clear guidelines, Indian liquor companies have been using social media such as Twitter and Facebook to directly promote their brands. Diageo, the world's biggest liquor company, UB Group's Kingfisher, Budweiser, Tuborg, SAB Miller, I Brands Beverages and Johnnie Walker are active on Facebook and Twitter, spreading messages about their brands.

"Surrogate advertising today isn't relevant. We should put standards in place instead that limit underage viewers from exposure to such messages which might be a social taboo," said Lisa Srao, chairman of I Brands Beverages. She explained that this could be achieved by setting time restrictions. "Even internationally, in the UK and the US, surrogate advertising isn't prevalent. What exists is responsible advertising that doesn't have an adverse effect on society," Srao said.

Media planners said the digital medium is now considered one of the mainstream platforms and liquor companies are using it to directly reach their core audience. "Unless the guidelines are modified, this fad will only grow," said one media planner on condition of anonymity.

There are also no curbs on liquor companies placing direct brand promotions on digital platforms of broadcast networks such as Hotstar by Star, SonyLiv by Multi Screen Media and Ditto TV by Zee Entertainment Television.

"But most media companies in the country have their own code of conduct and therefore allow only surrogate advertising by alcohol companies. But if they want, they can take direct promotions on their digital platforms as there are no guidelines, which can open a new revenue stream for them," said a media planner.