

They are young, sell beer and spread AIDS How far may brewers go to market their beer in Asia?

From our editor Floris-Jan van Luyn - Rotterdam, Feb 6, 2004

More and more entrepreneurs in Asia discover the effects of flirting as a sales technique. In Cambodia, the 'beer girls' sell their body with the beer, regardless of the consequences.

Whether it is betel nuts in Taiwan, cigarettes in Thailand, breezers in China or beer in Cambodia, a growing number of producers in Asia market their products through women. Attractive, underdressed, friendly, smiling, flirting women to be more precise. Because selling techniques involving flirtation have been used in the West for ages, they are now readily adopted by the new entrepreneurs in the booming Asian market.

No government can oppose it; taboos are loosened, and "bad influences" cannot be banished. The hunger for new outlets and exotic products will open even the most remote markets.

But it is a form of development that produces much harm in the harsh climate of this rising part of the world. One of these unwanted side-effects: the spreading of AIDS. And the front-runner here is Cambodia. This underdeveloped south-east Asian country has such a great need for jobs that for only a few euro's a day you can raise an army of workers. Beer producers especially use this prerogative. In the Siem Reap and Phnom Penh bars many women promote/praise "their" brand of beer to the local and foreign customers. They are called Promotion Girls within this industry, "pg's" locally. Women aged between 16 and 35, dressed in the sexy outfits of their brand, try to sell bottles of beer to the predominantly male customers. Most of them sell more than just beer. A night's work in the bars of Phnom Penh and Siem Reap often results in unprotected sex. At least this is what has been shown by the research of several concerned/interest [NGO] groups. The results show that for this ancient Khmer bastion, Siem Reap alone has almost 20% of the 400 beer girls infected with AIDS.

Is this of any concern to the beer companies? No, say many of them. To some extent, yes, others say. Absolutely, says the Cambodian NGO SiRCHESI (Siem Reap Citizens for Health Education and Social Issues). Initiator and co-founder Ian Lubek speaks about 'violence through omission/absence'. "When you refrain from helping someone who is in need, you share responsibility for the consequences. Beer producers have been aware for quite some time that the beer girls are at risk, yet no concrete steps are taken by them."

Lubek, a Canadian psychology professor residing occasionally in the Netherlands, was confronted with the problem in Cambodia accidentally in 1999. "I was on my way to Australia, and visited the temple complex of Angkor Wat, close to Siem Reap. I was chatting with a local young man, who told me about the numerous deaths from AIDS in Siem Reap. That made me think." This meeting resulted in the founding of SiRCHESI in 2001, financed through the Elton John AIDS Foundation.

Lubek: "The beer girls we are trying to reach, are usually 25 years of age, single mothers (1/3), have had some two years of education (only 15% can read) and are the bread winners for a farming family. They are such a vulnerable group."

The work these women do for such foreign beer brands as Heineken, Three Horses, Tiger, Stella Artois, Beck's, San Miguel, Carlsberg and Budweiser has a certain standing and they earn, for Cambodian standards, a reasonable amount, but not enough. "Most beergirls make between 37 and 55 dollar a month." More than the average (GDP) income per head, which is 30 dollars per month. "But everybody in Cambodia has to have an extra job in order to

survive." That applies for the beer girls too. Their greedy, pawing customers on average offer 25 dollars for sex with the woman who has just poured them their beer - much more than the few dollars that are common for a Cambodian prostitute.

Lubek thinks that the beer producers who hire these girls (indirectly), should share the responsibility. "Educate them[about sex], provide medications, double their wages and the problem is solved," Lubek says. "Then, most will earn enough to support their family and the necessity to have sex "on the side", and consequently [the risk of] spreading AIDS, disappear."

Several beer companies think differently. Manel Vrijenhoek, spokeswoman of Heineken in the Netherlands, claims a raise in income is "too simple". "The situation is very complex." Yet it is Heineken who takes matters in Cambodia seriously, and started a co-operation with the anti-poverty foundation/agency CARE. For Heineken they are creating the Selling Beer Safely Project, to provide information for the beer girls in Phnom Penh who sell on behalf of Heineken's Cambodian distributors. The Cambodian CARE trainers give information for a period of three days in subjects like sexual harassment, health care, and prevention of STDs [Sexually Transmitted Diseases]. "We acknowledge the need is highest in Cambodia," Vrijenhoek says. If the project is successful in Cambodia it will be implemented in other countries.

There are limits however. "Heineken cannot be held responsible for their personal life, and we are not as naive to think that we can change that," says Katinka van Kranenburg, who is responsible for health and safety issues of Heineken employees. "We can help to provide information though." Van Kranenburg: "Many women in Cambodia think it normal to be harassed [mishandled] by customers. [...] It is normal to have mistresses on the side, it is a part of their culture." . And finally admitting: "Beyond that it is a poverty issue, women do not have much choice."

Dutch NGO NOVIB has a different opinion. "Considering the social context and the country's history, in which social structures have vanished, prostitution is widespread. The social threshold preventing men from going to a prostitute is much lower than in the Netherlands, where politicians [aldermen] have to resign after one such visit . However those country girls do not do this for fun", spokesman Paul van Tongeren says. "Above that, you can blame the beer producers for paying the girls on a provision basis. That doesn't make their lives easier" according to Van Tongeren. "Provoking might be too strong a word, but in a sense the beer companies co-operate [facilitate/collaborate]."

Then why don't they just stop using promotion girls? "In Cambodia it is the way to sell beer," says Heineken's Vrijenhoek. "It is unthinkable to be the only brewer to quit using pg's." Other brands, like Guinness Stout and Foster's however have done so. Foster's doesn't sell beer in Cambodia any more, according to Anne Fogarty of the Australian company. Yet there still lies "danger" ahead for them. In China the beer girls of Foster's are a real hit, and an increasing number of Chinese go to their bars because there is more to do than just having a beer.

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"Girls for the grabbing attract customers"

In China's bars more and more scantily clad women go around, selling "their" beer brand. Thirsty customers easily go for it. But in the twilight of the bar-district, inhibitions fade.

By our correspondent Garrie van Pinxteren - Beijing, Feb 6 2004

"Hello, you want massage? Beautiful girls!", boys ask, standing in the cold in front of the bars, dressed in army-green overcoats. This is "Bar Street", the nickname for an area in the centre of Beijing that over the years has grown into a fancy fair of neon lights, beggars, prostitutes and policemen. Sex and booze are the prime reasons to come to Bar Street, as they are offered plentifully and rather openly.

In #66 Bar even on this weekday night it is fairly busy. Western pop music echoes through the sparsely lit room and the predominantly Chinese men drink heavily. They order their whisky by the bottle, and their beer is preferably brought to them as a six-pack.

What brand of beer? Most customers don't care much, but 21-year Zhang Xin sincerely hopes it will be Heineken. Zhang has been working for two months now as a Heineken-promotion girl in this bar. She has lovely long hair, and her large mouth is accented with shining lipstick. She wears a short, grass-green skirt, that reads "Heineken" in big letters. The brewery gives her a provision for each bottle she sells. She is paid a basic salary of 70 yuan per night (some € 7), with a bonus of 30 Yuan if she sells more than 168 bottles. For China that is well-paid, because she needs only to work for four hours per evening. Zhang, who is from the countryside outside of Beijing, pays for her university studies in business-management with the money she makes in the bar during the evening.

Do the customers bother her? "Not so much", she says. During her training as a beer girl she has not only learned that Heineken is a Dutch brand, that the beer is pure and that it was brewed outside China, she also got hints as how to keep unwanted attention of drunk customers at bay. "When they want to go out with me, I say for example 'sorry, but my boyfriend will soon pick me up' which usually does the trick."

However not all Chinese beergirls are equally virtuous. 23-year old Chen Lixing works for Australian brewer Foster's. Her regular stand is a quiet bar in which a Western-style country and western singer performs. Mostly it is older, fat, Western men who go there. Chen too in her training learned how to avoid annoying customers, and she knows how to do it without missing her provision. "Sometimes I promise to go out with someone after my work here is done. But when that time comes I just sneak out."

Chen is 23 and has been doing this work for two years. "They only want handsome, young girls for this kind of work. If you are older than 25, just forget it," she says. "I started this work because the firm in which I worked as a secretary went broke." Then our conversation is interrupted. A bartender asks Chen to bring two bottles to the men's table, further down the room. "Come on, please, be nice to me, you do it yourself", she pleads. Why doesn't she want to do it? "Well, one of those men used to drink Qjingdao-beer, but I persuaded him into Foster's. Since that time he continuously wants to take me out to dinner, and I don't want to."

"I myself never go out with a customer, but of course it happens. A friend told me that particularly the Bacardi girls are easily to be had." According to Chen the private owners of the bars do not oppose sex between the beer girls and the male customers. 'Girls for the grabbing' generate extra turnover. Besides the bar owner gets 20% of the price for sex, as commission, Chen has been told. After their bar duty [ends], they dress in their own clothes, and linger on in the bar. Only on their own time do they pick up customers. That seems a nice in between-solution: the beer-companies are not responsible for what happens to the girls and they themselves profit from the 'glamour'[status] which their professional uniform rendered them earlier in the evening.

Tr: R. I.