

Alcohol and Food Advocacy: What's the same? What's different? An interview with Michele Simon, Director of Research and Policy, Marin Institute

Michele Simon is a lawyer and policy advocate who recently became Research and Policy Director at the [Marin Institute](#), a California-based organization that serves as a watchdog of the alcohol industry. (In April 2007, Corporations and Health Watch [described Marin's successful campaign](#) to ban alcohol advertisements from the Bay Area Rapid Transit system.) Prior to joining the Institute, Simon had been active in food policy advocacy and is author of [Appetite for Profit How the Food Industry Undermines Our Health and how to Fight Back](#). Earlier this year, Corporations and Health Watch founder Nicholas Freudenberg interviewed Michele Simon in San Francisco about her experiences as a public health advocate on food and alcohol. These are excerpts from that interview.

CHW: Michele, you just started your job at Marin Institute a few months ago. Tell me what you're doing there and some of your plans for the future.



MS: My title is research and policy director and Marin's mission is to be an alcohol industry watchdog. In the past, Marin Institute has focused more on environmental strategies, mainly looking at locally-based policy solutions. In the last year, the strategic plan has been refocused to become more state and nationally focused with a specific emphasis on the alcohol industry. My role is to provide our advocacy agenda with research support and look at the major trends and how they influence public policy. We will then target certain policies to bring about changes that will counter industry's negative influences. One major area that we are focusing on is marketing of alcohol so I'm developing activities that will support those goals.

CHW: And what made Marin shift from a local emphasis to more state and national policy work?

MS: I actually wasn't involved in that decision but I can tell you that there is a serious lack of non-profit groups that have that focus on alcohol. Marin's review of who's doing what in the field showed that there was no major national player serving solely as a watchdog of the alcohol industry.

CHW: So tell me some of the things you are actually doing to carry out that. **MS:** Well, right now I'm developing a series of industry profiles, looking at the major players. For example, [Anheuser-Busch](#) sells half the beer in this country, and so we're getting specific data about their sales, their board members, and their other operations. Just getting an understanding of who the industry players are, how much money they make, how much money they spend on advertising, just really getting to know who they are is the first step in planning activities to change their practices. I think we have to start there to know who we're dealing with. We're also working to get a sense of how the industry operates in terms of brand ownership. Most people think of products in terms of brands. They notice there's Budweiser, there's Molson, there's Coors and so on. But really there are major industry players that own dozens and hundreds of brands. Also, in alcohol there has been a lot of consolidation going on. (See Box 1 on the next page for some of the products in the Anheuser Busch "Family".) In the past, there used to be clear separation between beer, wine, and distilled spirits. Well, now you have, for example, [Diageo](#), which owns products across all three of those categories. I think that changes, for example, how we look at the wine industry. We used to think wine, that's not a problem, but when it's owned by a major multinational company that can shift things. So, we're trying to paint a picture of who the major industry players are, how powerful they are, and then next step would be to look at their activities, lobbying, advertising etc. That's one of my first projects. And we have collected that kind of information in the past but we are updating it to keep up with a changing industry.

CHW: And is the goal to be able to say well how do you get Anheuser Busch to do something different in terms of marketing?

MS: Well, I think for now the goal is to have at our fingertips certain key data that will come in handy for whatever our advocacy target is. For example, Anheuser-Busch's latest marketing strategy is internet television, internet portal television. We know that Anheuser Busch is projecting to spend a hundred million dollars over the next few years on this. So right now it just really making sure we have data at our fingertips so when we're talking to media we have talking points that can be rather dramatic. It's interesting to me to see that they're spending far more money on television advertising than anything else. So that gives us some ideas about what direction to take. If we're considering going after outdoor alcohol advertising, we might think about is that really where our best use of resources is given that they have decided to spend so much more on television.

Anheuser Busch Beverage Products

Budweiser Family

Budweiser
Bud Light
Budweiser Select
Bud Dry
Bud Ice
Bud Ice Light

Michelob Family

Michelob
Michelob Light
Michelob ULTRA
Michelob ULTRA Amber
Michelob Honey Lager
Michelob AmberBock
Michelob Golden Draft
Michelob Golden Draft
Light

Import Family

Kirin Light
Kirin Ichiban
Grolsch Light Lager
Grolsch Blonde Lager
Grolsch Amber Ale
Grolsch
Harbin Lager

Specialty Beers Family

Redbridge
Ascent 54
Mule Kick Oatmeal Stout
Demon's Hop Yard IPA
Burnin' Helles
Ray Hill's American
Pilsner
Rolling Rock
Bud Extra
Bare Knuckle Stout
ZiegenBock Amber

Spirits Family

Jekyll & Hyde

Nonalcohol Brews

O'Doul's
O'Doul's Amber

Busch Family

Busch
Busch Light
Busch Ice

Natural Family

Natural Light
Natural Ice

Malt Liquors

Hurricane High Gravity
Hurricane Malt Liquor
Hurricane Ice
King Cobra

Seasonal Beers

Michelob ULTRA Fruit
Infused
Beach Bum Blonde Ale
Michelob Bavarian-Style
Wheat

Specialty Malt Beverages

BACARDI SILVER Mojito
BACARDI SILVER Peach
BACARDI SILVER
Watermelon
BACARDI SILVER Raz
BACARDI SILVER O3
BACARDI SILVER Big
Apple
BACARDI SILVER
Strawberry
BACARDI SILVER
PEELS
Tequiza
TILT

Specialty Organic Beers

Stone Mill Pale Ale
Wild Hop Lager

Alliance Partner Products

Redhook Ale
Widmer Brothers

Energy Drinks

180 Red with Goji
180 Orange Sugar-Free
180 Energy X-3
180 Blue-Low Calorie
180 Blue
180 Sport Drink
180 Energy



CHW: In other industries, --like tobacco, food and guns, for example we have seen that the health impact of these products is often influenced by the relationship between the industry—the big corporations that produce the products and retailers—those who sell to the public. I wonder how you think about that around alcohol . What’s the connection between a company like Anheuser Busch and the retail distribution?

MS: What really counts is the capacity to distribute your product to every local market and bar. And the beer wholesalers have been extremely effective as a lobbying group. The [National Beer Wholesalers Association](#) (NBWA), founded in 1938, is a trade association for more than 2,750 beer distributors nationwide. For the most part, its activities are hidden from the public eye. So for a product like Budweiser, their power comes in their distribution. I don't think anyone in public health understands how this works. I don't have the policy solution yet or the policy angle, but I do want to understand how the distribution system works. It was created after Prohibition, with rules for wholesalers and retailers and we need to understand how it works so we can develop strategies to reduce the harm from alcohol.

CHW: Can you describe the three alcohol control groups working at the national level? How does Marin distinguish itself from the two other groups?

MS: The [Center for Science in the Public Interest](#) has done great work on nutrition but they have only two people, maybe one and a half, working on alcohol issues. That's obviously, a limitation there. Lately they've been focusing on the role of the alcohol industry in college sports. (See Corporation and Health’s [January 2007 interview](#) with CSPI’s George Hacker on their alcohol projects.) And the other major national group is the [Center on Alcohol Marketing to Youth](#) at Georgetown University. CAMY has done important research on alcohol marketing to young people. We aim be an advocacy organization on policy issues that also go beyond marketing to youth.

CHW: In Marin’s work, who do you see as your key stake holders? Who are your consumers and who are the people you interact with in order to achieve your goals?

MS: People on the frontlines are absolutely our constituency. And the challenge for us is how to support ongoing community-based activities while also rallying their support for our state and national activities. Part of our challenge is still how can we help local groups clean up a neighborhood harmed by excess alcohol sales and then help them stay connected to community groups and statewide coalitions. I think that our audience must be anyone who is working on alcohol related issues. I think my role is to get people who are in the trenches to shift their current educational activities and get them to understand the importance of policy, and the importance of the alcohol industry in their world.

CHW: What about the professionals in alcohol related work—how do you interact with them?

MS: Professionals in the field are another really important constituency. I really hope to get them to apply a public health perspective to see the benefits of moving way upstream to fix the problems caused by the alcohol industry. I've been to community meetings where it just breaks my heart to see people talking only about "Well, how can we deal with these problems with our corner liquor stores and bars and how can we change the licensing, etc.". I think they're not focused on the real causes of their problems. They are struggling to clean up the mess that is caused by industry spending hundreds of millions of dollars a year to get people to drink more and the problems caused by government policy. I don't know exactly how best to bring these different levels of work together but I want to find a way...I understand that on a day to day level, the immediate problems are the reality and if I just go in and talk about the big picture stuff, the community may not be getting the help they want. On the other hand, it kind of just spins your wheels working only at the community level. And while the national level works present a whole other set of challenges, I don't think our focus on only is a solution. I do understand it's sometimes easier to work at the local level and to get something done, but it's also so possible just to get all that undone and you never really get at the root of the problem.

CHW: Let's switch gears and talk about what you have learned from moving from doing food policy advocacy to alcohol. What's the same? What's different?

“The alcohol industry seeks to blame the individual for drinking too much just like the food industry blames individuals for eating too much.”

MS: For the most part, the talking points are the same. For example, the whole focus on the individual is identical. I'm talking about industries' blame games and the personal responsibility message. It doesn't matter if you're talking about tobacco, food or alcohol. The alcohol industry seeks to blame the individual for drinking too much just like the food industry blames individuals for eating too much. I'm very amused by the “drink responsibly” tagline I see on every alcohol advertisement now shown. And some companies actually use that line as part of their marketing. So that whole thing is very clearly the same. But what's different from what I expected is that I thought alcohol somehow would be more like tobacco than food. But food is so hard because everyone has his or her opinion, whereas tobacco is much clearer—people understand it's harmful. What I'm finding is that alcohol has much more in common with food than with tobacco. In part, it is because of this whole grey area where, unlike tobacco, alcohol isn't an on/off switch. You *can* drink a little and be fine, and then there's the complicating factor, the alleged health benefits of alcohol. So similar to food there is a lot of grey area. I don't think alcohol is anywhere as stigmatized as tobacco is. Also, food is such a hot topic now that in a way alcohol is getting less concern. Like other health issues, alcohol has had its peak in terms of funding and attention by foundations and politicians. Unfortunately,

some of the major funders have now pulled out of alcohol. Working on alcohol has been more challenging than I expected. I've been struck by how little advocacy there is given that it's a pretty serious public health problem. Of course there are challenges that are similar, getting people to wrap their heads around the problems, understanding the history of marketing and promoting alcohol. In terms of policy, at least people get that marketing to underage youth is a problem. When they understand that kids are being targeted by alcohol marketers, most say "Oh, yeah, that shouldn't be happening." With food marketing, on the other hand, it's taken for granted that kids are going to be marketed to. It's more acceptable -- people just blame the parents. And with alcohol, people accept that government has a role in policy making -- regulating retail sales, taxing alcohol and so on -- these are accepted. So some people might disagree about whether or how much to raise alcohol taxes but they understand it as a policy to reduce consumption, especially among young people. With food, we don't yet accept a government policy role that helps to encourage health.

CHW: And what do you think about the potential for mobilizing people across the issues of food and alcohol? Do you think there is some common ground there?

MS: Well, first let me describe what I see as the problem in bringing these two efforts together. Alcohol really suffers from this perception that the problem's confined to a small subset of individuals, those who are alcoholics, and underage drinkers. I think the perception is that it's not a general problem. Only half the population actually drinks alcohol so they may think it's not a problem for them. Not realizing they could be hit by a drunk driver any minute. Food is more of an emotional issue for people. They get angry about food, they have opinions about it. If alcohol is not affecting them personally, than they don't really think about it.

CHW: On a more practical level, do you see potential for bringing these two sectors together. Is there common work that we could be doing around both food and alcohol?

"In poor neighborhoods we have many corner liquor stores and very few healthy food options. Why is that? What can be done about it?"

MS: I've started thinking and talking about it. One obvious connection is that in poor neighborhoods we have many corner liquor stores and very few healthy food options. Why is that? What can be done about it? Then there's land use and zoning -- city planners thinking about how we can use zoning laws to make healthy choices in more accessible and unhealthy ones less so. Restricting access to alcohol has sometimes been a hard sell and if we can bring food and tobacco folks into this maybe we can get more traction.

CHW: And many have observed that it may be inefficient for public health advocates to take on one harmful product at a time. What do you see as the potential for common

policy goals? Is there a social or policy agenda for protecting communities from corporate practices that damage health?

MS: My approach is not to look so much at the product we're talking about but rather at industry tactics. So whatever your health advocacy issue, whatever your tactics and strategy, industry strategies are pretty much identical: denial and obstruction of the scientific evidence, emphasis on individual responsibility. Working in food policy, I have found many people didn't get that companies exist to make money. It's their legal obligation as corporations to make money for their shareholders, even if it undermines health. Yet companies spin this unbelievably good public relations and advertising about their being responsible and caring, promoting good things, all this positive stuff. So the first step in building any movement is educating people, helping them understand what's going on. So when the alcohol ads say drink responsibly, do they really care about my 18 year old daughter not drinking until she's 21? No, they care about painting a picture of making it look like they care so policymakers stays off their back. I think it's so incredible that many people still don't understand that about corporate behavior.

CHW: What do you think advocates for healthier policies on tobacco, food, alcohol and guns, to name a few, need to be doing to make that point?

MS: Well, for starters I think too many people think that the tobacco industry is an isolated example, different from other types of industries. I have just been struck by how many groups working on food, from community groups to big groups like the American Heart Association, *want* to work with food companies, think they can engage food companies in protecting health.

What we need to do is paint the picture so they can get it. So many people think that their well-intentioned but modest educational programs are going to make the differences against what one friend of mine calls the "marketing of diseases" by the tobacco, alcohol and food industries. If people don't understand the nature of corporate motivation, then I don't think we're going to be able to make much progress in protecting health.



So our goal has to be to move alcohol, food and tobacco policy upstream. While education is important and community interventions are important, alone, they're not going to solve the problem. We need to develop a new understanding of the causes of the health problems associated with food, alcohol and tobacco.