

George Hacker is the Director of the Alcohol Policies Project at the Center for Science in the Public Interest and a leading advocate in efforts to change health-damaging practices of the alcohol industry. Corporations and Health Watch (CHW) interviewed Hacker in September 2006 to learn more about his work and the lessons he has learned. We were especially interested to learn more about CSPI's work on Alcopops, sweetened alcohol beverages produced by the alcohol industry to attract young drinkers. The interview was conducted by CHW staffer Estelle Raboni and is excerpted here.

**CHW:** What is your role at the Alcohol Policies Project and how did you become involved in this issue?

**HACKER:** I am Director of the Alcohol Policies Project, and I have been on and off since 1982, for all but five years during that period. I became involved with the Alcohol Policies Project because I was looking for a job at that time, and this seemed to be an excellent opportunity to utilize my skills and interest in public health for a good cause with a good organization. It was also a political environment surrounding alcoholic beverages that was quite in its formative stages. There had been no real effort at the national level at that time to promote a range of prevention policy measures at the federal level that could affect per capita consumption and behavior related to alcohol. And so, for me, it was an interesting opportunity to work with a good organization on an issue which was very important, but also something that provided me with an opportunity to learn and also to create something new.

**CHW:** So how did you get involved in working on Alcopops?

**HACKER:** Well, the Alcopops issue came about in a number of ways. Number one, we've always been interested in the kinds of products that are put out into the marketplace in the alcoholic beverage market and the basic disregard that producers and government have for the nature of the product and their potential for harm to the public. So when the Alcopops phenomenon began in the late 1990s in Europe and in Australia, we were watching closely. And when they made the leap to the United States, we were eager to highlight the way in which this product was designed and later marketed for young tastes and as an entry level alcoholic beverage that targeted mainly underage people. So those two interests came together and, in addition, at around that time we were approached by a pollster who was interested in doing some work with us, and together we found a donor who was willing to support that effort.

**CHW:** What was your perception of the impact of the alcohol industry's and the Alcopops' impact on human, and particularly pre-adolescent girls' health at the time?

**HACKER:** Based on what I had been reading in Europe and in Australia, where these products were being put on the market, I was convinced that by the very fact that they were sweet, packaged to look like soft drinks, and tasted like soft drinks, that they were designed specifically for young people, in particular young women. And so we were concerned that this was just another way for the alcoholic beverage industry to bring consumers not only into the alcoholic beverage market, but also eventually to their standard products. In fact, there were quite a few telling comments by executives in the alcoholic beverage industry that illustrate that that was one of the purposes of these beverages.

**CHW:** Can you explain more about what you mean by standard products?

**HACKER:** For example, *Smirnoff Ice* is an Alcopop, or they call them “alternatives.” Yet it has the name Smirnoff on it, and it intended to highlight that name Smirnoff which also has a wide range of distilled products, namely vodka, in that brand. So, essentially, the Alcopop version is intended to make it easier for people to move up the chain to the original Smirnoff product. And we have a couple of great quotes from the Executive at *Sky Vodka* who considered *Sky Blue*’s advertising budget to provide a great benefit to *Sky Vodka* as well.

**CHW:** And so that was your initial perception of Alcopops and the alcohol industry?

**HACKER:** My initial perception in 2000 and 2001, which was based not only on my experience, but on anecdotal evidence and phone calls from people around the country, was that these products very much resembled soft drinks. And they resembled soft drinks both in their packaging and in their flavors and, in particular, their sweetness, and to some extent, the carbonation. So they were really alcoholic copies of beverages that were popular among young people and also common to their tastes. We also got calls from adults around the country saying that they would go out, not knowing that these were alcoholic beverages, and buy them for their teenage children mistakenly because they didn’t look very carefully.

[\[View photos of Alcopop products\]](#)

We did a number of photographic comparisons in that we took these Alcopop bottles, and we put them out with bottles of non-alcoholic fruit drinks that were popular at the time. And I think those photographs demonstrated how similar the visual appeal of these products was: bright colors, fancy designs, all kinds of elements of the labels’ bright colors that made them attractive in a way that those fruit juices were attractive. And then later we also compared those bottles to their distilled spirit “parents”, to show how similar — the brand was essentially the same. Sometimes the same logos were on the labels, and the Alcopops were just a smaller version of the liquor bottle.

**CHW:** Other than create brand loyalty in future customers through these gateway drinks, how do the actions of Alcopop manufacturers affect human health, particularly young girls and women’s health?

**HACKER:** Well, by creating gateway drinkers and future drinkers, the primary health impact or risk is that they will be creating people with addictions. Because drinking these kinds of sweet beverages allows consumers to begin drinking at a far earlier age because it meets those sort of teen, preteen taste buds. And the data show that the earlier young people start to drink, the more likely that they’ll go on to have alcohol problems and become alcohol dependent. Now, we don’t know whether that’s a genetic or environmental effect necessarily, but still there are enough genetically high risk people for whom the ease of drinking could be a significant problem. The other impact is the high calorie nature of these products — they probably contribute to obesity among teenagers. Having said that, I don’t know of any real study that

shows that. You know, these products make it much, much easier to drink. It's more than just a gateway drug. It's like a worm on a hook.

**CHW:** We're also interested in the process of mobilizing communities around alcohol issues. The Alcohol Policies Project has also done some earlier work on *Power Master*, a new sub-brand of the malt liquor Colt 45 that was targeted at African-Americans. Can you tell me about that?

**HACKER:** Well, *PowerMaster* was a malt liquor that was designed essentially for the African American market. First of all it probably violated, at that time, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms standards relating to promoting the strength of a product, of a beer, given the name itself of "*PowerMaster*." And the African American community took tremendous umbrage at the name which brought back all kinds of connotations of slavery, and the protest against that product was enormously successful, and it took three weeks to get that off the market.

**CHW:** Does CSPI generally tend to collaborate with communities in order to mobilize against these particular products?

**HACKER:** Oh, absolutely. Since 1982, we've been organizing both long standing and temporary coalitions on a variety of issues; and in addition to issue coalitions, we frequently organize petitions and letters that have multiple signatories that involve various constituencies. Sometimes we focus just on the faith communities. Sometimes it's a broad-based coalition that mirrors our Coalition for the Prevention of Alcohol Problems. Sometimes we go to the public health schools, or the Health Department Directors in States, and others like that, to get their support for various activities.

**CHW:** And so was your organization also part of the attempt to get *PowerMaster* out of those particular cities?

**HACKER:** Oh, absolutely. On *PowerMaster*, we were one of several organizations and, as I recall, for strategic reasons, we had African American organizations take the lead on that campaign, although we were pretty outspoken in the media. We also played a role of providing information and government contacts, and coordination, as well as involved in a number of conversations with people at different organizations who were interested in doing something about it. I think that campaign is an example of how targeted communities as well as the advocate organizations that work on these issues can come together rather rapidly to take on a challenge like that. And just that practice in organizing increases the likelihood that future opportunities don't go unanswered.

**CHW:** With Alcopops you're trying to fight against a product not necessarily directed at a particular race or ethnic group, but toward a particular age group, do you find it's more difficult to organize against that?

**HACKER:** Well, you know, when we launched the Alcopops effort it was more a public education effort that was intended to boost interest among policy makers, both on the Hill, as well as in agencies like the Federal Trade Commission. It was also an effort to boost the attention of major organizations that had some interest in alcohol policy matters. And, from that

perspective, it was relatively successful in that over the years, the American Medical Association has done a number of [studies](#) and releases on the Alcopops issue

[The Pacific Institute on Research and Evaluation](#) has launched a fairly aggressive litigation strategy related to the classification of those beverages as one effort to slow them down.

And there have also been numerous efforts in the states and among state alcohol beverage regulators and some Attorneys General to tighten the regulation of Alcopops. At the Federal level, the interest that we generated led to an appropriations measure that directed the Federal Trade Commission to investigate these products. Not that that investigation really changed much, or came out as we had hoped; but it generated a great deal of activity and interest. And, in fact, it helped coin the term “Alcopops” in this country, which we think is an important frame for that kind of a beverage, rather than “alternatives.”

**CHW:** But despite some of those strategies, Alcopops are still on the market.

**HACKER:** They are, but their sales have come down dramatically since 2002 or 2003. And not only have their sales come down, but the number of products in the market place has diminished markedly. Many of the products just disappeared. And I’m not sure if our efforts are responsible, or if it’s just been such a cutthroat competition in that area for a beverage that was always marginal.

**CHW:** Given the different kinds of strategies that have been used to limit the attractiveness of Alcopops to the market, what strategy or strategies do you think would ultimately be successful in restricting Alcopops’ marketing to youth?

**HACKER:** Well, I think as has been sought in other countries, raising the taxes on Alcopops would be very effective. In fact, we have tried that — it’s the basis of the PIRE litigation effort. Because many Alcopops have a significant amount of alcohol that derives from flavoring agents that are distilled spirits rather than from a malt beverage, we’ve been arguing that they ought to be taxed as spirits. Classifying Alcopops as distilled spirits would increase the tax on those products fairly dramatically. So far, though, the regulatory structure has gone the other way — to liberalize the rules for Alcopops. It used to be that if a half a percent or more of the alcohol came from a liquor source, it would have to be taxed as liquor. Now you have to have half of the alcohol from a spirit source to require that it be taxed as a distilled spirit.

**CHW:** How does the alcohol industry promote Alcopops?

**HACKER:** At the time we did our first poll, there was no television advertising at all. It was just some print advertising around. What we found in that first poll was that the products were dramatically more popular and more likely to be used by underage persons than by adults so we demonstrated their attractiveness and that many young people said that they had consumed them. And those findings are now regularly corroborated by the Monitoring The Future Study, which has begun to ask high school students about Alcopops (they call them malt beverages or alternatives) and the Center of Alcohol Marketing Youth also issued some corroborating data that showed that young people were being targeted, or at least they were being exposed to a

higher percentage of ads for Alcopops than were adults on a per capita basis. So we were showing what these products looked like, and they looked like soft drinks and they tasted like soft drinks and, indeed, young people seemed to like them. That's what we were trying to demonstrate the first time when we sent that information to the regulators.

**CHW:** But despite that, you just mentioned that they've actually relaxed some of the regulations on how Alcopops are classified and taxed. So what would be the cause of something like that?

**HACKER:** I think we made a substantial case that these products seem to be very popular among young kids, and later on we showed that kids have the opportunity and, in fact, they seem to be more exposed to the advertising for these products than adults; that the products themselves seem to be favored by folks who don't like the taste of alcohol; that people in the industry themselves acknowledge that these are "entry level" drinks; that they bring people to their main brands; and that they are basically "starter suds," as we call them. We demonstrated all that, I think, but the Federal Trade Commission apparently wasn't convinced or they just didn't want to do anything about it.

And then, No. 2, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, which is now called the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau got involved. That's where the battles among the industries occur. For example, one of the major Alcopop producers, Diageo, which makes Smirnoff Ice and its progeny, does battle there with the beer industry. There was a tremendous political battle going on during the evolution of those Alcopop rules, and I think the Alcohol and Tobacco Bureau just reached a political decision. It was a compromise decision that changed the previous rule to allow these products to have some level of distilled spirits, alcohol, in them.

**CHW:** One of the strategies I've heard is to require alcohol manufacturers to list calorie and ingredient content in Alcopops. Is the thinking behind that that young girls who are the main target of Alcopops would be dissuaded from drinking the beverage once they knew what the calorie content was?

**HACKER:** That's one of them. Did you see our [advertisements](#) that we ran in several college newspapers? It shows a sort of an androgynous expanding waistline, but it was probably supposed to be female with handle bars and a person pinching the large handle bars. And that was an effort to do two or three things. Number one, we placed those ads, as I recall, at many schools, five or six of the schools that had been named "party schools" in the *Princeton Review*. That was about the time when this issue of ingredients and alcohol beverage labeling started to come up again. And we wanted to tie it to that so if you read the copy in that ad, it talks about the fact that people are being confused, or at least they're not aware of the fact that these products have a ton of calories — sometimes two or three times as much as beer. And as a result young women consuming more calories than they might desire. And so it was an attempt, to open people's eyes to the fattening nature of these products as one means of decreasing the demand for them, but it was also an effort to strengthen support for labeling requirements that would provide that kind of information for consumers, because it's currently not required. As you may or may not know, CSPI has been petitioning Federal agencies to require ingredient, calorie, and some other labeling of alcoholic beverages since 1972.

**CHW:** Why do you think it's taken this long to have it considered?

**HACKER:** Well, I think that there are powerful interests that are not particularly interested in providing all that information to consumers. And those interests are usually the alcoholic beverage industry. But having said that, there are three producer industries, all of whom have some slightly different interests when it comes to labeling issues, so they're fighting it out amongst themselves as well. But also the Alcohol and Tobacco Bureau is in the Department of the Treasury, and I don't think there's a great interest in alcohol over at the Treasury, especially in this Administration.

**CHW:** Is the alcohol beverage industry a powerful lobby?

**HACKER:** Of course. I mean because it's a multilayered and multilevel lobby. The producers groups, the distributor groups, the retail groups. Then you have hoteliers, and advertisers, can makers — you know, it's a tremendous lobby plus wine is produced in California, which has the largest Congressional delegation in Congress. As just an example, wine is produced in 49 states so that there's a political element in each State. The National Beer Wholesalers is one of three or four top PACS in the United States Congress today, and they have a lot of family and other owned businesses around the country that interact regularly with their members of Congress and other politicians and also provide a lot on money independent of the national group. And you have these big corporations like Anheuser Busch and Diageo and SABMiller, Coors — they exert a lot of influence. The other thing that I think is important to remember, part of the mission of the Alcohol, Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau is to ensure an orderly and legal system for the production and distribution of alcoholic beverages. And so to some extent, that agency is very used to dealing with the industry as their clients, and they serve, to some extent they service that industry as much as regulate it.

**CHW:** Do you think that representatives of the alcohol industry feel any pressure in scaling back their marketing attempts as a result of the Project's work?

**HACKER:** I think that they have changed their behavior as a result not only of our Project's work but of the work that our Project has spawned over the last twenty years. The fact is that our Project has led to these broad coalitions, has I think stimulated interest in other organizations to do similar work. It has led groups like, M.A.D.D., Mothers Against Drunk Driving, Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America, Join Together, the American Medical Association and others to focus on some of these issues. And so, together, we have the capacity to bring these kinds of issues to the public's attention as well as to the attention of policy makers. Now there are some policy makers now who have articulated an interest in strengthening the regulation of alcohol advertising, for example. I think the industry has been forced to change its practices. The way they've done that is they've, number one, changed their advertising codes and made them more transparent, they have increased the number of their supposed responsibility messages. Actually, many producers have now added a tiny little line in their ads, something like "Drink responsibly." We don't think that's going very far. But on the other hand, I don't think they would have done many of the things that they've done, as well as they've been forced to create a tremendous amount of public relations/public education materials and activities in order to

buttress their public standing. So they're all now engaged in a whole lot of face-saving public relations and supposed responsibility endeavors. But a lot of that is, I think, is just called "CYA." [Cover Your Ass].

Another result of our and our colleagues' activities, is that they've massively expanded their political contributions and their influence on Congress and state legislatures. But, having said all that, I think that the Alcopops advocacy work gave the industry some headaches because no one in their right mind would believe that those products are *not* youth-oriented. Yet, those products are still out there. They're available, because of the way they're regulated at the State level, in the same places that beer is available making them very available to young people. They're broadly distributed and not, sort of, holed up in liquor stores which are more restricted, and there are fewer of them than convenience stores for example. It's somewhat hard to say how successful we've been. I think that we've been more successful since 1982, as I've said, in getting the industry to change its behavior. Not that its behavior is so stellar today.

**CHW:** And finally is there anything else that you'd like to add?

**HACKER:** Well, let me put the Alcopops into a little perspective. The Alcopops fit in with two issues that we were working on. One of them was sole focus on alcohol and young people given how important that connection is in terms of public health and safety, and also how important that is in the context of the alcoholic beverage market. And we think that the alcohol industry's Achilles heel is that they rely so heavily on recruiting young people, just as the tobacco people did, in order to create a marketplace for the future. And with regard to younger people, the young people are perhaps the heaviest drinkers around. So they consume a substantial amount of the alcohol and they're a valuable market in themselves. But then, there were other issues that have been boiling since the mid to late 90s that started to get hot in the early 2000s, and that relates specifically to the advent of distilled spirits advertising on television and radio. And part of the Alcopops effort, particularly when we started focusing on the liquor brand names, was focused on undercutting Diageo's efforts to get liquor on TV because we were demonstrating how many young people were in the audience and how great their access was to TV, how little they were supervised, and that the proposal that Diageo made at that time to air the ads only after nine o'clock on certain shows was totally inadequate and clearly ignored the large number of young people in the audience. So we were looking at trying to get that message out to poison the waters for the distilled spirits advertising as well.

[Read more about Center for Science in the Public Interest's work on Alcopops.](#)