

PRIDE AWARDS 2017

Category: Issues, Crisis or Reputational Management

Company: Inside Media

Entry title: Aston Manor - earning the reputation they merit

Explanation of issue/crisis and objectives:

Aston Manor Cider (AMC) is the UK's largest independent cider maker – producing drinks in every sector of the cider category from value to premium.

They are also the largest producer of 'white cider' - a tiny proportion of the total market though represented by strong, value products that can attract considerable criticism.

As a growing and ambitious business AMC asked us to:

- Support the reputation they merited based on product quality and quality of operations
- Ensure they participated in the public debate on alcohol misuse and challenge misinformation promoted by critics of the industry and of AMC
- Considered other audiences so that they might also reflect the merited reputation that AMC deserved, i.e. employees, business partners and customers

Research, planning and strategy:

We first established whether it was credible for AMC to claim they merited a good reputation – better than that they had.

It was clear they did. Considerable investment over several years afforded them outstanding production and logistics facilities – rated in independent audits as better than any other drinks producers.

Their product portfolio was good and very broad, yet attention was focused on the value and strong ciders that industry critics see as problematic.

Our research also included an analysis of the:

- Composition of cider market and wider drinks market
- Critics of the cider market and drinks generally, including the arguments they presented
- Available evidence around misuse.

It was also important to determine how robust the business might be in challenging their critics. When we presented bold plans backed by evidence and clear logic, the management team we entirely supportive.

Our strategy was to:

- Identify themes around quality, capability and good practice that would consistently be applied to the pipeline of positive storylines developed for regional and trade media
- Create opportunities to win third-party endorsement of their quality by researching relevant awards and supporting the submissions made
- Develop robust material to counter the misinformation of others as an effective reactive function and to start to be proactive in terms of the public debate on alcohol misuse.

As well as our own planning and execution we needed to have in place effective monitoring and be responsive to relevant issues that either supported the business or sought to be critical.

Tactics and their implementation, including creativity and innovation:

With clear themes for proactive communication we worked with people across AMC to identify the activities that supported the claims of quality and capability, and that would populate the pipeline of positive news storylines we needed.

In relation to countering the misinformation of critics of the business (and wider industry) we spent a great deal of time understanding the composition, scale and context of the market.

This meant studying the considerable volume of market research that AMC invests in – including qualitative data on white cider consumers. We also had extensive discussions with AMC's senior management and marketing team to help formulate their stance on various issues.

Getting very close to the business also enabled us to successfully identify instances that would support different awards – be they for product quality, innovation, marketing design, operations or total business performance.

In order to become more proactive in the public debate around misuse we asked AMC to invest in original independent research.

This took the form of an anonymous survey of the attitudes of relevant professionals working with people struggling with substance misuse issues.

Anecdotal conversations with professionals in drug and alcohol services supported our view that:

- Action on a specific substance being misused merely displaced the problem, and
- That effective approaches were focused on people and not substances being misused

Our research also established that a relevant context was missing, i.e. white cider is just 0.27% of total alcohol and in long-term decline.

Demonstrate how negative impacts were avoided, positives achieved and improvements made:

Our research and insight meant a number of instances where journalists intended to write a negative story and recognised that the premise presented to them was flawed or inaccurate after we spoke with them.

Our engagement, knowledge and effective communication also minimised the reputational impact of an ASA Complaint.

Our submission was clear, accurately reflected the context of a single instance and pointed to remedial action to improve internal processes. As a result the ASA were satisfied that a full judgement and publication was not merited.

Convincing AMC to invest in original independent research is also supporting both how we counter criticism and how we also become more proactive.

Our work in this area is also central to the engagement AMC has with Government – for instance in a submission in June 2017 to HM Treasury on duty. The quality of material and arguments assembled also positively informed and influenced the submission made by the cider industry body.

Measurement and evaluation:

Client satisfaction/influencer engagement:

Gordon Johncox, MD of AMC: “Inside Media have proven to be an invaluable resource working very closely with us on some extremely challenging issues.

“Their approach is very proactive and one of meticulous attention to detail and carefully thought through research and preparation.

“Recent work on a Government consultation paper has also served to shape and influence the industry position on what is a very sensitive and important issue.”

Martin Green, Editor of Drinks Retailing: “Proactive communication from Aston Manor is strong – never anything pointless.

“Despite being smaller, I think of Aston Manor alongside companies like Diageo when it comes to engaging in the public health debates. Having spoken to the team, I am well aware of the positive steps the company has taken to act responsibly.”

Nigel Huddleston, Drinks Writer: “Responses are usually meaningful and interesting.

“Certainly Aston Manor seem very willing to engage with critics and very high on the league table of engagement versus other producers.”

Third-party recognition

Supported by us, AMC won 16 awards in 2016 for product quality, innovation, business and environmental performance. Nine awards have been won to date in 2017.

Coverage results (June 2016-June 2017)

- Increasing volume of coverage
- 139 instances of coverage prompted by proactive work all on agreed themes
 - 122 positive in tone, 17 neutral, none negative
- 27 instances of coverage prompted by reactive response after inquiry received
 - 26 neutral when published, one negative in tone

Resources available

Having overseen the independent research project (May 2017) we now have material to support future activity:

- Robust reactive statements
- Positive opportunity to generate a better informed public debate

- Formal publication might support a forum for interested parties to explore effective approaches to tackling misuse (focused on people and not products)

Budget and cost effectiveness:

The positive storylines support our work across all channels (including social media) and for different media, hence, all work for AMC is dedicated to this effort.

Monthly retainer is £3,750 or £45,000 a year.

The independent research project was £5,850, including our fees.