Elaine Hindal: chief executive, Drinkaware

Aware of the need for change

Soon after Elaine Hindal arrived at Drinkaware an independent audit earlier this year seemed to throw doubt on whether the industry-funded responsible drinking body was fit for purpose.

Yet she remains undeterred, as Phil Mellows discovers

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tometimes I do wonder what I’ve let myself in for,” says Elaine Hindal. It’s easy to sympathise. In her first few months as chief executive of Drinkaware she was confronted by an independent audit of the organisation, which found that it lacked clarity of purpose, an evidence base to support its actions and a marketing strategy, while a perception of industry influence had left it isolated in the alcohol harm reduction community.

And then an academic evaluation of its most prominent responsible drinking campaign suggested that it caused young people to drink more, rather than less.

Add to that the often-stinging daily cut and thrust of the alcohol debate and the fact that Drinkaware’s fundraising agreement with the drinks industry expires in December and you could say that Hindal’s been chucked into the deep end.

She’s quickly learned how to swim in those choppy waters, though, and maintains an enthusiasm for the job that almost makes it seem like she’s enjoying it.

Before arriving at Drinkaware Hindal spent 15 years at Schweppes, where she cut her teeth in marketing soft drinks and confectionery, both categories that have been unfairly criticised in terms of the obesity agenda, she points out. Then came a dramatic career switch to the Children’s Society, where she heads up their charity’s alcohol strategy.

“That was something really different for me, to join a campaigning organisation, but I wanted to work in the charity sector. I’d had some fantastic training and wanted to give something back, and it fitted my values, which I think is important.”

Her new role “is not a very big step away,” she says. “Drinkaware sits between industry and crime and health, which makes it really interesting, and I think I have a good understanding of both the commercial pressures and where the health and community sectors are coming from. I can speak to both camps.”

“I initiated a drugs and alcohol project while at the Children’s Society, so it’s a genuine interest I have. I’m really excited about it. Everyone is really enthusiastic about the campaign, and that’s fantastic – though the debate is rather stronger than I realised.”

“The audit didn’t shock me,” Hindal adds. “It’s the kind of thing that inspired me to take the job.”

But has Drinkaware really been getting it right? The unpublished evaluation of its best-known campaign, Why Let Good Times Go Bad?, suggested that young people exposed to it actually drank more – what scientists call an ergotrophic effect, an inadvertent adverse outcome caused by medical advice or treatment.

“We’re definitely taking that on board, and the people who did the research are working with us on that,” says Hindal.

“It was a laboratory experiment with students, and the fact that it suggested we are promoting drinking is obviously a concern, but we want to get to actual behaviour, which actually happens in a real-life setting.

“We do have to look at it very seriously, though. For some groups of young people, drinking is a big part of their social life, and we know we’re not getting behaviour change there. The question is, how do we become a catalyst for change for them?”

“We’ve done a lot of work on the on-trade in this, and that doesn’t mean parents really can be a major influence.”

“What we’re doing is trying to give them open access online. ‘But it’s true there is a gap in the evidence base around how effective campaigning is in driving behaviour change, and not just influencing attitudes and awareness,’ she adds. “We want to get more hard data on that, rather than relying on claimed behaviour.

Drinkaware is already commissioning such research, which will involve observing drinkers’ behaviour in pubs, among other evidence. “Our partnership with the industry puts us in a unique position to do this kind of thing,” she says.

“MyDrinkaware has 300,000 users, and we have a lot to offer. We genuinely want to work with other groups.”

“We’ve actually got a lot of strong evidence about what has and what hasn’t worked, it’s just that we’re not good at sharing it,” says Hindal. “We have, for instance, evidence from surveys of attitudes to drinking over time and there’s some really interesting information there, but we’ve not published it. I’d like to make that kind of thing a resource for researchers and journalists, by giving them open access online. “But it’s true there is a gap in the evidence base around how effective campaigning is in driving behaviour change, and not just influencing attitudes and awareness.”

“We’re very keen to work with the on-trade, and we have to make not-drinking more acceptable. Social media is huge for that audience, and we can have a debate with them there.”

“It’s a profound difficulty that Hindal has been wrestling with in her short tenure, and it will be a major concern as discussions get underway about how the organisation will continue to be funded once the current deal runs out at the end of this year. “I’d like to diversify our income streams,” she says. “We’re looking at all the options, including the structure of the Drinkaware website. “Our isolation is a problem. We genuinely want to work with other people, and we have a lot to offer. We have to be part of the debate.”

Elaine Hindal joined Coca-Cola & Schweppes Beverages as director of Schweppes North America in 1988. Hindal returned to Cadbury as director, chocolate in 1992, and after gaining an MSc in commercial strategy in 1999, crosses the Atlantic to become global brand director for Coca-Cola in 2007.

In 2007, Hindal becomes marketing consultant, including for Nokia in 2009. She is appointed director of advocacy and communications at the Children’s Society in 2011. Hindal is named chief executive of Drinkaware in 2013.

We’ve got all the evidence we need, but it’s all about sharing it,” she adds. “Drinkaware sits between industry and crime and health, which I think is important.”

“At the end of the day, I think it’s the middle of nowhere, but it’s all about the warm and welcome, and it serves great food. I had my 50th birthday party there, and I’m always recommending it to people. I reckon it’s had quite a bit of business out of me!”