

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

Sometimes 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 funding agreement with the drinks industry expires in December and you could say that Hindal's been chucked in at the deep end.

She's quickly learned how to swim in these 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 most of her career 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.

"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've got a foot in 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 has an opinion on alcohol, and that's fantastic – though the debate is 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."

Or was it all bad, she insists, demonstrating that Drinkaware has made progress in the past few years, increasing awareness levels and attracting an impressive amount of activity to the MyDrinkaware website.

"It shows we have the foundation we need to start to shift the organisation to be more proactive," she says.

"The audit confirms we have a wider influence, and I was pleased to see that. I'd like to expand our activities, to diversify. It also shows there is a strong commitment from the industry, that the industry takes corporate social responsibility seriously, and we're part of that. We have an essential role in giving people information they can trust.

"There is a good take-up on the website, but we need to build on it, to change awareness and attitudes and be a catalyst for behaviour change.

"MyDrinkaware has 300,000 users, some of them visiting up to five times a week, and those people are the heaviest alcohol users.

"They know they're drinking too much, they're searching for help, and we can help them to make better decisions.

"But we can be more active. We have to reach out and get people engaged, so they become advocates for our message. And whether they do that depends on what tools we give them.

"What we're trying to do is quite complex," she

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goes on. "We're asking people to drink less and in a different way, to find alternatives. Alcohol plays such a big part in our culture, it has to be a subtle message.

"There are times when people are more receptive, though – when their children are asking them about drink, when they find themselves in A&E."

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 –



Favourite spot: there is great food and a warm welcome at the Punch Bowl Inn in Crosthwaite, Cumbria



My kind of pub

"I definitely have a favourite – the Punch Bowl Inn at Crosthwaite, near Kendal in Cumbria, is fantastic. It's in the middle of

nowhere, but it's always full. It's about the warmth 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!"

what scientists call an iatrogenic 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, what 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're very keen to work with the on-trade on this, and that doesn't mean just putting up posters. We know that's not sufficient.

"The number of young people who aren't drinking is growing, too, but at the moment they feel isolated 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."

Hindal's own son is 16 and she's having 'the conversation' about drink, believing that parents really can be a major influence.

"I know that many parents provide alcohol to their children for the right reasons, to protect and teach them, but that's at odds with the

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evidence. We want to ask them to delay the age of that first drink, and it's a real challenge to do that without being critical. We have to engage with them and give them the information they need to make their own decision."

What about the alleged lack of an evidence base for the ways Drinkaware is trying to

achieve its aims? "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," she admits. "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.

Yet Drinkaware's unique contribution to alcohol harm reduction, its ability to get under the skin of the drinks trade and closer to the consumer, is something not widely appreciated by others in the field. Rather than make use of what it can bring to the table, they dismiss its efforts because of the industry involvement.

It's a profound difficulty that Hindal has been made sharply aware of 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 board.

"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."

300,000

the number of users on the MyDrinkaware website

Key dates

1988
After gaining an MSc in occupational psychology Elaine Hindal joins Coca-Cola & Schweppes Beverages as group brand manager

1992
Crosses the Atlantic to become vice-president, of marketing for Cadbury Beverages North America

1998
Is appointed marketing director of Schweppes International

1999
Becomes global brand director for Coca-Cola

2003
Returns to Cadbury as commercial strategy director and global category director, chocolate

2007
Becomes marketing consultant, including for Nokia

2009
Is appointed director of advocacy and communications at the Children's Society

2013
Hindal is named chief executive of Drinkaware

