

## **Busting the flashy car for 75 mph to let the 250 mph Peterbuilt pass**

### *The PR approach to hiding an alcohol pandemic*

In opioid news this week, state attorneys general across the country are stepping up their game against the opioid crisis. Awhile back, the AGs sent letters to insurers, asking them to do more to curb the opioid epidemic. Now, they say they're expanding an ongoing investigation into pharmaceutical companies make or distributing opioids. That's according to MedPage Today.

<https://www.medpagetoday.com/Neurology/GeneralNeurology/68003> The publication also reports, in Washington D.C., the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) offered up an additional \$144 million in grants for preventing and treating opioid addiction ... a crisis costing the economy \$78.5 billion a year.

That's correct. Opioid use and addiction costs the U.S. \$78.5 billion-with-a- 'B'.

Alcohol use and addiction costs the U.S. \$250 billion a year, using the same measurements of health care costs, lost productivity, and legal system expenses.

We focus on an epidemic, so we don't have to focus on a pandemic. The 75 mph 'vette gets pulled over. The 250 mph Peterbuilt gets a pass. Classic PR.

The justification goes something like this:

Pick a drug – One that is sold only by prescription, generating profit for a few, wealthy souls vs. a drug sold nearly everywhere in the U.S., generating profit (and tax revenue... but not as much as you think) for every restaurant, bar, retailer, grocer, hotel, gas station, henhouse, outhouse, and doghouse where it's sold. Villify alcohol? Not on your life.



Draft in support – According to FollowTheMoney.org, Big Pharma contributed \$163 million to local, state, and federal candidates in 2016... alcohol interests (manufacturers, distributors, retailers) donated \$219 million. Don't bite the hand.

Choose an opponent you can outspend – BusinessInsider.com put beverage alcohol spending at \$421 million in a single calendar quarter. Every one of those ads tells Americans we can drink a toxin and known carcinogen 'responsibly.' You're not going to run with these big dogs. Stay on the porch.

Capitalize on ignorance – Fewer than 1 in 10 Americans know that alcohol kills three times as many people as opioids (89,000/yr. vs. 30,000/yr). Less than 1 in 4 know that alcohol's a carcinogen and a third of the 22,000 annual alcohol-related U.S. cancer deaths occurred in people who had downed one and a half drinks a day or less. Alcohol is legal. Legal equals 'safe' in our society. Except for those nasty drunk drivers, binge-drinking college kids and hard-core, red-nosed alcoholics, this isn't a drug: It's responsible and fun in moderation. Opiates and opioids are controlled substances, illegal without a

prescription, and have a high risk of addiction and/or overdose. Nevermind the medicinal relief in chronic pain situations: Opioids are definitely the baddie.

Don't make them think, either – There is a short line between opioid use and overdose death. Drinking alcohol is more like stepping out onto the highway and waiting for the Peterbuilt to hit you: It could take years or decades. Too many dots to connect – and other causes to which to pin the death while you're waiting. Brevity is better in our 'always-on' planet. A recent [Pew Internet study](#) in the US suggests that people benefit from instant access to a wealth of information from numerous sources, but their attention span and desire for in-depth analysis is consequently diminished. That's how we got the term bounce rate. “If you start a message and I can't see the end from the beginning, I will find it elsewhere... and bounce.” Opioid tragedies tell what time it is... alcohol deaths tell how to build a watch.

Sell the sizzle, not the steak – There are 91 deaths a day from opioid overdose. It takes lives in a single-dose in some people. And sadly, the lives are often kids and young adults that society wouldn't have picked out as a drug user. The old newsroom saying was, “If it bleeds, it leads.” Crass and cynical? Yes. Accurate? Pretty close. Stories of an honor student dying are tragedies with great images on par with hurricanes, school shootings, and blazes... compared to someone dying a death from alcohol-related illness like heart attack, stroke or cancer.

Wag the dog – We have a genuine health crisis. The opioid problem is real and tragic and a worthwhile fight. Now, if we turn a genuine health crisis and spin it up to an epidemic... maybe we don't have to talk about a pandemic or other health crises like fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASDs) which are now more prevalent than autism. It's the sleight of hand performed by politicians, PR wags, confidence men, and magicians for millennia: Watch what I do with this hand, while the other takes your wallet. Or your health.

And, most importantly of all, don't make enemies – According to the 2015 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), 86.4 percent of people ages 18 or older reported that they drank alcohol at some point in their lifetime; 70.1 percent reported that they drank in the past year; 56.0 percent reported that they drank in the past month. Even if you went with the lowest figure, 56 percent of adults used alcohol in the last thirty days. That's 137 million adults. By American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM) stats, 2.5 million adults have substance use disorder involving prescription pain relievers or heroin. You've got a good shot at convincing me something is bad if you're not doing it. You're even more effective telling me something is bad if I'm not doing it.

What we have here, is failure to communicate: There's a drug *acceptance* problem in the U.S. There's not just an opioid overdose crisis. There isn't only an alcohol pandemic. There isn't a weed legalization debate. The problem is cultural in the way we normalize drug use, stigmatize those who've become ill from them, and throw too little money, too late, at treatment instead of prevention. No amount of PR is going to paper over it for long before it becomes fiscally unsustainable.