

# Framing Alcohol Tips in Action

This resource has been developed to support VicHealth and its allies to apply the tips from Healthy Persuasion: A message guide for health promotion practitioners to their alcohol messaging by using real and adapted examples from a review into alcohol messaging conducted by Common Cause Australia in 2021.

## Values-based messaging (VBM) for health promotion:

Common Cause Australia supports organisations working on social and environmental issues to incorporate a values-based approach to community engagement. VicHealth has undertaken work with Common Cause Australia, to develop and test effective messaging for a variety of health promotion themes using an approach called 'values-based messaging'.

Based on decades of research from the fields of social psychology and cognitive linguistics, this approach to messaging involves engaging people's deeply-held values to motivate concern and action. It's an approach that has been used extensively in environmental protection and climate change advocacy to build engagement and support for action.



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## Tip #1: Externalise the problem

### Topic: Behaviour change

Externalising the problem is always possible, even in communications aimed at motivating behaviour change.

#### Tip not applied ✘

Cutting back on the amount of alcohol products **we drink** isn't only good for our long-term health, **drinking less** booze can also help us lose weight and save money. Here are some tips to cut back on alcohol...

Focus is on the individual drinker when discussing the problem.

#### Tip applied ✔

Alcohol **products** are **heavily promoted** yet **alcohol companies** often **downplay the harm** they can cause to our health. To cut through **the spin**, here are some tips on what we can do to reduce the harm from alcohol...

Alcohol companies and their actions are front and centre when discussing the problem.

### Topic: Alcohol guidelines

The below examples illustrate how externalising the problem can be used in discussing alcohol guidelines, which normally lend themselves to individual responsibility framing.

#### Tip not applied ✘

One in five **Australians are ignorant** of the harms caused by **drinking alcohol**, according to new research. And young Australians are of particular concern as **they are not making a link** between alcohol and illness or physical harm.

This blames individuals and their lack of knowledge for the problem.

#### Tip applied ✔

She expressed concerns over the **alcohol industry's criticisms of the guidelines** and **attempts to downplay the harms** associated with alcohol consumption. "The **alcohol industry** has a fundamental **conflict of interest** over the impact of alcohol on people's health because **it wants to sell** as many alcoholic products as possible."

This frames the guidelines as a tool to counter industry misinformation.

The guidelines... focus on harms from **alcohol products** and... serve as another critical reminder that protecting children from **alcohol advertising** must be a **public health priority**.

The phrase "alcohol products" subtly brings the industry into the frame. A link is drawn between the guidelines and alcohol advertising to strengthen the industry focus.

### Topic: Pregnancy warning labels

On alcohol policy topics in which the industry is a natural part of the story, it is still important to explicitly name the industry and its motives rather than take this as given.

#### Tip not applied ✘

He welcomed the decision to put "stronger and more visible pregnancy health warnings on alcohol," which he said would "protect the health and future of thousands of Australian children". "It's been a long road to this decision, with mandatory labels having **been discussed** for more than a decade," he said. "Finally, this label will provide clear, visible information to help increase awareness of the harms."

This fails to name the industry and its attempts to block and water down pregnancy warning labels.

#### Tip applied ✔

She welcomed Friday's decision and argued it prioritised the health of families over the profit margins of the **alcohol industry**. She said her organisation had been advocating for a clear label on alcohol products for years. "Warning people about the potential harms of alcohol **cannot be left in the hands of an industry motivated by increasing its sales and profits**," she said. "The approved black, white and red label gives consumers the best chance of being informed of the potential harms of consuming alcohol during pregnancy, compared to **the version that was preferred by alcohol industry groups**."

This uses the Health vs Profits frame to highlight the damaging and self-interested role played by industry in the policy debate.

## Tip #2: Use values (not facts) to persuade

### Topic: Online delivery services

When advocating for policy change it is important to convey the values at stake, not just the facts that underpin the issue.

#### Tip not applied ✕

International **research literature demonstrates** that, in general, increased physical availability of alcohol leads to higher levels of alcohol use and harm. Online alcohol delivery services have the potential to substantially increase convenience and encourage competitive pricing, and **thus may contribute to** increased harm.

This uses abstract language to describe what the problem is using references to research and logic.

#### Tip applied ✓

**Individuals, families and community** should be supported to be **healthy and safe**. The alcohol industry's rapid expansion of online sales and alcohol home delivery in Victoria is **placing children and other vulnerable people in our community at risk of harm**. We are calling for the Victorian government to introduce a number of common-sense measures to prevent harm from online sale and home delivery of alcohol.

This explains not just what the problem, but why it matters. References to specific groups of people at risk helps evoke empathy and values of care.

### Topic: Trading hours

On controversial topics like trading hours it is important to explain what values are at stake, not just prove that the problem exists.

#### Tip not applied ✕

There is **strong evidence** that extending the trading hours of alcohol outlets **results in** increases in alcohol-related problems. **Other evidence indicates** that a reduction in these hours **can contribute to** a reduction in these same problems.

This recites a list of evidence to prove there is a problem without explaining why it matters.

#### Tip applied ✓

At a time when we should be strengthening **the community's say** in the availability of alcoholic products and reducing the **pervasive nature of the drug** across the community, the government is making it easier to **push out alcohol at times where there is a much greater risk of harm**.

This highlights the core values at stake – democracy and responsibility.

### Topic: Marketing

Rather than simply describe the cause-and-effect relationship between alcohol and harm and hope our audiences make the connection to values, we need to tell evocative stories that make our audiences feel those values powerfully.

#### Tip not applied ✕

Alcohol marketing and promotion **contributes to** young peoples' attitudes to drinking, starting drinking and drinking at harmful levels. Much of this marketing **has the effect of** reinforcing the harmful drinking culture in Australia. We urgently need comprehensive reform of the alcohol advertising regulatory arrangements.

This outlines the logical cause and effect relationship between alcohol marketing and harms, without appealing to the heart.

#### Tip applied ✓

Children and other vulnerable people in our community should have the **opportunity to lead healthy lives** and should be **protected from harmful alcohol advertising**. However, the alcohol industry **bombards Victorians** with relentless alcohol advertising, including in places and media where it is seen and heard by children. We are calling for the Victorian Government to introduce new **standards to protect children and vulnerable people** from alcohol advertising and promotions.

This frames the problem of marketing as an attack from the industry that children and others should be protected from engaging social justice values.

## Tip #3: Stick to your story (don't tell theirs)

### Topic: Alcohol harms

Most Australians believe both that alcohol is an important part of our culture and that it causes significant harm. Reminding them of the former idea undermines support for alcohol policy, but reminding them of the latter builds support. Stick to helpful ideas and cut the rest.

#### Tip not applied ✘

As a society, alcohol is a **big part of our culture**. It's part of how we **play and relax**, how we **connect with our friends and family**, and how we **celebrate**. But it can also be detrimental to our physical and mental health and has been identified as the sixth leading cause of disease burden in Australia.

This repeats a number of true, but unhelpful ideas about alcohol before outlining the harms these products cause.

#### Tip applied ✔

Alcohol is detrimental to our physical and mental health and has been identified as the sixth leading cause of disease in Australia.

Here we have cut the unhelpful ideas out to get straight to the point.

### Topic: Behaviour change

Reminding audiences of what is "normal" behaviour when it comes to alcohol use is unhelpful, if those norms are unhealthy or misguided. It is better to tell a more accurate story of the role of alcohol in our lives.

#### Tip not applied ✘

Although drinking can be a **common way of coping with stress, poor sleep, physical or emotional discomfort and other difficulties**, when it starts to become a habit or interferes with your life, alcohol use can become a problem.

This normalises alcohol as a coping mechanism and fails to point out that alcohol exacerbates many of these same problems.

#### Tip applied ✔

Despite **efforts of the industry** to market alcohol as the solution to pretty much everything, using alcohol has been shown to increase stress levels, reduce quality of sleep, and impair both your physical and mental health.

In this version, we have cut the myths and instead told a more accurate, and helpful, story.

### Topic: Alcohol cultures

As above, it is important not to normalise unhealthy alcohol cultures. We can avoid this by telling a new story of how those cultures came about.

#### Tip not applied ✘

"It's the way a **woman can have 'me time'** ... it's a **way of distracting yourself from the humdrum** of everyday work and family and that **mental load we take on**."

Here an alcohol policy advocate is quoted describing the cultural norms for alcohol among women. This further validates and normalises these unhelpful associations.

#### Tip applied ✔

The **alcohol industry** has increasingly **targeted women in its marketing** – positioning alcohol as a reward for overworked women. Their tactics **mirror those of the tobacco industry**, which attempted to rebrand cigarettes as 'torches of freedom' almost a century ago. To this day, neither industry likes to talk about how **their products cause cancer**.

This explains the alcohol industry's role in creating unhealthy alcohol cultures. This helps de-normalise them.

## Tip #4: Create something good

### Topic: Behaviour change

In behaviour change messaging many advocates focus exclusively on the negative impacts of alcohol on people's lives, but pointing out the positive effects of change can be a lot more motivating for persuadable audiences.

#### Tip not applied ✕

The less alcohol people consume, the lower the risk of **alcohol-related accidents, injuries, dependence** and **chronic illness**, such as **cancer**.

This outlines the bad things that can be avoided by reducing alcohol use.

#### Tip applied ✓

"I saw it as an opportunity to be **curious**. I decided to focus on the things I would gain – more **energy, better quality sleep**, ability to **save money** to name a few."

This outlines the good things that can be gained from the same action.

### Topic: Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)

Both of the below examples welcome the findings of a Senate committee report into FASD.

#### Tip not applied ✕

Too many Australians are unaware that drinking alcohol during pregnancy, or while trying to conceive, risks adverse outcomes such as **miscarriages, still births, low birth weight** and **FASD**.

This emphasises the negative outcomes of the problem.

#### Tip applied ✓

By creating supportive environments for alcohol free pregnancies, together we can **improve the health and wellbeing** outcomes for our children, families and communities for future generations.

This outlines the good things that can be gained from the same action.

### Topic: Policy change (various)

The language we use to describe our policy solutions should always have positive connotation and avoid those with negative or mixed connotations such as strict, limit, ban, reduce, or tighten.

#### Tip not applied ✕

We are campaigning for **stricter regulations** around online sales and delivery of alcohol products.

This frames the regulation of online delivery services using the negatively associated concept of "strict" – a term with negative connotations.

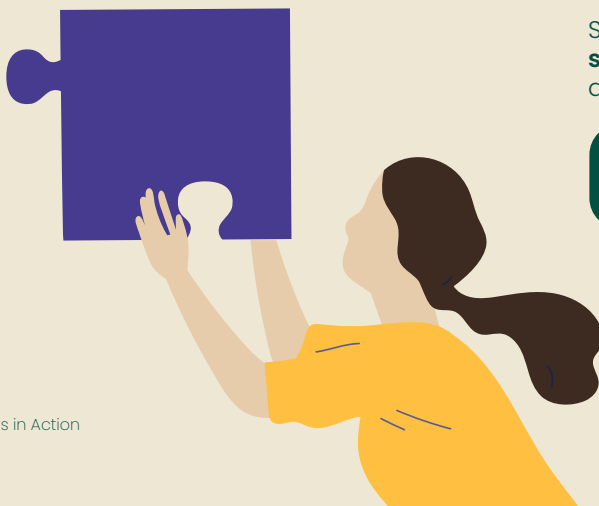
#### Tip applied ✓

In 2020, the NSW Parliament passed new laws that will hold alcohol companies that sell their products online to a **higher standard** and close the loopholes for alcohol delivery.

Here regulation is framed as "higher standards" – a positive concept.

She called on the Victorian Government to act now to **strengthen** the Bill by introducing **safeguards** on on-demand alcohol delivery.

Regulation is framed as "strengthening" and "safeguards" – both positively associated concepts.



## Tip #5: Keep it real

### Topic: General (mission statements)

Below we contrast two organisational mission statements.

#### Tip not applied ✕

We support policy reforms that **contribute to** a reduction in **alcohol-related harms** in Australia. We support the **progression of population-based health measures**, which **take into consideration far-reaching** and **complex impacts** of alcohol related harms.

This is filled with jargon that could be tricky to understand for people not working in public health.

#### Tip applied ✓

We campaign for policy change to **protect the community** from the **harm the alcohol industry causes**, and to provide **balance** to the industry's **aggressive marketing** and normalisation of alcoholic products.

This statement uses clear and emotive language accessible to most people.

### Topic: Alcohol licensing

The examples below are both discussing the issue of community input in decisions around alcohol licensing.

#### Tip not applied ✕

Currently little is known about how **'top down' or 'bottom-up' mechanisms** influence **licensing processes** and **whose voices are (and are not) heard** when alcohol licensing decisions are made. These processes and decisions have **implications for the health and social inequalities** faced by some disadvantaged groups **in relation to** alcohol harms.

This is both jargon-heavy and fails to make a clear point about what outcomes are desirable and why.

#### Tip applied ✓

It's time the government took the harms caused by alcohol businesses more seriously... and **allowed the community to put their health and safety** at the forefront of **how and where alcohol businesses operate** in Victoria.

This makes a clear point about the importance of community voice in licensing decisions using accessible language.

### Topic: Marketing

The below examples show two different ways of articulating the outcomes of children's exposure to alcohol marketing.

#### Tip not applied ✕

Excessive exposure to alcohol marketing and promotion is of particular concern as it **contributes to** young peoples' **attitudes to drinking, starting drinking** and **drinking at harmful levels**.

This uses public health terminology to list the three known outcomes.

#### Tip applied ✓

The alcohol industry **advertises relentlessly** through media and **in places where children and young people can see it**, and this in turn **means that young people** are more likely to **start using alcohol products at a younger age** and to **drink more if they are already using alcohol**.

This applies a story-telling approach to explain the harms using more simple language.

## Story Structure

The Vision-Barrier-Action story structure can be applied in as little as three sentences or across an entire report. The examples here vary in length, topic focus and channel of communication to show how the structure can be applied in a variety of contexts. The final example shows how it is possible to play around with the order of story elements to tell a more detailed story in an extended message.

### Tip applied

Topic:  
**Online alcohol delivery | Source: Quote from media article**

**(Vision)** At a time when we should be prioritising family health and safety, **(Barrier)** it's disappointing to see these amendments do not include a requirement for alcohol companies to verify proof of age identification when selling alcoholic products online. **(Action)** We need to close the loopholes in our laws so that online alcohol companies uphold community standards like checking ID.

### Tip applied

Topic:  
**Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder | Source: Open letter published in newspapers**

**(Vision)** For families, the most important thing in life is the health and wellbeing of our children. That's why it matters to all of us that our families have access to clear information about the health and safety of the products they buy – especially products that may harm our children.

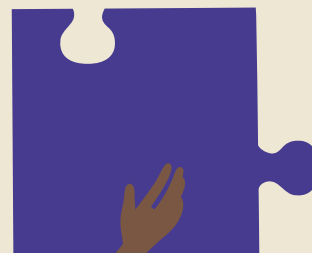
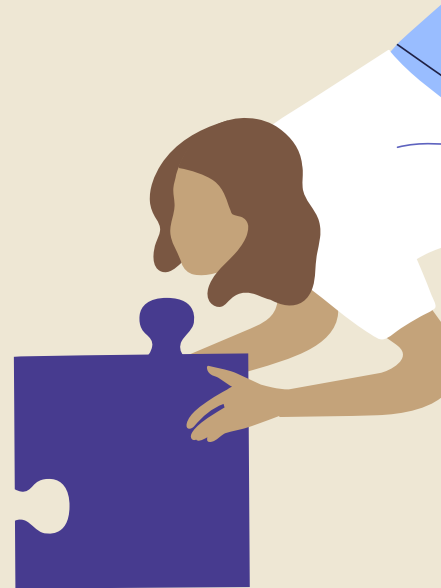
**(Barrier)** Alcohol can cause brain damage in unborn babies when consumed during pregnancy – a condition known as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. Alcohol can also lead to miscarriage, stillbirth, premature birth, low birth weight and developmental problems. Yet these products have never before been legally required to carry a health warning.

**(Action)** Thankfully, that's about to change. We are all in agreement that we need a mandatory label. Now our independent food authority has developed a clear and visible label that, with your support, will soon appear on all alcohol products sold in Australia and New Zealand. This will replace the ineffective and confusing label applied inconsistently by some alcohol producers to date. You will soon be meeting to decide whether to support this carefully designed label. As you do so, we ask that you put the health and wellbeing of Australian children first by supporting the evidence-based design in full.

### Tip applied

Topic:  
**Marketing | Source: Summary of position statement**

**(Vision)** It's never been more important to support individuals, families and their communities to be healthy and safe. **(Barrier)** However, during the COVID-19 pandemic the alcohol industry has rapidly pivoted its marketing strategies to push alcohol use at home on vulnerable people in isolation. Alcohol use makes people more vulnerable to COVID-19, worsens negative mental health impacts of social isolation, and fuels violence in Victorian homes. Increases in alcohol use during the pandemic may lead to more people developing long-term health conditions such as heart disease, liver disease and cancer. **(Action)** Now more than ever, effective alcohol policies are needed to keep individuals, families and communities safe and well.

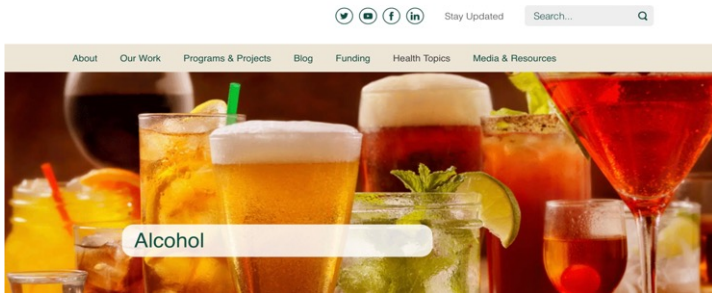


## Imagery

### Topic: General (imagery)

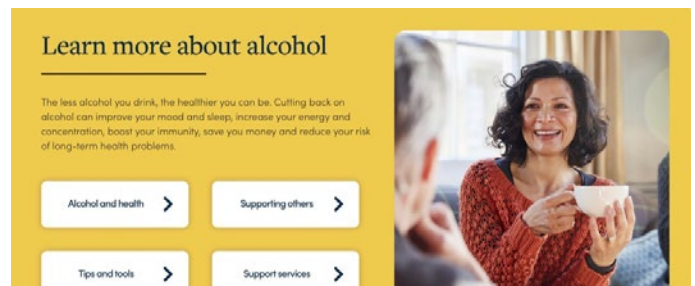
All of the tips in the Healthy Persuasion guide apply not only to the words we use, but also our choice of imagery. Telling our story in images, means showing people enjoying life and connecting with others without alcohol or (where relevant and more sparingly) imagery depicting the harms of alcohol. Using images of popular alcohol products or of people drinking at social events, however, serves to normalise alcohol and drinking culture.

Tip not applied ✕



This image used on a webpage discussing alcohol harms shows a selection of colourful, refreshing and fun looking alcoholic drinks.

Tip applied ✓



This image used on a similar page shows someone socialising with a non-alcoholic drink.

Register and stay up to date on tips and resources by heading to [VicHealth's website](#). For more on Values-Based Messaging for health promotion see:

- [Framing gender equality message guide](#)
- [Framing walking and bike riding message guide](#)

For more information on Common Cause Australia visit [www.commoncause.com.au](http://www.commoncause.com.au)



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