



JOURNAL PHOTOS / ANDREW M. DICKERMAN

Barrington High School student Kate Molvig listens as sociology professor Rob Williams, below, demonstrates how the alcohol industry uses television and print advertisements that promote drinking.

DECODING THE MESSAGE

A sociology professor takes a high school psychology class on a tour of alcohol advertising and identifies techniques that he says are aimed at the students who are too young to drink legally.

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JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

BARRINGTON — A beer commercial asks coolly, “Why ask why?”

A lifestyle magazine piece about alcohol is sprinkled with photos of colorful mixed drinks and an attractive young woman.

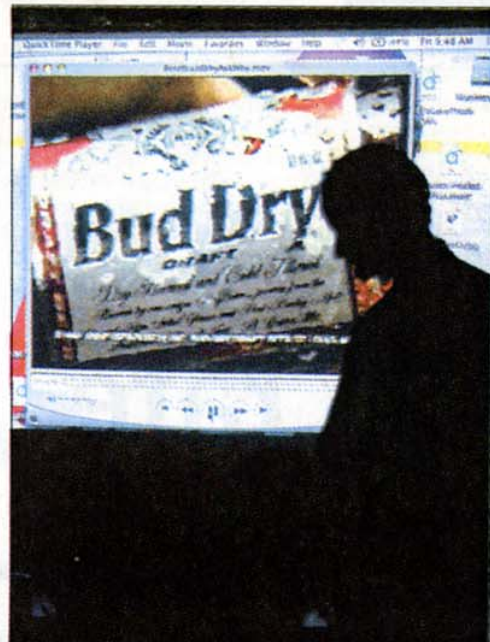
It is Friday and Rob Williams, a Champlain College sociology professor who studies media, is showing that mix of messages to what he says were advertisers’ target audience:

BARRINGTON people too young to drink. In this case, a psychology class at Barrington High School. In a community that has taken steps in recent months to combat underage drinking, Williams’ visit to several classes throughout the day aims to show how a \$3-billion-a-year alcohol marketing machine affects people the law says cannot buy its product.

Williams says that while some people see media as “the devil,” he loves it. He says that some ads target our reptilian brain, which responds emotionally while essentially “turning off” the part of the brain that can decipher true intent of visual or audio messages.

“How many of you have ever written a paper?” he asks as hands go up. “Well, then you are a media producer.”

But Williams said people in this country are living in the most “media saturated” time in history. And for some kinds of media, young people need to decode the symbols.



SEE ADS, C2

Ads

Continued from Page C1

Williams begins with a commercial showing an island paradise. A man and a woman eat dinner and she flashes him a sensual glance. The image in the ad shifts to one meal on the menu: oysters. Then two images are superimposed: a tall lighthouse, which fades into a hibiscus flower shown blooming quickly.

What is the ad about?

"Um, Bermuda," one boy answers.

It is indeed a travel ad for Bermuda, but other students chuckle because they see the real meaning: sex.

The lighthouse fading to flower seems obvious enough to students.

Why oysters? Williams asks.

"It's an aphrodisiac," says student Joel Buff.

But in some advertising, particularly for alcohol, messages may be more ambiguous.

Next, Williams' slides show a page from YM magazine that says, "Read this before you drink." To read the piece, Williams says, someone must use a part of the brain called the neo-cortex. But, he says, the page is filled with images of drinks and a young woman.

"So, you tell me, what are you going to remember most?" he asks. "This is actually alcohol industry propaganda."

Alcohol ads often link sex with

drinking, Williams says. He shows one segment that focuses on a refrigerator opened to show only beer bottles and cans with the sound of bottles clinking. It shifts to men and women in a club or bar, but the soundtrack underneath includes the sound of a woman moaning. One woman in the bar wears a negligee.

In another ad, a woman dressed in a silver bathing suit fades to a silver beer can. The ad includes words that suggest double meanings such as "grab it" that, Williams says, are not simply about pulling the tab off a beer can.

"Your neo-cortex has been shut off," Williams says of the sounds and images in the advertisements, and the reptilian part

of the brain has taken over.

Statistically, according to Williams, most people in this country don't drink much at all: 5 percent drink heavily during a week's time. But a good percentage of those are young people.

But, he argues, the alcohol industry's push includes savvy product placement. He shows a clip in which one of the stars of the show *Sex in the City* mentions a type of Absolut vodka that was created for the show. Then the slide cuts to a clip from the news program *Frontline* in which an official with the company that created the ad placement tells an audience, "It was quite a buzz."

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