

The New York Times

Business Day Media & Advertising

Mike's, a Flavored Alcohol Brand, Tries to Widen Its Appeal

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Published: May 22, 2013

MIKE'S HARD LEMONADE, the 14-year-old alcohol brand, faces the same challenge that nonalcoholic lemonade brands like Country Time face, namely, enticing consumers to drink lemonade on occasions besides picnics.



The actor Martin Landau appears in a new commercial for Mike's Hard Lemonade.

A new advertising and marketing campaign by Mike's, "Never Not a Good Time," promotes the hard lemonade as a versatile drink for any setting.

One commercial opens in a bowling alley with a man holding a ball. "Any time's a great time for a cold, refreshing Mike's," says a voice-over.

"Anytime?" responds the bowler, as if the words had been spoken to him, in a commercial entirely in rhyming couplets. "Even now?"

"Even if you were bowling against Martin Landau," responds the voice-over as, inexplicably, the 84-year-old actor smiles from the next lane. "And a man covered in dirt" — a filthy man approaches — "rubs up on your shirt."

Another commercial, set in a Japanese restaurant and featuring the rapper Coolio, also juxtaposes rhyming couplets with offbeat humor.

The commercials, which were introduced on Wednesday, are by Grey New York, a division of the Grey Group, which is owned by WPP. [Tom Kuntz](#) directed, with production by [MIZ](#). It marks the first appearance in a commercial for Mr. Landau, according to the brand.

Mike's Hard Lemonade, which will spend an estimated \$15 million to \$20 million on the campaign, spent \$13.3 million on advertising in 2012, according to Kantar Media, a unit of WPP.

Sweetened ready-to-drink alcoholic beverages go by many names, including flavored malt beverages and progressive adult beverages, and along with Mike's include offerings like Smirnoff Ice, Bud Light Lime-A-Rita and Four Loko.

Revenues in the category grew 20.2 percent in the 52 weeks ending April 21, according to SymphonyIRI Group, which does not track liquor stores but does track most other outlets where they are sold, including supermarkets and convenience stores. Mike's, which markets numerous flavors including spiked versions of apple cider and fruit punch, leads the category with a 30.1 percent share.

While meant to appeal to both sexes, the commercials are primarily directed at men ages 25 to 35, with men in the leading roles in both spots, which will appear on male-skewing networks including ESPN, NBC Sports Network and Comedy Central.

Sanjiv Gajiwala, the director of marketing for Mike's Hard Lemonade, said "the classic Mike's Hard occasion is a backyard barbecue, and we love that occasion but we believe that Mike's is appropriate many more places than just the backyard."

The brand aspires to be as versatile as beer, which is why the new commercials are set in beer-familiar settings like a bowling alley.

"We're looking at a traditional beer consumer, which is a natural fit for Mike's," Mr. Gajiwala said.

While Mike's consumers are split about evenly between men and women, according to the brand, beer drinkers are predominantly men, with Gallup, which polls Americans about alcohol consumption annually, finding in 2012 that [55 percent of men drank beer in the last seven days](#), compared with 23 percent of women. (The inverse is true for wine, consumed by 52 percent of women and 20 percent of men, according to the poll.)

Like wine coolers, which were popular in the 1980s, sweet and fruity alcoholic beverages like Mike's may strike some as unmanly.

Among men, 21 percent would not want to be seen holding a ready-to-drink flavored alcoholic beverage, compared with 11 percent of women, according to a poll by Mintel, a market research firm. Sweetened malt beverages are featured on [Askmen.com](#)'s "[Top 10 Drinks Real Men Don't Order](#)," a list that also includes fuzzy navels, aporetinis and cosmopolitans.

Brian Platt, a creative director at Grey, said that while beer commercials often deliberately appeal to men — with sports celebrities and scantily clad women — the new Mike's ads aim to appeal to women as well.

"We have to walk a fine line and we want to be careful and not be uber-masculine," Mr. Platt said. "So we play it down the middle so that both men and women can relate."

Critics say the soda-like flavors of brands like Mike's appeal to underage drinkers, and label the products alcopops. Among underage drinkers from 13 to 20, [Mike's is the eighth most popular alcohol brand](#), with 10.8 percent reporting consuming it in the previous 30 days, according to a recent report by the Boston University School of Public Health and the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

A bill pending in the North Carolina Legislature would [restrict the sale of flavored malt beverages](#) to state-run liquor stores, which legislators say are more daunting to underage drinkers than convenience stores and supermarkets.

Mike's original products have 5 percent alcohol by volume, the same as beer brands [including Budweiser](#), while more potent offerings including Mike's Harder Lemonade have 8 percent; other flavored malt brands including Blast by Colt 45 and Four Loko market varieties with 12 percent.

"The sweet taste and every imaginable flavor is out there to mask the flavor of alcohol and appeal to younger taste buds," said Michael J. Scippa, public affairs director of Alcohol Justice, an industry watchdog group. The group has urged municipalities and counties to support what it calls [alcopop-free zones](#), where lawmakers ask convenience store and grocery store owners to voluntarily stop carrying the products.

Mr. Gajiwala, the marketer from the brand, said that its products are marketed only to legal drinkers.

"We take responsible marketing seriously in all stages of our marketing," Mr. Gajiwala said. "We are very open about what our products are and how we go to market with them, and take steps to see that they aren't marketed to underage consumers."