

THE FUTURE OF AGENCIES

Non-Drinkers Are Struggling in an Agency World That Relies on Alcohol

Americans are drinking less and looking for alternative ways to celebrate and bond



Boozy holiday parties and happy hours can exclude those who abstain from alcohol from bonding with their colleagues. Adweek



By **Emmy Liederman**

JUNE 27, 2022

When Taleah Mona-Lusky got sober, she was told by people in both her professional and personal circles that she should also leave her career in advertising behind. In an industry that celebrates winning a new client with rounds of shots and encourages drinking as a bonding activity, it was difficult for them to understand how she would stay afloat.

"Work can be a trigger, and the 'work hard play hard' mentality is outdated," said Mona-Lusky, the president of full-service creative agency Swift, adding that her office offers options for both drinkers and non-drinkers, such as beer and kombucha on tap. "There need to be options and we need to have conversations about how to use drugs and alcohol safely."

Members of the advertising industry often **use alcohol to rejoice**, but curating both a social and professional culture that revolves around drinking often leaves those in recovery—as well as those who simply wish to abstain from drinking—in the dark. Many employees have used the pandemic to reevaluate their relationships with alcohol, and as they return to the office and feel pressure to participate in happy hours,

...being cut back is becoming more common in the advertising industry this year, and it seems to be a trend across the industry, with data from Nielsen showing that non-alcoholic beverage sales have increased 33% in the last year. **Data from Morning Consult** found that the share of those who drink at least once a week declined across all beverage categories from October 2021 to March 2022, with beer dropping six points from 25% to 19%.



HOW 2021 BECAME THE BREAKOUT YEAR FOR SOBER OCTOBER

Consumers with an annual household income of \$100,000 or more are 10 points less likely to say they drink alcohol than they were last fall. The CDC has also published new guidelines as of 2020 that have lessened the level of recommended drinking: Men are advised to have two drinks or less in a day, and women one drink or less.

According to alcohol and addiction expert Dr. Joseph Volpicelli, society is inclined to characterize drinkers into two groups—those who struggle with addiction and those who don't—but the reality is not so black and white.

"There's a huge gray area in which people might be drinking excessively and not realize they are suffering some consequences," he said. "These people are likely to be better off by moderating their drinking or stopping altogether."

Volpicelli added that when any type of drinker uses alcohol to cope with either trauma or anxiety, this coping mechanism only compounds mental health suffering. This cycle can contribute to **feelings of stress and burnout that have been especially common throughout the ad industry** during the pandemic.

"Your anxiety doesn't just come back to the level it was when you started drinking, but it actually gets worse," he said. "It's like borrowing money from the bank and then having to pay interest."

Making people comfortable

Mona-Lusky wishes there was more space for open conversations about sobriety across the ad industry, as she knows many going through a similar journey that they don't feel comfortable discussing. She also stressed that folks in sobriety are hesitant to take advantage of resources like FMLA due to the shame associated with addiction.

"I've been sober for five years, and it's taken me that long to feel comfortable enough to really talk about it," she said. "I want to talk about it because there aren't many people who are."

Dodging questions about sobriety was one of the hardest parts of the journey for Mona-Lusky, who encourages peers to be more cognizant of how their comments can contribute to suffering. She asserts that people shouldn't probe when someone abstains from drinking at a social event and avoid asking how long someone has been sober, as the answer could be a day.

"We like to put people in boxes, but there are lots of ways to identify as a sober person other than 'alcoholic' and 'addict,'" she said, adding that "not drinking is the least interesting thing about me."

A former member of an ad agency, who chose to remain anonymous, says that landing her first job in advertising was regarded with prestige, as there was a popular sentiment that "if you could make it in advertising, then you have really made it." This high status came with a **toxic work culture**, according to the source.

"Your normal coping mechanisms go out the window," she said. "You have no time to go to the gym and are working 12- to 13-hour days. It's a mental vacuum for anyone prone to alcoholism."

When she didn't reach her usual three to four drinks per day, the source would suffer from cold sweats, shaking and panic attacks. She was able to get sober by reducing her cravings through Vivitrol, an injectable medicine that combats alcohol dependence by blocking opioid receptors in the brain. AA meetings, biweekly therapy and working through the trauma that led her to dependence has also supported the source's sobriety.

Creating alternatives

remembers having "no other option" than to drink at work events. Despite pressure from friends, she set strong boundaries and regarded her sobriety as a "badge of pride" instead of a point of shame.

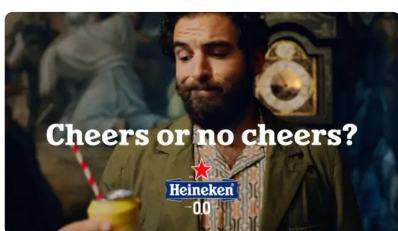
Ziad Ahmed founded Gen Z-focused agency JUV Consulting when he was 16. While it was not only illegal for him and many of his employees to drink, they also were barred from taking calls from alcohol brands.

As a Muslim American founder who abstains from drinking for religious reasons, as well as a believer in creating a culture of "empowering young people," Amhed has no interest in putting alcohol at the forefront of social activities. Instead of meeting up at bars for happy hour, the JUV team created a book club, organizes lunch and learns for holidays like Juneteenth and celebrated Pride by visiting historical LGBTQ+ sites throughout New York City.

"It is important that there are spaces where you can bond with your teammates and not feel pressured to drink," he said. "We certainly don't want JUV Consulting to look anything like the scenes in Wolf on Wall Street. We want to be the opposite of that in every conceivable way."

Tracy Tobin, the chief people officer at marketing consultancy company Adswerve, is also focused on bringing people together in ways that don't revolve around alcohol, including volunteer events and extracurricular activities outside of work.

"Though alcohol will likely always be a factor, the ad industry can do more to make sure that it's not at the core of building a company culture of employee connectivity," she said.



FOR DRY JANUARY, HEINEKEN DEBUNKS THE MYTH THAT GIVING UP BOOZE IS NO FUN



EMMY LIEDERMAN

[@emmyliederman](#) emmy.liederman@adweek.com

Emmy is an Adweek staff writer covering agencies, influencers and the creator economy.



RECOMMENDED ARTICLES



AD

