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Energy drinks with alcohol stir fears Parents advised to pay attention to what their teens are drinking

By **ROBIN ERB**
BLADE STAFF WRITER

It's the fine print on the drink containers that worries people like Brenda Brake:

Tilt: 8 percent alcohol.

Sparks Plus: 7 percent alcohol.

Joose: 9.9 percent alcohol.

"Parents will see it as an energy drink. If your youth comes in the house with a different-colored can and he's drinking it right in front of you, you're not going to pick up the can and read the ingredients," she said.

Ms. Brake would know. A representative of Parents Helping Parents, she's assigned to working with parents whose youth are assigned to Lucas County Drug Court — in other words, kids whose crimes generally stem from their addictions.

She and others are concerned about a string of energy drinks on the market that mix high doses of caffeine — trouble enough for kids — with alcohol.

Troubling, too, is another set of numbers.

In a survey last year by Mintel International Group, a market research firm, 31 percent of 1,903 youths 12 to 17 years old said they regularly drink energy drinks such as the nonalcoholic Full Throttle, No Fear, and Adrenaline Rush.

That's a hefty chunk of the \$3.2 billion energy-drink industry that year.

Michele Simon of the alcohol industry watchdog Marin Institute in San Rafael, Calif., co-authored a report earlier this year "Alcohol, Energy Drinks, and Youth: A Dangerous Mix."

To her, the alcohol industry is marketing energy drinks to the youngest drinkers, employing things like MySpace.com and other cyberspace tools to show young people consuming energy drinks.

Add the alcohol to the energy drinks, she said, and it provides a young consumer an enticing "bridge" from soda pop and nonalcoholic energy drinks to alcohol mixes.

Locally, Danielle Stratton echoes the same concerns. She heads a group called Teen Institute Leaders Team, or ironically enough, TILT. It's a group that is concerned about young people's addictions.



Probation officer Johnny Carrillo displays an alcohol-containing energy drink confiscated from a teen on probation.
(THE BLADE/AMY E. VOIGT)



Energy drinks containing alcohol raise concerns on several levels among local authorities. (THE BLADE/DAVE ZAPOTOSKY)

On Friday, Miss Stratton's group sent letters to Anheuser-Busch Inc., maker of the drink Tilt.

They told Anheuser they weren't looking to remove the drink from shelves, just change its "furtive packaging."

"A mere redesign of the can will alert teens, as well as parents, that your product is an alcoholic beverage," they wrote.

In an interview with The Blade, Ms. Stratton was more blunt: "Teenagers can fool anyone by appearing to drink an energy drink."

Anheuser probably hasn't received the letter yet. But an interview request Friday by The Blade generated a three-

sentence written response.

It noted that consumers must be 21 to drink Tilt and that Anheuser-Busch encourages "the responsible consumption of all of our products."

"The ingredients in Tilt are clearly labeled, and these ingredients, Tilt's formulation, and its label have been approved by the federal government," it continued. "Anheuser-Busch is adamantly opposed to underage drinking, and no other company has done more to proactively address this issue."

Miller Brewing, which manufactures Sparks, did not return a call from The Blade.

Johnny Carrillo first worried about the drinks, not because of numbers, but because of experience.

The probation officer assigned to drug court keeps a plastic bag in his office. Inside is an empty water bottle — a teen had used it for vodka — and a bright silver bottle, Sparks. Both had been confiscated from teens on probation.

The two containers represent the same problem: a way to sneak alcohol past unsuspecting parents. Last month, a drug court teenager was sent back to detention after he was caught drinking one of the energy drinks.

"It was 9 percent [alcohol], the one he drank," Mr. Carrillo said.

It's such a concern that intake personnel screening kids for drug court now routinely ask: Do you drink Sparks or any other energy drink with alcohol?

Kids sometimes don't even consider it alcohol, say local drug and alcohol counselors as well as the Marin Institute's Ms. Simon. Moreover, they don't understand they're mixing drugs too — alcohol as a depressant, caffeine as a stimulant, counselors say: The caffeine may mask alcohol intoxication because of its energy boost, but motor skills and other functions are just as impaired by the alcohol.

Neither the outgoing nor incoming agent-in-charge of the Ohio Public Safety Department's Toledo investigative office, nor the captain in charge of Toledo police vice unit reports any underage drinking problems associated with the energy drinks.

But the qualifier might be the word "yet," said James L. Edwards, Sr., longtime head of Lucas County's Urban Minority Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Outreach Program, or UMADAOP.

Perhaps it's a good thing that Toledo lags in trends and fads, he added. "We're not always the first or with the most," he said. Perhaps, he said, the interest from young people in energy/alcohol drinks won't pick up locally. "We'll keep our fingers crossed." Still, he and others worry that the simple energy drinks are a problem too, especially for young, developing bodies and minds.

Olga Soto, supervisor of an outpatient drug and alcohol program at Connecting Point's Bancroft Street facility, said youths, especially addicts, can easily become dependent on a caffeine rush.

An admitted fan of coffee, Miss Soto argues that the energy drinks contain several times the amount of caffeine in coffee: "I also make the argument that I go to bed at a reasonable hour and I wake up feeling refreshed. These kids are staying up to 3 or 4 in the morning. There's always a concern when a child is using a drink to keep them moving or to keep them motivated," she said.

Contact Robin Erb at: robinerb@theblade.com or 419-724-6133.