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Alcohol sales illustrate risk

By Juanita D. Duggan

Why should wine not be sold online in the same way as books, CDs, movie tickets, American flags, low-rise blue jeans, 800-thread-count designer sheets, Mark McGwire's rookie baseball cards, the latest spring sandals and other products such as, say, cheese?

Because wine is alcohol! A "controlled substance," an intoxicating liquor, a product once banned in our country.

Need I remind anyone that our society outlaws alcohol sales to those under 21, whether in a grocery store or restaurant or on the Internet?

Now, are minors already buying alcohol online from companies that either don't care about the age of their customers or are genuinely duped by young Net-savvy surfers? Absolutely.

Are state governments having trouble policing this activity and holding those who sell to minors accountable? You bet.

Should we make it easier for our kids to buy alcohol, also known as wine, beer and spirits, online? No way.

The 21st Amendment to the Constitution unequivocally grants power to states to regulate the sale and distribution of alcohol. Why? Three reasons:

- To allow people to choose the availability of alcohol in their individual communities (half of all Americans don't drink, and "dry" counties still exist).
- To ensure orderly markets (preventing a return to bootlegging and a black market).
- To collect taxes.

This system is the very backbone of safe-driving and responsible-drinking programs. Yet it is one an elite group of winery owners and connoisseurs wants to dismantle so wine can be sold at a triple markup — instead of working through legitimate online "business-to-business" sites that sell and distribute alcohol through the legal system.

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Did you know that winery-rich states such as California, Oregon and Washington are suing out-of-state cigarette retailers for selling online to minors and avoiding paying state taxes?

While they are at it, why not look in their own backyards at those who illegally sell alcohol online?

E-commerce has indeed revolutionized our lives. But the Internet also has a dark underbelly — a world of illegality where innocent people, often kids, get sucked in and hurt. Alcohol, in any form, should not be a part of that picture.

True, teens are not racing online for cabernet. But they are buying pure grain alcohol under the same loopholes that allow a winery to sell cabernet to a collector. Who in their right mind would want to deregulate alcohol so that a few producers can make a bigger profit at the expense of the safety of our children?

Juanita D. Duggan is CEO of Wine and Spirits Wholesalers of America Inc.



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