

World Health Organisation Briefing

Geneva: 23rd October 2002

Tobacco industry youth smoking prevention programmes – a critique

The tobacco industry's youth smoking prevention (YSP) campaigns have three main dimensions:

1. 'Youth access' – enforcing laws that prevent retailers selling to under-age smokers;
2. 'Responsible marketing' – tobacco companies have agreed a code which they claim amounts to responsible marketing for their products [\[1\]](#);
3. 'Counter-marketing' – tobacco companies pay for advertising aimed at persuading young people not to smoke.

Many observers have uncritically accepted this as responsible corporate behaviour without carefully examining the evidence for such campaigns and the motives of a tobacco company in running them.

Youth access programmes: Ling et al (2002)[\[2\]](#) give a good account of the weakness of tobacco industry-supported youth access programmes, and comment on the tobacco industry's preference for them as follows:

Youth access programmes have also been widely supported by the tobacco industry, perhaps because they reinforce the industry's key marketing message that "smoking is for adults", which arguably makes smoking even more attractive to teens.

The evidence shows that youth access policies are not effective unless they are part of a comprehensive tobacco control strategy – of the type always opposed by tobacco companies – and depend on robust enforcement with penalties and threat of license suspension to ensure compliance. Again, tobacco companies do not favour such strict action against retailers.

Responsible marketing: The tobacco industry has advocated so-called "responsible marketing codes" that purportedly aim to restrict marketing that is targeted at or appeals to children. The problem with this approach however is that they in effect sanction advertising that appeals to 18-24 year olds – and it is impossible to design advertising that appeals to adults but not to children. The best evidence shows that advertising restrictions are effective in reducing consumption only when they are comprehensive. A thorough review of the evidence by Saffer and Chaloupka (2000)[\[3\]](#) concluded that:

comprehensive advertising bans can reduce tobacco consumption, but that a limited set of advertising bans will have little or no effect. A limited set of advertising bans will not reduce the total level of advertising expenditure but will simply result in substitution to the remaining non-banned media

Most public health authorities advocate a *complete* ban on tobacco advertising as the major public policy approach to tobacco marketing. The industry's codes should be judged by what they permit rather than what they prohibit. They are in effect an attempt to allow most forms of tobacco marketing; promotional budgets will simply move from the banned to the not-banned media and promotional approaches. The investor community has been reassured that the marketing code would make little difference. Bonnie Herzog, former tobacco analyst at Credit Suisse First Boston, has stated that [\[4\]](#):

...the multinationals' strategy is proactive and is a way to improve their image. These international marketing standards partly came as a result of increasing pressure from governments worldwide and anti-smoking activists. Also, by proactively setting new international tobacco marketing standards, the multinationals could be trying to counter a number of proposals that the WHO has been working on to curb the amount of cigarettes that are

consumed on an international level. One would think that the elimination of certain marketing practices would effectively decrease advertising spending and hence increase margins, however we believe the modest amount the multinationals actually spend on these types of practices will be redirected into other types of marketing promotions i.e., point of sale activity.

Counter-marketing: the campaign approaches chosen for tobacco industry youth smoking prevention without fail draw on the weakest most ineffectual messages – usually stressing ‘personal choice’ or that smoking is for adults only. BAT emphasises the role of adult authority figures:

However, through harnessing the expertise and understanding of all interested parties – including government, retailers, parents, teachers and young people themselves – we hope to ensure that YSP [youth smoking prevention] programmes are accepted and successful.

But this is the opposite of the techniques used to sell cigarettes. BAT and Philip Morris are heavily involved in Formula One motor racing, and use the world’s fastest drivers and high tech sports to promote its product^[5]. Tobacco companies favour the use of boring authority figure to oppose smoking, but the glamour of Formula One to promote it. This clearly illustrates the disingenuous nature of the initiatives.

Problems with youth smoking prevention initiatives

In summary, the many problems with these campaigns can be grouped under three headings:

1. The messages used are ineffective, and if anything likely to encourage smoking

- By focussing on smoking as an adult activity, they increase the definition of smoking as adult or rebellious and make it more appealing to young people. Cigarettes become the ‘forbidden fruit’;
- Tobacco companies use much more effective techniques and persuasive role models to promote smoking than they use to promote ‘prevention’ – for example Formula One sponsorships, attractive merchandise, and powerful advertising (see pictures);
- There is no evidence that the industry’s campaigns work – and tobacco companies have never presented any evidence base or credible evaluation to demonstrate that its programmes have any impact. When the impact of Philip Morris’s YSP advertising campaign was evaluated independently along side the innovative ‘truth’ campaign, it was found to be *counterproductive*. The research found: ^[6]

Exposure to "truth" countermarketing advertisements was consistently associated with an increase in anti-tobacco attitudes and beliefs, whereas exposure to Philip Morris advertisements generally was not. In addition, those exposed to Philip Morris advertisements were more likely to be open to the idea of smoking.

- Tobacco companies always oppose measures that are known to be effective in reducing youth smoking, like smoke-free areas, increased taxes and advertising campaigns based around shocking imagery, addiction, or the misconduct of the tobacco industry and its attempts to manipulate youth;
- Even if all the limitations above could be overcome, it is simply impossible to construct advertising that appeals to 18-year olds, but has no impact on 12-17 year olds, especially as advertising to this age group generally involves looking more ‘grown-up’ than the age of the target audience.

2. The main objective is public relations

- Documents from elsewhere in the industry note how YSP measures have been conceived to head off legislation that would be effective and therefore unwelcome – like the complete bans on tobacco advertising widely supported in the European Union. For example, the following comment is from a Philip Morris confidential document ^[7]:

“As we discussed, the ultimate means for determining the success of this program will be: 1) A reduction in legislation introduced and passed restricting or banning our sales and marketing activities; 2) Passage of legislation favorable to the industry; 3) greater support from business, parent, and teacher groups.”

- The offer of money to health ministries enables tobacco companies to shape their public health initiatives in a way that suits them – ie. ineffective youth smoking prevention initiatives that detract from meaningful tobacco policies;
- These initiatives come with substantial public relations and image building. BAT recently circulated its YSP advertising video to hundreds of parliamentarians and some companies have advertised their YSP advertising campaigns.

3. Exclusive focus on ‘youth smoking’ is misguided

- The YSP initiatives aim to define the ‘problem’ of smoking only as a young persons’ issue, disregarding the harm done to addicted adult smokers struggling to quit. We regard the welfare of addicted adult smokers as equally important, and adult smokers are at progressively greater risk the longer they continue;
- Even if the objective was only to reduce youth smoking, the best way to tackle youth smoking is to ‘de-normalise’ smoking in adult society. Teenagers want to do what they regard as normal in adult society, and the tobacco industry’s approach aims to keep smoking as a widespread adult activity;

Conclusion

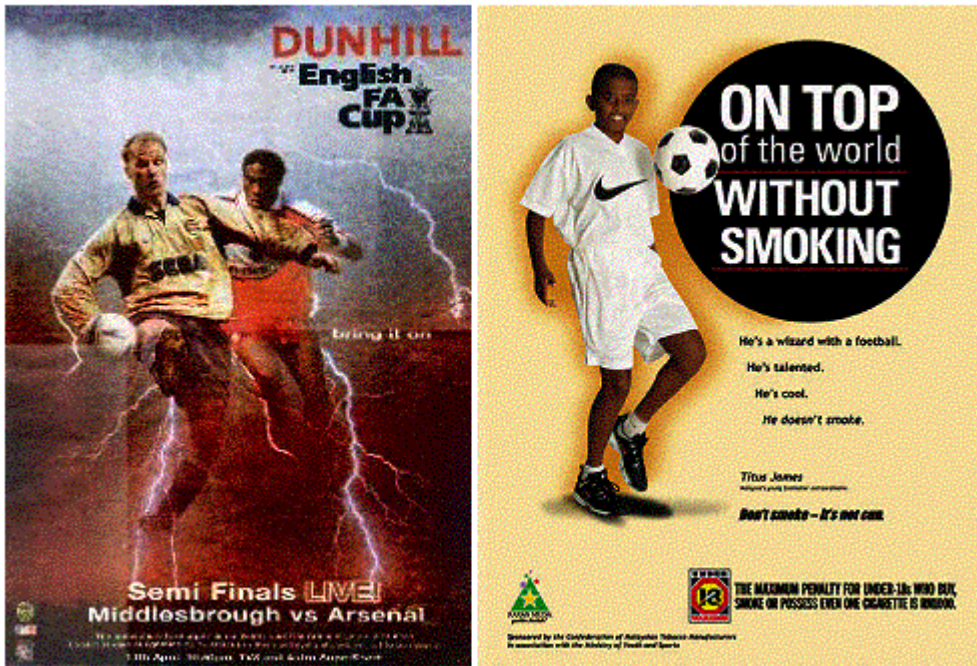
There is no credible evidence to back the tobacco companies’ youth smoking prevention initiatives and plenty to suggest they are likely to be ineffective or harmful, and primarily a public relations tool. A study published in June 2002 examined the motives and impact of tobacco industry youth programmes and is summarised as follows [\[8\]](#):

The industry started these programs in the 1980s to forestall legislation that would restrict industry activities. Industry programs portray smoking as an adult choice and fail to discuss how tobacco advertising promotes smoking or the health dangers of smoking. The industry has used these programs to fight taxes, clean-indoor-air laws, and marketing restrictions worldwide. There is no evidence that these programs decrease smoking among youths.

Conclusions. Tobacco industry youth programs do more harm than good for tobacco control. The tobacco industry should not be allowed to run or directly fund youth smoking prevention programs.

Appendix - Pictures

Comparison of British American Tobacco’s pro-smoking campaign and YSP initiative in Malaysia. Illustrating the use of virginal innocence in YSP programmes, and aspirational sports stars in promoting Dunhill in Malaysia.



BAT using the super-cool Jacques Villeneuve for promoting smoking while arguing that youth smoking should be tackled by boring authority figures. BAT wants to “mobilise teachers, parents, Government and public health bodies in an integrated communications campaign with effective messages” (2000 – evidence to Health Select Committee)



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- [1] BAT web site (accessed 5 June 2002) *Marketing standards* [view]
- [2] Ling P., Landman A. and Glantz SA. It is time to abandon youth access tobacco programmes. *Tobacco Control* 2002;11:3-6 [view]
- [3] Saffer H. & Chaloupka F., *The effect of tobacco advertising bans on tobacco consumption*, *Journal of Health Economics* Vol 19 (2000) (6) pp. 1117-1137 [view]
- [4] Herzog, B. International Tobacco Marketing Standards. 25 September 2001. Credit Suisse First Boston. [view]
- [5] See the unrestricted promotion of Lucky Strike at the BAR site:
<http://www.britishamericanracing.com/>
- [6] Farrelly MC et al. *Getting to the truth: evaluating national tobacco countermarketing campaigns* *Am J Public Health*.2002;92:901–907 [view abstract]
- [7] Joshua J. Slavitt (Philip Morris) memo “*TI Youth Initiative*,” 12 February 1991. [view]
- [8] Landman, A, Ling, P, Glantz, SA, Tobacco Industry Youth Smoking Prevention Programs: Protecting the Industry and Hurting Tobacco Control. *Am J Public Health* 92: 917-930 [abstract]