

Deadly Targeting of Women in Promoting Cigarettes

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The history of tobacco marketing portrays a strong relationship between cigarette advertising targeted to women and the rise in the prevalence of women smoking. This article describes how tobacco companies crafted their marketing strategies to obfuscate the growing evidence of the health hazards of tobacco and to circumvent attempts to regulate cigarette advertising. It shows how the tobacco industry understood and capitalized on the women's liberation movement to sell cigarettes as symbols of freedom and emancipation, tracing the creation and promotion of Virginia Slims as a case study. And it documents the unfortunate success of these marketing strategies as reflected in the trends of tobacco use, especially among underage girls, and the commensurate increase in tobacco-related disease and death among women.

Anticipation, Interception, and Mutation

The history of tobacco advertising shows that the industry has been remarkably adept at anticipating and deflecting attacks by the health community. The recent revelations of internal documents make clear that the industry's own research into the health effects of tobacco use was often more advanced than studies by the medical community. However, tobacco companies worked hard to conceal what they knew from the public who would be their customers.¹⁻³

When news of the health hazards of tobacco first started penetrating the public consciousness in the 1950s, cigarette advertising made explicit health claims,

often through celebrity spokespeople. Using popular public figures was, by then, already a staple of cigarette advertising. Baseball legend Babe Ruth, for example, announced in the 1930s that Old Golds had "Not a cough in a carload," and stylized portraits of physicians claimed that "More Doctors Smoke Camels Than Any Other Cigarette" in the 1940s.⁴

As knowledge about tobacco-related diseases became more widespread, however, the industry realized that instead of reassuring consumers, the health claims might actually be raising awareness of tobacco's hazards. The tobacco industry's own trade publication pointed out that the industry had been "warned editorially on many occasions that the 'health' theme was a risky one," and advised the selling of "pleasure" instead.⁵ Quietly, cigarette companies ceased making explicit health claims and turned instead to image advertising that projected health, vitality, sexiness, and attractiveness with very little text.⁶

When the industry felt the threat of government regulation of tobacco advertising during the 1960s, cigarette companies instituted a system of self-regulation under the auspices of the National Association of Broadcasters. Although Congress required a health warning on cigarette packages, the industry's self-imposed code successfully forestalled greater government intrusion, and tobacco advertisers achieved unprecedented penetration into the youth market. Oddly, though the code provided for penalties of up to \$100,000 for transgressions, not a single fine has ever been imposed.⁷

During the late 1960s, broadcast tobacco ads were subjected to the fairness doctrine, which required stations to air one minute of free counteradvertising for every three minutes of paid ads. The tobacco industry was first to appreciate the potency of this antismoking campaign. Long before health statisticians documented the coincident drop in smoking prevalence, the major tobacco companies agreed to a ban on broadcast

advertising and specifically requested that it be codified in a statute so they could avoid charges of collusion and other violations of antitrust law.⁸

Despite the broadcast ban, cigarettes continued to be the most heavily promoted consumer product in America; cigarette companies merely shifted their marketing expenditures. During the first quarter of 1971, the first year of the broadcast ban, the number of tobacco ads in women's magazines increased fourfold.⁹ Between 1987 and 1988 alone, total marketing expenditures for tobacco increased by 27%.¹⁰ By the late 1980s, the tobacco industry ranked first in print media,¹¹ being the largest spender in outdoor advertising, second in magazines, and sixth in newspapers.¹²

More recently, tobacco marketing expenditures have shifted from advertising to promotion, such as distribution of specialty items including clothing and accessories.¹³ The most recent report from the Federal Trade Commission shows that cigarette companies spent a record \$6.03 billion on advertising and promotion during 1993. This represents a 15.4% increase over the prior year, despite an 8.9% decrease in sales for the same period.¹⁴

Pursuit of the Women's Market

Tobacco advertising works for the same reasons that other product advertising works. Once a particular market niche has been defined, marketing researchers explore the weaknesses or needs of those targeted individuals and the stimuli to which they respond in seeking to fill those needs. As explained by media consultant and tobacco control advocate Tony Schwartz, the advertiser does not need to pitch or sell values or emotions, because those already exist in the minds of his targets. All the successful advertiser needs to do is to understand what those existing values and emotions are, and then use stimuli that resonate with them.¹⁵ The tobacco industry has been particularly adept at understanding, predicting, and capitalizing on the feminist

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movement by seizing the symbols of feminism and equating women's liberation with smoking.

In addition to direct appeals to consumers, tobacco companies have worked to reduce the potential opposition they would otherwise face for selling a lethal product. Research has shown a significant negative correlation between the amount of tobacco advertising in women's magazines and the number of articles that address the health hazards of tobacco.¹⁶ The tobacco industry has also used philanthropic contributions very strategically to endear itself to the leaders of the populations it targets, especially women. In response to a recent survey, 13 women's organizations reported accepting donations from tobacco interests, each exceeding \$318,000.¹⁷ The National Women's Political Caucus, recipient of significant tobacco largesse, honored George Knox, Philip Morris vice-president, at its 1989 Good Guys Award Dinner.⁹

Virginia Slims: A Case Study. Tobacco company executives realized that "The ladies have led every major cigarette trend in the past 15 years . . . Our studies show that they were the first to embrace king-size cigarettes, menthol, charcoal, and recessed filters."¹⁸ Therefore, after a decade of success in repositioning Marlboro as masculine and increasing its market share among male smokers, Philip Morris decided to appeal to modern women with the development of a new brand. Spurning strategies based on traditional feminine imagery, Virginia Slims launched a 100 mm "slimmer than usual" cigarette in 1968 with the slogan "You've Come a Long Way, Baby!"

The Virginia Slims campaign hoped to create a "consumer-related identity . . . to establish and maintain a new attractive brand personality . . . [for] the smoker's motivation and loyalty to a brand comes from identifying with the personality of that brand."¹⁹ The creation of brand personality was to be achieved using aspects of style, tone, music, and visuals, rather than information, for the creative team believed that "in cigarette advertising . . . 90% of what you communicate is nonverbal."¹⁹ A large, all-male staff was assigned to this task, appropriately nicknamed "15 Guys in Search of a Feminine Identity."¹⁹ The creative team settled on a "fun personality

for the brand—a lively, sparkly, happy cigarette." It was to be "The first cigarette for women only . . . designed slimmer for a woman's slimmer hands and lips . . . and packaged in a slim purse pack."¹⁹

Something about the tone-of-voice felt right. It's a male cigarette company saying, in effect, "Women, we put you on a pedestal. We think you're terrific, you're fabulous, you're great. We love you, and we want you to have this cigarette we made for you." The message is out-and-out flattery, done lightly enough to be acceptable. Is there a woman alive who doesn't like flattery?¹⁹

One "great brain" came up with the concept of exploiting women's rights, which had re-emerged in the late 1960s. The slogan and copy contrasted women's historical lack of rights with the modern situation in which women could have everything, even "a cigarette brand for your very own."¹⁹ When the campaign concept was translated from magazine pages to radio and TV, the music chosen was deliberately "a corny, happy suffragette kind of sound like an up-dated Salvation Army band," with a message of "Congratulations on being a woman. Congratulations on your success."¹⁹

After a summer's successful testing in San Francisco, Virginia Slims moved quickly into national distribution. Television and magazine ads contrasted the old social order with new mores by belittling dated restrictions on women:

In 1910 Pamela Benjamin was caught smoking in the gazebo. She got a severe scolding and no supper that night. In 1915, Mrs. Cynthia Robinson was caught smoking in the cellar behind the preserves. Although she was 34, her husband sent her straight to her room. Then, in 1920, women won their rights.²⁰

Virginia Slims' launch year advertising was carried on 9 TV network programs, plus spot TV and radio, 16 women's publications and Sunday supplements.¹⁸

When cigarette advertising was banned from broadcast media, budgets shifted to dramatically increase the volume of advertising in women's magazines. In 1974, Virginia Slims was backed by \$8.3 million in advertising in magazines, newspapers, and Sunday supplements, making it the biggest spender in print.²¹ This intensity in print advertising targeted to women continued into the 1980s.

Virginia Slims started sponsoring women's professional tennis in 1970, with a full season of tournaments played in 20 cities in 1971. Free cigarettes were given away at stadium entrances, and contract players were not allowed to take any public position opposing cigarette sponsorship.²² The Virginia Slims media guide, published annually, became the "encyclopedia of women's tennis,"²³ and the company's public relations firm developed a full program to penetrate the media with stories that extended far beyond the sports pages. Media luncheons were held at the start of the season in New York and before each event in every tournament city, where charity tie-ins created more publicity. Despite the broadcast ban on cigarette advertising, television coverage of the tournaments brought Virginia Slims and its slogan into homes across America. A Philip Morris marketing vice-president explained, "Virginia Slims gets worldwide publicity and an opportunity to sample adult audiences and to spin off retail promotions."²³ It also had the advantage of acquiring grateful allies. In 1990, when Secretary of Health and Human Services Louis Sullivan, MD, called for an end to sports sponsorship by cigarette firms, women tennis stars opposed the effort and supported Philip Morris and the industry.²³

As part of Virginia Slims' award-winning premium promotion in 1977, 30,000 "Ginny Jogger" sweat suits were distributed. During the mid-1970s an additional 400,000 items were distributed, including "You've come a long way, Baby" T-shirts (200,000), jerseys (110,000), and sweaters (70,000), each requiring cash and proof of purchase.²⁴ A promotional mainstay has been the "Book of Days," a hard-bound appointment calendar noting historic dates (including the 1968 launch of Virginia Slims), historical anecdotes, and memorable sexist quotes. By 1985, one million of these books were printed annually.²⁵

The Success Of Tobacco Advertising

The prevalence of smoking by women, and the corresponding statistics on tobacco-induced diseases in women, serve as testimony to the success of targeted tobacco advertising. In 1923, when lung cancer was extremely rare, women consumed only 5% of all cigarettes sold.

By 1929, this was up to 12% and by 1935, 18.1%; it peaked at 33.3% in 1965 and remained virtually unchanged through 1977.²⁶ Prevalence among men was higher during this time, peaking at 50.2% in 1965, but it has declined faster.²⁷ In 1987, 31.7% of men³² and 26.8% of women smoked.²⁸

The greatest growth of tobacco advertising aimed at women followed the introduction of Virginia Slims. A small explosion of women's brands ensued, and by 1979, magazine tobacco advertisements targeting women equaled those targeted to men.²⁹ These advertising campaigns have been associated with significant increases in smoking uptake among girls younger than the legal age for purchase.³⁰ Smoking prevalence among female high school seniors surpassed that of their male counterparts throughout the late 1970s and 1980s.³¹

Unfortunately, women have indeed come a long way. Between 1950 and 1994, female lung cancer mortality rates increased 500%, from 3% of all female cancer deaths to 22%.³² In 1965, an estimated 30,000 American women died from ten categories of tobacco-related diseases; by 1985, that figure had risen to 106,000.³³ ■

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