Selling the “Quit” Brand to Young Adult Smokers

The paper by Ling and Glantz in this issue of *Journal of General Internal Medicine* draws attention to an obvious fact—smoking cessation is in direct competition with the cigarette industry’s goal of selling cigarettes.¹ Thus, it really should not come as any great surprise to find among the many millions of pages of previously secret tobacco industry documents evidence that cigarette companies invested heavily in efforts to understand what motivates someone to stop smoking. Ironically, the public health community has also invested in similar research. However, unlike the research conducted by those interested in promoting better health by encouraging and assisting smokers to quit, the cigarette companies’ sole purpose has been to find ways to counteract the forces that might cause a smoker to think about giving up smoking.

The steady decline in cigarette consumption observed in the United States since the 1960s supports the view that the cigarette companies are slowly losing their grip on smokers.^{2,3} However, the Marlboro man is not riding into the sunset without a fight. As cigarette consumption has fallen the major cigarette manufacturers in the United States have responded by spending more, not less on market research, advertising, and promotions in an effort to expand and retain market share in an ever-shrinking pool of smokers.⁴ Evidence of this effort is seen most dramatically in the increasing number of brand choices available to smokers. Between 1982 and 1998, cigarette consumption dropped by 38%, yet during this same period cigarette companies increased by 622% the number of cigarette brand styles available to consumers.^{5,6} The number of Marlboro brand styles increased from 9 to 44 during that time; Newport increased from 8 to 21. As public awareness of the health risks of smoking has grown, cigarette companies have responded by marketing illusionary light and ultra-light brands, and investing in new promotional schemes, special discounts, and direct consumer marketing efforts designed to entice young nonsmokers to start smoking, and to hold onto an increasingly health-concerned share of adult smokers.

For obvious economic reasons, cigarette companies have invested mostly heavily and competed most aggressively to capture and retain young adult smokers (usually defined as 18 to 24 years of age). Industry documents reveal that cigarette companies see young adult smokers as an especially valuable group because brand loyalties are still being formed, but once established represent the key to a company’s long-term profitability.^{1,7} Young adults are also prized because they help establish trends for teenagers, they are less concerned about the negative health consequences of smoking, and they have money to spend.⁷ The main take home message from the Ling and Glantz paper is that public health should follow the lead of the cigarette companies and start focusing attention on the young adult smoker market.¹

Today, the scorecard shows that cigarette companies are winning when it comes to young adults. Recent national surveys show that smoking rates are declining in all age groups, *except* young adults.⁸ One reason for this disturbing trend is that cigarette makers are investing a large share of their marketing resources to capture the young adult market, whereas the public health community is not. While increasing access to nicotine patches and quit lines may persuade some older smokers to give up their cigarettes, for younger adult smokers a different approach is going to be needed if the cigarette industry’s hold on young adults is to be eroded.⁹

As Ling and Glantz point out, the tobacco industry’s documents provide a road map that public health can follow to capture a share of the young adult smoker market.¹ The tobacco industry’s research on smoking cessation confirms what most health practitioners already know and what the medical literature has documented—many smokers are dependent on nicotine, which makes it hard to quit and in order to succeed in quitting, one has to be motivated to stop smoking.^{10,11} The tobacco industry marketing research clearly demonstrates that worries about health are the main reason that smokers give for making a quit attempt.¹ The higher number of quit attempts by younger adult smokers compared to their older counterparts is consistent with their greater awareness of health risks from smoking.^{12,13} However, older smokers have a higher rate of success in staying quit.¹²⁻¹⁴ The reason for this contradiction is that health awareness does not necessarily equate to health concern and behavior change.¹⁵ Recognizing health risks from smoking may lead a smoker to make a quit attempt, but accepting that the health risk is real and immediate for oneself is a more potent motivating force for staying quit.¹⁶

The difference between health awareness and health concern is something that cigarette makers have carefully considered in their marketing plans. For those mostly older health-concerned smokers who begin each day coughing and wheezing, cigarette manufacturers have conveniently created a line of ultra-light cigarette brands intended not so much to make smoking an enjoyable experience, but rather to lessen one’s guilt and fears about smoking.¹⁷ For those not so health-concerned younger adult smokers who are hip to the fact that smoking is a health risk, cigarette manufacturers have produced a line of “guilt-lite” cigarettes. Young adult smokers today are more likely than older adult counterparts to smoke a light cigarette brand.¹⁸ The number one selling cigarette brand among young adult smokers in the United States today is Marlboro Lights with 35% market share, nearly twice that of Marlboro regular (16%).¹⁹

The success of public health campaigns to deter smoking will be measured in large measure by our success or failure in competing against cigarette companies for a share of the young adult smoker market. Public health needs to set its sights directly on countering what Philip Morris is

doing to market its Marlboro brand. Among young adult African-American smokers, Lorillard and its Newport brand should be the target because the market share for this brand is over 80% in this group.¹⁹

Counter-marketing efforts need to be carried out with younger adult smokers comparable in scope to the successful "Truth" campaign that has targeted teenagers.²⁰ Smokers of all ages need to have ready access to effective interventions to help them break their addiction to nicotine.²¹ Young adult smokers in particular do not seem to appreciate the benefits of behavioral and pharmacological assistance that can help them quit.²² Young adults also need to be informed about the fraud of so-called light cigarettes.¹⁸ Design gimmicks such as ventilated filters and additives whose sole purpose is to make inhalation of deadly tobacco smoke more palatable should be prohibited. Graphic warning labels that reinforce the message that every cigarette one smokes does their body damage should replace the ineffective text-based warnings now required on cigarette packs.²³ Finally, the continued unfettered marketing of cigarettes through lifestyle advertising, special event sponsorships, and product line extensions should be halted.—**K. MICHAEL CUMMINGS, PhD, MPH, and GARY A. GIOVINO, PhD**, *Department of Health Behavior, Division of Cancer Prevention and Population Sciences, Roswell Park Cancer Institute, Buffalo, NY.*

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