Published in final edited form as:

Tob Control. 2012 May ; 21(3): 363–365. doi:10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2011-050219.

Planting Trees Without Leaving Home: Tobacco Company Direct-to-Consumer CSR Efforts

Mariaelena Gonzalez, Ph.D., Pamela M. Ling, MD, MPH, and Stanton A. Glantz, Ph.D.
Center for Tobacco Control Research and Education, University of California, San Francisco

Keywords

greenwashing; corporate social responsibility; Santa Fe Natural Tobacco Company

In developing countries tobacco and cigarette production involves the diversion of arable land from food to tobacco production. It also involves child labor (despite tobacco company corporate social responsibility campaigns against the use of child labor in tobacco growing fields), heavy pesticide use (often bought from tobacco company on loan), and deforestation.^{1–7} Santa Fe Natural Tobacco Company (SFNTC) is a wholly owned subsidiary of Reynolds American Inc. (Winston-Salem, NC, USA), which is, in turn, 42% owned by British American Tobacco (BAT). Tobacco companies, and BAT in particular, have a long history of using Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to support lobbying activities, to repair their reputation, and to turn non-tobacco non-governmental organizations (NGOs) into allies.^{3, 4, 8–17} RJ Reynolds also engages in environmental sustainability projects as part of Reynolds American Inc.¹⁸ Previously, BAT worked with NGOs such as Earthwatch to portray BAT as socially responsible.¹⁹ As part of its CSR activities, BAT engages in reforestation projects in many tobacco growing countries. However, these efforts are often used to replace trees lost as fuel for the flue-curing process (and thus serves to ensure that fuel is available at a later time point).⁷

SFNTC is using reforestation programs as a promotional activity. SFNTC produces American Spirit cigarettes, a premium brand with an “environmentally friendly” and “natural tobacco” image.²⁰ In 2011 SFNTC used direct to consumer advertising to reinforce its eco-friendly image.

In the past, SFNTC embedded wildflower seeds in birthday cards sent to consumers on its direct mail lists.²¹ In 2011, SFNTC mailed out birthday cards (figure 1) which read, “We know how important the environment is to you. Instead of planting a seeded card, we want you to go global. This year, plant a tree in one of the many reforestation projects throughout the world.”²² Consumers “plant” trees by redeeming a code and choosing which country they wish their tree planted in. They can also obtain environmental information (such as a carbon calculator) and information about reforestation projects.

The website, www.seed-the-future.com, is run by the company FarFromBoring, which markets promotional items.²³ FarFromBoring created the Seed the Future campaign that

Corresponding Author: Mariaelena Gonzalez, Center for Tobacco Control Research & Education, UCSF, 530 Parnassus Ave., Box 1390, San Francisco, CA 94143-1390, mariaelena.gonzalez@ucsf.edu.

Competing interests: None

Contributorship Statement: MG came up with the idea for the paper and drafted the manuscript. PML and SG contributed to the analysis and interpretation of data, helped revise the manuscript, and worked with MG to revise the manuscript in response to the reviewers’ comments. All authors gave final approval of the version to be published.

allows clients to “leverage your brand in an eco-friendly way” and “enhance your company’s brand image by demonstrating your environmental awareness”²⁴ through “tree cards” (figure 2). Web searches revealed that organizations such as Stanford University, and London Towncars have used these “tree cards”. A cached version of the Seed the Future website stated that “All Seed The Future projects support Trees for the Future”²⁵ (a nonprofit organization); however, a call to FarFromBoring revealed that, because many tree planting organizations focus on one area of the world, net revenues (after their costs and profit) are given to several organizations that planted trees in the US and elsewhere. (We could not discover the exact organizational names.) Because the seed-the-future website does not have a privacy policy and each tree card contains a unique code, it would be easy for SFNTC to track which consumers redeem these gifts.

In 2011, Phillip Morris also offered an eco-friendly promotion using the Marlboro website, which included charting the company’s environmental activities, offering conservation tips, and allowing customers the opportunity to have Marlboro donate \$5 to a conservation agency on their behalf and to enter an environmental project-themed sweepstakes. While Marlboro did not name who they were going to give the money to, on the website, placed directly below the offer to donate money, customers are invited to “learn more” about three conservation agencies: Keep America Beautiful, American Land Conservancy, and American Rivers.²⁶

While in the past BAT has used CSR, such as the reforestation projects, to target policy elites, tobacco growers, and consumers,¹⁷ the low cost of activities such as “tree cards” (100,000 cards cost \$0.66 each plus additional costs for a custom “landing” webpage)²⁷ or email and web promotions like sweepstakes suggests that in the future corporations may direct more CSR efforts at consumers on their direct-mail-list using third parties.

Acknowledgments

Funding: This work was supported by National Cancer Institute at the National Institute of Health (grants CA-113710, CA-87472) and by the California Tobacco Related Disease Research Program (20FT-0077).

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Figure 1.

Front and one of the inside inscription of birthday card received from the Santa Fe Natural Tobacco Company (a full copy of the birthday card has been sent to Trinkets and Trash), and copy of the leading page www.seed-the-future.com/SFNTC.

Figure 2.
Outline of the relationship between FarFromBoring, Tree Cards, and way in which Tree Cards are redeemed.