The Future of Tobacco Marketing in Canada

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ABSTRACT

With the advent of the Tobacco Act, tobacco marketing is now severely restricted in Canada. This article considers how the tobacco industry may conduct future marketing in order to circumvent the Tobacco Act. Past tobacco marketing strategies are discussed in light of how such strategies could be used in future marketing campaigns. In addition, this article highlights the need for private industries unrelated to tobacco to conduct socially responsible advertising so as to avoid inadvertently promoting tobacco.

MeSH terms: Tobacco industry; smoking; marketing; advertising; Internet; sports

Canada is currently among the leaders in tobacco control, particularly with respect to the regulation of tobacco marketing. The recent ban on tobacco sponsorship¹ and the requirement for cigarette packs to carry new graphic health warnings² stand out. These marketing restrictions, combined with survey data, show that fewer youth smoke.³ When one also considers that Canada serves as a model for the international community, and that the Framework Convention for Tobacco Control paves the way for similar policies to be adopted internationally,⁴ the marketing regulations of the Tobacco Act could be a source of concern to the tobacco industry. The fact that the industry has contested the recent Quebec Supreme Court decision to uphold the Tobacco Act⁵ demonstrates the industry's desire to continue advertising.

The recent loss of a major advertising route, that of sponsorship, means the tobacco industry has a significant amount of funds available for marketing. Since the tobacco industry has a poor history of social responsibility,⁶ it is highly probable that the industry may try to circumvent the Tobacco Act by re-directing these funds into new ways of marketing. As advocates of public health, we should now, more than ever, be on alert for emerging tobacco marketing methods.

How could future tobacco marketing be done in Canada? The release of corporate documents from tobacco firms has helped elucidate how marketing has been done in the past.⁷ Knowledge of these methods can assist professionals in detecting future tobacco marketing campaigns. These strategies, and how the industry could try to apply them in future tobacco marketing, are outlined below.

Overview of past tobacco marketing strategies

Targeting Vulnerable Groups

Historically, the industry has targeted special groups, such as children.⁷ Since Canadian law does not allow the industry to market to children directly,¹ the tobacco industry could try advertising to children through a third party by forming alliances with industries that are popular among children, such as brand names in sports, music, or film. Since any evidence of economic ties between such industries would

La traduction du résumé se trouve à la fin de l'article.

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Acknowledgements: The authors thank Robert Allard, Marie-Claire Laurendeau, Eric Litvak, Cristin Muecke, Stéphane Perron, Chantal Sauvageau, and the reviewers for their invaluable comments on the manuscript, and Yann Cosma for the useful legal advice.

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likely be carefully hidden and, therefore, impossible to prove, this potential marketing strategy is of even greater concern than traditional marketing methods.

Visual Imagery and Repetition

Visual imagery and repetition are well-recognized marketing tools.^{8,9} Both strategies have formed the basis of tobacco marketing,⁷ and there is no reason to think this will change. The persistent presence of cigarette imagery gives an impression that smoking is socially acceptable and desirable.⁷ Some of the key forms of imagery used in tobacco advertising are as follows:

1. Lifestyle advertising, reassuring imagery, and encouraging tobacco as a social norm

Historically, the tobacco industry promoted its product in a pristine way.⁷ For instance, the industry used pictures of nature to portray cigarettes as healthy and pure.⁷ However, advertising a pristine product no longer makes sense since the new Health Canada warnings make the physical appearance of cigarette packs quite horrifying.² The tobacco industry must therefore sell (and attempt to normalize) a scary-looking product. One option is to increase exposure to the health warnings so as to ultimately decrease the effectiveness of the warnings. Although it may seem unusual, it may make sense for the tobacco industry to incorporate the physical characteristics of cigarette package warnings into their ads. For instance, tobacco ads could be written with a typeface similar to the health warnings. Images within the new health warnings could be incorporated into unrelated symbols of the tobacco ad. Overall, ads such as these could contribute to creating an air of 'familiarity' and to a consequent false sense of security with cigarette packs.

2. Extreme sports, encouraging risk taking, and other themes

The industry has used extreme sports such as Formula One car racing in the promotion of their product⁷ and may turn to other popular sports, such as ice hockey, in order to reach a larger proportion of the target population. The industry has also promoted risk taking as a rewarding behaviour and associated cigarettes to freedom, masculinity, and

peer acceptance.⁷ Given that smoking is obviously a risky behaviour, it may be in the industry's interest to continue promoting risk taking in their ads. Consequently, it seems logical for the industry to associate activities such as hockey with risk taking, freedom, or other themes. In fact, hockey would be a wise choice since it is popular with boys, and since the current decrease in tobacco use by young males is a concern for the industry.

3. Verbal imagery

The industry has used slogans that covertly promoted cigarette use. Any slogan or theme incorporating the notion of lighting or burning things could potentially be used by the tobacco industry.

Maximizing Exposure to Children

The industry could try to maximize exposure by using a variety of media channels popular with children. The Internet, in particular, is an attractive option for the industry since regulations on Internet marketing are lax. Since the industry cannot advertise directly to children,¹ they could incorporate their messages into the third party's web-site. The industry could find innovative ways of attracting children to this web-site, for example, through cool television commercials. Although it would appear unusual in a developed country, they could tour schools, sports clubs, and music clubs to promote the web-site. Since children are likely to enjoy seeing photos or videos of themselves on the Internet, the industry could give children a further incentive by posting such images on the web-site. Children are also likely to refer friends to the web-site to show off the pictures.

Repetition

The tobacco industry has historically used contests to promote cigarettes.⁷ Since repetition is important,⁹ the industry could develop a contest requiring children to repeatedly view the tobacco messages on the web-site. They could offer desirable prizes, such as objects signed by famous figures. The overall result is that children repeatedly see tobacco normalization messages and gradually become comfortable with cigarette packs and smoking.

How should these hypothetical future scenarios be addressed?

The importance of preventing tobacco advertising is now well recognized. The fact that tobacco advertising and promotion has recently been shown to increase adolescent smoking¹⁰ further emphasizes the need to regulate marketing. This article has highlighted some of the ways in which future tobacco marketing could be done to circumvent the restrictions on tobacco marketing. The public health community's next step is to actively monitor advertisements directed to children and youth for their tobacco content. This task is relatively easy since we only need to look in places where exposure to children and youth is greater than to adults. Second, we need only be concerned with large amounts of tobacco imagery, since small amounts are less likely to have the impact desired by the tobacco industry.

Undoubtedly, the monitoring of products promoted to children and youth may result in the discovery of coincidental tobacco imagery. In these cases, the public health community can inform companies that their ads could inadvertently promote tobacco. There are many reasons for which companies may decide to change their ads. First, most companies want their ads to make consumers think about their own products, not another company's product. Second, it is not in any company's interest to inadvertently market a product with a bad reputation. Sales could suffer if consumers suspected a company was inadvertently promoting tobacco.

Most importantly, companies have a responsibility to market their products in a way that is not harmful to public health. In a commentary on the potential harms of youth injury prevention programs, one conclusion was the importance of evaluating public health interventions.¹¹ Should a similar point be made for the marketing campaigns of private industries?

The World Health Organization advocates for the regulation of marketing to children, including marketing on the Internet.¹² Although this concern stems from a need to regulate marketing in order to curb the obesity epidemic, this principle readily applies to tobacco marketing. However, until such regulations are put in place, corporations should carefully consider the potential for double messaging from

their marketing campaigns, that could result in inadvertent harm.

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Received: June 8, 2004

Accepted: February 18, 2005

RÉSUMÉ

Depuis la mise en application de la *Loi sur le tabac*, le marketing des produits du tabac est considérablement restreint au Canada. Cet article examine comment l'industrie du tabac pourrait dorénavant publiciser ses produits en court-circuitant cette loi. Les stratégies antérieures de marketing des produits du tabac sont revues avec la perspective de leur utilisation dans ces nouvelles campagnes. Enfin, l'article insiste sur la nécessité pour les industries non reliées au tabac de mener des campagnes publicitaires responsables pour éviter de promouvoir les produits du tabac par inadvertance.

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