Marketing Cigarettes to Children

Curt Dewees

Since the number of smokers in the United States is declining by about 1 million a year, the tobacco industry must recruit new smokers if it is to survive and prosper. Most new smokers are recruited from the ranks of children and adolescents. More than 80 percent of smokers born since 1935 started smoking before they turned 21. Today, 90 percent of those who start smoking are children or teenagers. Obviously, getting young people to start smoking is vitally important to the survival of the tobacco industry.

Cigarettes are one of the most heavily marketed consumer products in the United States. The tobacco industry claims it doesn't advertise to children and has established a voluntary code to that effect. Tobacco spokesmen say those millions of dollars spent each year on cigarette advertising are intended to encourage brand loyalty or to encourage adult smokers to try a new brand. Is the tobacco industry telling the truth? Let's examine the unique case of Camel cigarettes.

Camel cigarettes were first introduced in 1913 by RJ Reynolds (RJR). For 75 years, RJR advertised to adults. In 1946, for example, RJR advertised that "More Doctors Smoke Camels Than Any Other Cigarette." The idea was that smoking was a medically safe thing to do. Later on Camel developed other adult themes such as, "Camel. Where a man belongs." But over the years Camel sales slumped. It eventually became clear within the tobacco industry that the aging Camel was on its last legs.

In February 1988, RJR decided to breathe new life into its tired old dromedary. It introduced the "smooth character" multimedia advertising campaign, which featured a brightly-drawn cartoon character. Dubbed "Old Joe," this new cartoon camel was a cross between James Bond and Don Johnson on "Miami Vice" with a little race-car driver and jet pilot thrown in. The "smooth character" ads showed Old Joe the Camel wearing a tuxedo or a leather aviator's jacket. He was pictured hanging out with friends, at parties, and in front of a bright red sports car. Usually one or more beautiful, attentive women were stationed close at hand.

The results of the "smooth character" campaign astounded the tobacco establishment. The tobacco industry reported that Old Joe "has reversed the fortunes of Camel cigarettes, now the No. 6 brand in the $40 billion market" and that the "smooth character is proving just how much a well-executed image blitz can do for a decrepit brand." Nationally, RJR's "smooth character" campaign boosted sales to an estimated $476 million a year. Old Joe the Camel succeeded so well he even spawned an imitator. The Brown & Williamson Tobacco Company recently introduced a penguin character to advertise its Kool brand of cigarettes.

Today RJR continues its "smooth character" campaign, adding new twists along the way. Old Joe is now the laid-back leader of a jazz group called the "Hard Pack." In one ad, Old Joe and his friends relax between sets, while one of them reaches forward and offers you a cigarette. In another ad, Old Joe and the Hard Pack are partying at a nightclub called the Midnight Oasis. A bouncer turns away a cowboy (the Marlboro Man?) at the door, while the caption reads, "Only smooth characters need apply."
While the "smooth character" is new, the way RJR sells him is not. The tobacco industry has a long tradition of placing ads in markets specifically designed to reach young people. Magazine ads are a perennial favorite. The tobacco companies also pay to have their cigarettes appear in dozens of teen movies. For example, Camels are featured in the Walt Disney movies *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* and *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*.

According to tobacco-industry market strategy documents, the tobacco companies also place poster ads at "key youth locations/meetings places in the proximity of theaters, record stores, video arcades, etc." You can also find Old Joe posters in shopping malls, a favorite teen hangout. RJR also uses billboards and sponsors sporting events and entertainment events to promote Camels.

RJR also spreads the Camel gospel through promotional giveaways, ranging from T-shirts and baseball caps to inflatable mattresses and radios goods that appear to be aimed at young consumers. You can buy these items with "C-notes," which are included in cigarette packs. In all, RJR spends $100 million a year on Camel ads and promotions. What impact does all that advertising have on kids?

To find out, the California Department of Health commissioned a study in 1990. A team of researchers led by Joseph R. DiFranza, MD, conducted random telephone interviews with over 24,000 adults and 5,000 teenagers. The respondents were asked which brand of cigarettes was the most advertised brand. By far the two brands named as being the most advertised brands were Marlboro and Camel.

An interesting thing happened when the responses were broken down by age. It became obvious that the younger the respondent, the more likely he or she perceived Camel as the most advertised brand. Less than 10 percent of respondents aged 45 years and older thought Camel was the most advertised brand. This percentage doubled to 19.8 percent for the 18-24 year-olds and increased to 22.7 percent for the 16-17 year-olds. Over 34 percent of the youngest age group, aged 12-13, named Camel as the most advertised brand.

The DiFranza study, reported in the December 1991 Journal of the American Medical Association, suggests two possible reasons for the younger kids' familiarity with Camel. One is that children are exposed to more Camel advertisements than adults are. The other explanation is that the Old Joe character is just more interesting to kids.

A study by P. M. Fischer and others supports the second theory. Fischer questioned 5,000 kids to find out how well they recognized brand logos. The study found that many three- to six-year-old children were just as captivated by Old Joe Camel promoting cigarettes as they were by Mickey Mouse in advertisements for the Disney Channel.

A third study by John P. Pierce, PhD, and others compared the market shares of Marlboro and Camel among California smokers from 1986 to 1990. During those four years Marlboro increased its market share, and the increase was more or less the same among all age groups. Camel also increased its market share, but the 18- to 29-year-old smoker group increased far more than any other age group, skyrocketing 230 percent. Pierce concludes that Camel's triumphant comeback is largely dependent on young smokers.

This conclusion is consistent with the viewpoint within the tobacco industry. One source close to Marlboro (Camel's main rival) said, "When you see teenage boys people the cigarette companies aren't supposed to be targeting in the first place going crazy for this guy [the cartoon camel], you know they're [RJR] hitting their target." Another advertising consultant said, "Where I worked we were trying very hard to influence kids who were 14 to start to smoke."

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Internal tobacco industry memos and marketing strategy documents confirm these statements. One RJR long-term strategy document asked, "Whose behavior are we trying to affect? New users." Another RJR document described the goal as "optimizing product and user imagery of "Export A" against young starter smokers." The average age of starter smokers is 13.
In public, the RJR company blows a lot of smoke to cover up its strategy, saying Camel smokers are mainly white males over the age of 21. But behind the smoke screen, the tobacco companies are engaged in extensive market research to find out what appeals to children. They want to "learn everything there is to know about how smoking begins." One RJR tobacco marketing plan for "Export A" cigarettes describes their "psychological benefits" this way. "Export" smokers will be perceived as ... characterized by their self-confidence, strength of character and individuality, which makes them popular and admired by their peers." This strategy taps deep into children's vulnerability to peer pressure.

The tobacco companies know they have to get kids started while they're young. According to one industry study, "The goading and taunting that exists at the age of 11 or 12 to get nonsmokers to start smoking is virtually gone from the peer group circles by 16 or 17."

The tobacco industry also researches the best ways of keeping children from quitting once they start. One study looked at marketing low-tar brands to teens as an alternative to quitting. The study found that for boys "the single most commonly voiced reason for quitting among those who had done so ... was sports." The tobacco industry's sponsorship of sports events, such as the Camel Supercross motorcycle race, appears to be a ploy to discourage teenage boys from quitting. Also, the tobacco industry's constant emphasis on slimness (Virginia Slims, etc.) also helps to encourage the fear in girls that if they quit they will gain weight.

The sheer volume and calculated youthful appeal of tobacco industry advertising produces its intended effect. Research has shown that children get their positive images of smoking from advertising. Children who are aware of tobacco advertising, and those who approve of it, are more likely to become smokers. The DiFranza study found that nonsmoking children who believed smoking would make them more popular were eight times more likely to say they intended to smoke in the future.

Pierce agrees: "Our results suggest that tobacco advertising is causally related to young people becoming addicted to cigarettes. ... Also, there is strong evidence that most smokers become addicted when they are minors and do not understand the long-term consequences of smoking. Overcoming the addiction is a lifelong struggle for many smokers, and the failure rate for cessation attempts is extremely high."

In an editorial published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, Representative Henry Waxman, D-California, wrote, "With straight faces, RJ Reynolds and its industry colleagues report that they've chosen figures like Old Joe Camel because they believe that such figures will appeal to adult smokers and encourage them to change brands. With the same straight faces, they will likely express shock that children respond to this campaign by taking up smoking. It's simple: first they wanted us to believe smoking was safe. Now they want us to believe that their advertising campaigns don't cause people to start smoking and that cartoons don't appeal to children.

"Not only are these statements unbelievable, but they are also immoral and dangerous. In light of the deleterious health effects of tobacco, cigarette advertising is the moral equivalent of a national campaign to 'Drive Drunk Just for the Fun of It.' This isn't the first time the dubious morality of the tobacco industry has come under fire. During the Cipollone v. Liggett Group trial of 1988, in which a smoker sued a cigarette company and won, a 1972 internal tobacco-industry memorandum came to light. This memo outlined the industry's strategy of "creating doubt about the health charge without actually denying it; advocating the public's right to smoke without actually urging them to take up the practice, and encouraging objective scientific research as the only way to resolve the question of health hazard." The federal judge in the Cipollone case, H. Lee Sarokin, concluded that the tobacco industry had participated in a "conspiracy vast in scope, devious in its purpose, and devastating in its results."

Is RJR involved in a similar conspiracy with Old Joe Camel? DiFranza acknowledges that from a legal and moral standpoint it is important to determine if the tobacco industry is actively promoting nicotine addiction among youngsters. "From a public health perspective, however, the morality of the tobacco companies is not the issue," he adds. "If it is found that tobacco advertising leads to addiction and disease among young people, whether intentional or not, then this cause of disease..."
must be eradicated . . .

"Our study provides further evidence that tobacco advertising promotes and maintains nicotine addiction among children and adolescents. A total ban of tobacco advertising and promotions, as part of an effort to protect children from the dangers of tobacco, can be based on sound scientific reasoning."19

Pierce agrees, concluding that cigarette advertising encourages youth to smoke and should be banned. "Unless those responsible for protecting our young take action quickly, the declines that we have seen recently in the proportion of our youngsters who start to smoke may be in jeopardy," he says. "Given the potential harm to the health of future generations, public policy should, as a matter of urgency, extend the ban on tobacco advertising to cover not only the electronic media but also all other forms of cigarette advertising and promotion."20

Canada has already attempted a total ban on cigarette advertising. Canadian public health advocates recently argued that advertising promotes smoking by minors and convinced the national legislature to ban all tobacco advertising. The tobacco industry appealed, and in the first round of appeals the judge overturned the new law. Nevertheless, the law remains in effect pending the next round of legal appeals.

Why did the appeals judge overturn the law? Because he believed the tobacco-industry argument that cigarette advertising is aimed only at adult smokers. This means public health advocates must work harder to demonstrate that the tobacco industry does use advertising to target young people.

In the United States the Federal Trade Commission took action in October 1991 to stop Red Man Chewing Tobacco from advertising on television by sponsoring televised sporting events. The cigarette industry has sponsored televised sporting events all along, but the Justice Department, which has had jurisdiction over cigarette advertising for 20 years, has yet to take any action.

Because of this inaction, it is up to lawmakers and the public to take the next step and ban all forms of cigarette advertising and promotion. Obviously this will not be easy. The tobacco industry is a well-funded and well-entrenched enemy and will fight any proposed ban. Nevertheless, public health advocates are gaining support as tobacco industry practices come to light.

As Rep. Waxman says, "If we can protect our young people from nicotine addiction, they are unlikely to die of smoking-related diseases as adults. Tobacco use by young people should be treated with the same level of intolerance as the use of any other addictive drug. It is sobering to me as a legislator and recent grandfather that six-year-olds now find Old Joe Camel as easy to recognize as Mickey Mouse."

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References


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