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Cigarettes are the only product advertised which are lethal when used as intended. Indeed they are a product about which nothing good can honestly be said. They are highly addictive. The damage they do to health has been documented by more than 50,000 research studies. Smoking is the single largest preventable cause of death in America. Over 1,000 people die every day because of cigarette-related diseases. In the twentieth century, more people have been killed by tobacco than by war.

Nowhere is the distorted perspective of advertising a perspective that manages to screen out almost all unpleasant reality except the strictly personal (e.g., bad breath, facial hair) more obvious than it is in cigarette ads. Contradictions abound in the world of tobacco advertising. Youthful, healthy people frolic and play with no apparent worries whatsoever. “Alive with pleasure,” proclaims the ads for Newports, as if to obliterate the haunting subtext, “Dead with cancer.” Macho men owe their freedom and independence, indeed their very masculinity, to their Camels and Marlboros, although the evidence indicates that cigarettes are linked with impotence, lower testosterone count, and sterility.

Most advertising is essentially myth-making. The point of almost all national advertising is not to give information but rather to establish an image for a product. Advertising does this by linking a product with a quality or attribute. These jeans will make you sexy, this detergent will save your marriage, this car will give you confidence. The links are generally false and arbitrary, but we are so surrounded by them that we come to accept them without any further thought, to believe that they are unquestionably logical and natural.

Such myth-making is always deceptive and often harmful to the consumer. In the case of cigarette advertising, however, it can be truly dangerous. It further convinces cigarette smokers, young people, and the entire society that this drug is benevolent and essential to one’s happiness and success. It creates in our society a climate of denial.

Most important of all, tobacco advertising spuriously links the use of tobacco with precisely those attributes and qualities in life such things as happiness, wealth, prestige, sophistication, success, maturity, athletic ability, virility, creativity, sexual satisfaction, and others that the habitual use of drugs usually diminishes and destroys.

Cigarettes remain among the most heavily advertised products in the nation. The tobacco industry spends over two and a half billion tax-deductible dollars a year in the US alone on advertising and promotion of its products. At the same time, the industry ironically attempts to deny that this advertising has any effect on consumers. They insist that they do not target nonsmokers or young people, and that the whole point of all that advertising is simply to get smokers to switch brands.

In fact, only 10 percent of the nation’s 55 million smokers switch brands in a given year. It is obvious that the tobacco industry needs to recruit aggressively new smokers to replace those who die or quit. A recent study published in Health Education Quarterly found that proportionally more cigarette ads were placed in women’s and youth-oriented magazines than in magazines targeting other segments in the population. This suggests that the tobacco industry is responding to overall decreases in the number of smokers in this country with an increased attempt to recruit new smokers from other groups, especially young people and women.
Young people have always been an important target of the tobacco industry because marketers know that at least 75 percent of smokers are hooked before the age of 21. Many of the cigarette advertising campaigns appeal more specifically to young people by equating smoking with sexiness, glamour, and sophistication. In addition, some campaigns seem expressly designed to catch the attention of children. The current Camel campaign, for example, uses cartoon characters. Often this campaign has made light of well-established health risks with the copy "75 years and still smokin'." Although this refers superficially to the brand's 75th birthday, it certainly implies to the casual observer that one can smoke and still live to a ripe old age.

Social learning theory suggests that repeated exposure to modeled behavior can result in behavioral change in lifestyle. It is no casual coincidence that cigarette ads feature only very healthy, attractive, and youthful-looking people. Those who argue that peer pressure is the major influence on the lives of young people strangely overlook how the entire peer group as a whole is socialized. Few seem to realize that advertising is a powerful educational force, one that promotes attitudes and values as well as products.

One of the major functions of advertising in general is to induce in its consumers these early and unspoken expectancies in life. Advertising attempts to affect attitudes. According to an editorial published in a recent issue of Advertising Age, "Quite clearly, the company that has not bothered to create a favorable attitude toward its product before the potential customer goes shopping hasn't much of a chance of snaring the bulk of potential buyers."1

No wonder ads feature characters who will have special appeal to children. The current campaign for Parliament Lights, for example, uses the slogan, "The Perfect Recess." Surely recess is a word with a much more positive meaning for children than it has for adults. And the pictures in these advertisements such as of a young couple on bicycles generally support this interpretation.

Another common theme in ads aimed at young people is that cigarette smoking is a daring, gutsy thing for them to do. Many cigarette ads feature very risky activities. "Be a daredevil. Be a rebel," the ads tantalize. Research indicates that smokers are more likely than the general population to be risk-taking, extroverted, defiant, and impulsive. It is no coincidence that cigarette companies are the leading sponsors of events that appeal to risk-taking teenagers: rodeos, ballooning, and motorcycle, dirt-bike, and hot rod-racing.

The smoker is portrayed as the man or woman who dares to defy public opinion, to stand on his or her own. "No compromise" declared one series for Winston.

Teenage girls are especially vulnerable to this kind of advertising pitch. An American Cancer Society report found that cigarette smoking among teenage girls was highly identified with an anti-authority, rebellious syndrome in relationship to the adult world. For instance, one Lucky Strike ad depicts a young, very defiant-looking woman along with the caption, "Light my Lucky.

Virginia Slims cleverly plays on this attitude as well in many of their ads. In one ad, an older, rather Victorian-looking woman is complaining about young women: "Shocking, absolutely shocking, the way young women cavort about these days," and another says, "Tsk. Tsk. Proper, decent women shouldn't have fun in the sun. In fact, they shouldn't have any fun at all." A young woman replies, "Well, shame on me, 'cause I really like to have fun." Certainly these older women are meant to represent mothers, teachers, and other adults who might advise young women, among other things, not to smoke. A rebellious adolescent thus might mistakenly interpret valid advice against smoking as an edict against having fun.

The tobacco industry is attempting to get even more mileage from this image by portraying public-health advocates as anti-smoking fanatics who want to tell everybody else what to do. It seems to be setting health officials and agencies against what it would characterize as the courageous, independent, free-thinking smoker. Thus its extraordinary public-relations campaign attempts to
equate smoking with democratic freedom and the criticism of smoking with totalitarianism.

The long-running Virginia Slims campaign (and others similar to it) attempt to make an amazingly ironic equation between liberation and addiction, between freedom of choice and enslavement to tobacco. This equation is particularly self-contradictory, given that nicotine is the most addictive drug known to science, and that at least 85 percent of smokers wish they could quit their addiction. The only equality that smoking has brought to women is that they are now contracting lung cancer at the same rate as men are. One can consider cigarette smoking liberating only if one considers death the ultimate form of freedom.

In addition to the above techniques, ads aimed at women and girls also frequently suggest that cigarettes are a form of weight control. In this way the advertisers are cashing in on the national obsession with excessive thinness for women. A primary reason that many women start and do not quit smoking is their terror of gaining weight. Ads have been playing upon this fear of obesity for a long time. In 1928 the Lucky Strike ads said, "To keep a slender figure, no one can deny . . . Reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet."

With a much more well-informed public, the advertisers probably couldn't get away with such an overt and outrageous message today. They can, however, use extremely thin models and copy that includes such words as slim and slender. Virginia Slims' new superslims cigarette promises smokers "more than just a sleek shape." A recent campaign for Capri cigarettes features an attractive young woman and the headline, "The slimmest slim in town." This pitch is one major reason that cigarette smoking is on the increase among teenage girls, a group especially susceptible to the obsession with weight.

Unfortunately, these tactics seem to be working too well. The only societal group in which cigarette smoking is increasing is that of young women, and the largest new group of smokers is girls under the age of eleven. Twenty percent of young women graduating from high school smoke, versus 10 percent of the men. A Weekly Reader survey found that, although other drug use among teenagers has declined, the rate of adolescent cigarette smoking has remained essentially the same for the past five years.²

The most effective incentives against smoking for young people involve emphases on the importance of physical well-being and the need to be an independent thinker. It is also extremely important to fight the off-balanced obsession with excessive thinness for women in our society. A recent national survey of fourth-grade girls found that 80 percent of them were already on diets. This obsession with weight in itself should be regarded as a major public-health problem. In addition, we must continue to fight the sexism that makes young men desperate to appear macho and young women willing to settle for counterfeit emblems of progress rather than the real thing.

The tobacco industry has insidiously positioned itself on the side of autonomy and freedom. This is a classic example of doublespeak. Ads for tobacco often stress freedom, independence, control, and power although, ironically, it is precisely these things that addiction takes away from its users. Critics of tobacco need to expose the truth that cigarette smoking is nothing more than a dangerous addiction deliberately promoted by a callous industry devoted only to profit. We also need to do everything we can to help people, especially the young, realize that by smoking they are actually giving in to conformity rather than expressing their individuality. They are allowing themselves to be personally manipulated by a very powerful industry.

We need to educate our children and students very specifically about the risks that they take by using tobacco. Vague slogans about the effects of tobacco do more harm than good. We need to be as specific about the dangers of smoking as we have become about heart disease in recent years.

We need to begin this education as early in the lives of our children as possible. Some people feel that teaching about alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs actually encourages drug use, just as some people feel that sex education leads to promiscuity. However, in both cases, the evidence suggests just the opposite.

We know that in most cases our children won't have licenses to drive until they are 16, but we certainly wouldn't want to wait until then to teach them about automobile safety (e.g., using seat belts and obeying the law) and, more important, about the values and attitudes that make people safe and courteous drivers. Imagine the chaos that would result if we simply tossed them the keys and said, "Drive responsibly" and let them go without another word.
We need to model low-risk behavior for our young people. We also need to help them find healthful ways to be euphoric and joyful, to find positive ways to achieve the things that drugs promise (and sometimes even deliver for a short time and then take away). Our drug problem is deeply related to other problems in our culture poverty, racism, sexism, glorification of violence, greed, alienation, and damage to the environment. We need to empower our young people, to help them believe they can and should make a difference in solving these problems. We need to touch the part of them that wants to be well, to be all they can be, and to be of use.

Our society needs to make a major comprehensive effort to prevent drug problems in our midst. Such an effort must include education, mass media campaigns, increased availability of treatment programs, and more effective deterrence policies. It must also include public policy changes that take into account that individuals act within social, economic, and cultural environments that profoundly influence their attitudes and choices. Such changes would include raising excise taxes on tobacco and regulating its advertising. Research has documented that the single most effective way to reduce consumption of tobacco by young people is to raise excise taxes.

In 1986 the American Medical Association decided that the evidence was sufficient to warrant the call for a total ban on cigarette advertising. Even if such a ban did not lead to an immediate decrease in actual consumption, it would clear the way for the media to report on the dangers of smoking with an honesty it has never before employed. The media's self-censorship on behalf of cigarette and alcohol advertisers is a national disgrace. The public education that is essential in solving our major drug problems is probably not possible until the media no longer depend upon the economic goodwill of the tobacco and alcohol industries.

The war that we are waging on drugs is meaningless if it does not focus also on our legalized drugs our advertised drugs since they are still not legal for young people, who are under the continuous influence of very sophisticated advertising approaches. We cannot win this war until we stop supporting the denial that is at the heart of the problem, both in individuals and in society as a whole the denial that tobacco advertising depends upon and perpetuates.

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**References**