

- ISSUE BRIEF -

SMOKING CESSATION PROGRAMS

This issue brief explains how Philip Morris benefits by promoting smoking cessation materials as part of its corporate social responsibility program. The cessation programs emphasize that the individual smoker and not Philip Morris is responsible for addiction to their products.

THE ISSUE:

Philip Morris uses cynical corporate social responsibility programs like smoker cessation guides to convince society it doesn't want to keep its customers addicted, instead of lowering the amount of nicotine in its products to non-addictive levels or ceasing to oppose increased excise taxes on cigarettes, an effective tobacco control intervention proven to lower smoking rates. The company uses corporate social responsibility and personal responsibility rhetoric and tactics that shift the onus of responsibility away from industry and back onto its customers who struggle to free themselves from their addiction to tobacco. Philip Morris and the tobacco industry's promotion of smoking cessation has not been long-lived nor robust. Now that the major tobacco companies have acquired smokeless tobacco manufacturer subsidiaries, they are already turning away from cessation towards smokeless products as an alternative to quitting.

THE EVIDENCE:

Most Smokers Want to Quit

* Statistics show that most people who smoke would like to quit, a fact that the tobacco industry knows is a threat to its long-term profits.

According to a 2008 Gallup poll, 74% of the people who smoke say they would like to give it up, and 67% of those surveyed said that they are addicted to cigarettes.¹

A 2004 study of four countries found that 90% of adults surveyed reported they regret having started smoking and would not have started if they had it to over again.²

Given the fact that approximately 80% of adult smokers start smoking when they are teens or earlier,³ when their cognitive abilities are not fully developed,⁴ and that this demographic holds mistaken beliefs about the addictive nature of cigarettes and the consequences of smoking,⁵ it is debatable whether they made a truly informed choice to smoke.

Addiction

* *Traditionally, the tobacco industry has always denied that its products were addictive, because its lawyers warned that if addiction were admitted, the assertion that its customers made a free choice to smoke could not be supported. This was particularly dangerous in the context of litigation.*

*In a 1980 memo between Tobacco Institute executives, they recalled that their lawyers had told them "that the entire matter of addiction is the most potent weapon a prosecuting attorney can have in a lung cancer/cigarette case. We can't defend continued smoking as 'free choice' if the person was 'addicted.'"*⁶

In a 1990 litigation memo, Philip Morris's public relations consulting firm, Burson-Marsteller, summed up the industry's arrogant and unsympathetic position towards allegations that cigarettes are addictive: "Essentially, the addiction claim is an appeal to American juries to excuse a plaintiff's failure to stop smoking and to put the blame on tobacco companies for making cigarette products available. . . Those who claim addiction in cigarette litigation cases are seeking to disclaim their own personal responsibility."7 This is still the industry's position when it comes to litigation, though it has softened its rhetoric a bit with corporate social responsibility buzzwords.8

"Societal Alignment"

* In 1999, the tobacco industry strategically began to admit that smoking causes harm and can be addictive (a move which Philip Morris called "societal alignment") because the tobacco companies were starting to lose in litigation and experience much more political pressure than they had ever endured before.

"Societal alignment," was a strategy of both meeting and shaping society's expectations of the tobacco industry's corporate behavior. 9

Tobacco industry lawyers and executives have long recognized the perils of claiming the companies' customers choose freely to use their product if it is proven to be addictive.10,11

Yet despite this knowledge and perhaps because of the compelling statistics regarding the number of people who assert that they would like to quit smoking, Philip Morris and the other major tobacco companies felt that the benefits of corporate social responsibility tactics outweighed the risks on this issue, and began to admit on their websites that their products are addictive, at least outside of the context of litigation and regulation.12

QuitAssist

* In keeping with its "societal alignment" strategy, in 1999, Philip Morris decided to extend its corporate social responsibility efforts to include a program that would provide resources and information to its customers who wanted to quit smoking.13

In 2005, a Philip Morris executive testifying in the U.S. Department of Justice's racketeering lawsuit against the tobacco companies testified that "one of the goals of our Mission to achieve alignment with society is to support smokers who have decided to quit. . . . It's about helping smokers who want to quit be more successful. . . . [O]ur mission is to be a responsible cigarette manufacturer, and taking steps to help reduce the harm caused by smoking is part of that. One way to accomplish that goal is by supporting smokers who have decided to quit smoking cigarettes."14

In 2003, the company's cessation program included a smoking cessation guide provided on its website, and television advertisements and cigarette package "onserts" publicizing the guide.15,16 The company has distributed tens of thousands of the guides.17

Although Philip Morris initially contemplated using the more logical domain name www.quitassist.com,18 it ultimately chose to use its corporate domain www.philipmorrisusa.com instead, despite the confusion this caused with some smokers the company surveyed.19 It's possible that the company's desire for recognition for its corporate social responsibility efforts outweighed concerns for a more memorable, user-friendly URL.

Philip Morris could avoid creating addicted customers by reducing the level of nicotine in its products, or ceasing to oppose increased excise taxes, a proven method of discouraging smoking, particularly in underage smokers.

A 2004 Philip Morris survey found that "A number [of survey participants] thought PM USA's sponsorship of QuitAssist™ was positive; indicated corporate responsibility," though it also observed that "[a] few had a negative view of PM USA's provision of quitting information or were skeptical of information provided by PM USA."20

In 2009, one of Philip Morris's research grantees who helped write the smoking cessation guide was called out by public health researchers who claimed that the Philip Morris researcher improperly approached them for their help with an evaluation of Philip Morris's QuitAssist website. The public health researchers claimed that the tobacco research grantee offered to pay them for their input as consultants while assuring them he would conceal their involvement so that they would not be stigmatized as working for the tobacco industry, which included paying them in a way that could not connect them to the industry. He sent an email to the researchers soliciting their input, which stated: "Your name would not be associated in any way with your commentary, and you would not be

mentioned in any way in any correspondence or reports of findings from the study. Once you have been paid, your name would be removed from our records.”²¹

Personal Responsibility

* Philip Morris combined messages about personal responsibility with its smoking cessation program, placing the ultimate responsibility for the consequences of smoking on its customers, not itself.

In 2005, a Philip Morris executive testifying in the U.S. Department of Justice’s racketeering lawsuit against the tobacco companies testified that “Although we believe that adult smokers should continue to make decisions for themselves about smoking, we believe we have a role to play in helping them quit if that is what they want to do.”²²

Nicotine Replacement Therapy

* Despite its supposed commitment to helping its customers quit smoking, Philip Morris still worried about the addiction question, and the authors of its smoking cessation guide were concerned about admitting that nicotine replacement therapy and other medical interventions were necessary to break the cycle of addiction. Instead they wanted to focus on the personal responsibility and willpower of smokers as being the key to stopping smoking.

The authors of Philip Morris’s smoking cessation guide fretted about how much their television ads publicizing the guide should concede that quitting smoking requires a medical/pharmacological solution to address the problem (as opposed to willpower).

In a series of emails amongst the authors, one member of the committee writing the manual asserted: “. . . I would like to see less emphasis on nicotine replacement therapies (documenting someone who quit on their own or with social support would help balance the message.),”²³ and stated that “I agree we should give current smokers all the help they can benefit from, including nicotine replacement. Still, most former smokers said they were able to eventually quit w/o medications and so it seems important to support their perspective as models for potential quitters who want to do it on their own.”²⁴ Another committee member echoed this concern, objecting to the word “medication” being visible in an image of the manual’s pages in the television ad, calling it a “noxious subliminal message,” and stating “I would be concerned re the over representation of the ‘medication solution.’ . . . The medication route is one solution and an effective one but I would be concerned about unwittingly turning off our audience by too much medical talk. . . .”²⁵

Others on the committee pushed back against this resistance, stating for instance, “I am not sure we want to balance the message in that way, since cold turkey quit attempt success rates are demonstrably lower than assisted quitting”²⁶ Another member acknowledged “the new guidelines that virtually all smokers should at least *consider* medication.”²⁷ Another member tried to balance the two viewpoints, stating “I think promoting pharmacological support will only increase quit rates. The issue for me is to do this in a context that also promotes self efficacy.”²⁸

Missing from all this discussion amongst the authors was the fact that Philip Morris could avoid creating addicted customers by reducing the level of nicotine in its products,²⁹ or ceasing to oppose increased excise taxes, a proven method of discouraging smoking, particularly in underage smokers.³⁰ Once again, the tobacco industry was using corporate social responsibility and personal responsibility rhetoric and tactics that shifted the onus of responsibility away from industry, this time onto its customers who struggled to free themselves from their addiction to tobacco.

Smokeless Tobacco and Cessation

* The tobacco industry’s promotion of cessation has already begun to wane. Coinciding with their acquisition of smokeless tobacco company subsidiaries, the major U.S. cigarette manufacturers are now shifting their emphasis from supporting smoking cessation to advocating for the use of smokeless tobacco products as an alternative to quitting.

This bait and switch tactic is reminiscent of Lorillard’s advertising campaign for its True cigarettes, which advocated smoking True cigarettes because they were a safe alternative to quitting smoking.³¹

In June 2003, at a hearing of the U.S. House of Representative’s Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade and Consumer Protection, members of the tobacco industry testified that while smoking cessation was an important goal (and, as

they implied, an unrealistic and Utopian goal), the focus should be on encouraging the sale and use of so-called reduced-risk and reduced-exposure tobacco products, such as smokeless tobacco.³²

One member of Congress roundly criticized those testifying for the smokeless tobacco industry, telling them that their use of “the guise of concern for public health” qualified them for “a chutzpa award.”³³ She asserted that this argument “that smokeless tobacco use is a healthier alternative to smoking is analogous to suggesting that one is better off jumping off the fifth floor of the building than the 20th because, of course, both are likely to cost you your life.”³⁴ She pointed out that internal industry documents prove that smokeless tobacco manufacturers are pursuing a “dual consumption” strategy, not trying to help people quit smoking.³⁵ There is both anecdotal evidence³⁶ and scholarly research^{37,38,39,40,41} that affirm this assertion as well as the fact that smokeless tobacco carries its own burden of harm. The “dual consumption” strategy was evident in a 2009 R.J. Reynolds advertisement for its Camel Snus Frost product using the slogan “your cigarettes may get jealous.”⁴²

At the same hearing, Surgeon General Richard Carmona testified that there was scientific evidence to support the assertion that smokeless tobacco is harmful and that telling potential customers such as youth that this is a safer product could act as a prelude to their eventually moving on to smoking cigarettes.⁴³

In December 2009, Philip Morris and its newly-acquired subsidiary U.S. Smokeless Tobacco Co. wrote several letters to the Food and Drug Administration responding to a request for comments on the new statute granting the FDA regulatory power over tobacco products. Philip Morris advocated that the FDA encourage the use of smokeless tobacco products based on a “continuum of risk . . . to complement effective prevention and cessation strategies.”⁴⁴

THE MESSAGE

Most people who smoke regret starting (usually when they were underage), and would like to quit.

The tobacco industry realizes that the addictive nature of its products undercuts its claim that its customers continue to smoke because they freely choose to. Nevertheless, the major tobacco companies decided around the turn of the 21st century to admit that their products are addictive, in an attempt to preempt regulation and litigation. To underscore their supposed good will in admitting this long-obvious fact, they have employed corporate social responsibility programs to appear more open and responsible.

Philip Morris has instituted a corporate social responsibility program that provides information and resources to those of its customers who say they would like to quit. There are signs that the company was more concerned with the form and appearance of this program than its substance, and there is no convincing evidence that the company actually wants to encourage its customers to stop using its products.

Philip Morris’s smoking cessation program emphasizes personal responsibility over corporate responsibility. In its internal documents, there is ample evidence that the company had concerns about admitting that pharmacological therapies are necessary to overcome the addictive qualities of its products.

The tobacco industry’s interest in promoting outright smoking cessation was very short-lived. Now that all of the major tobacco companies have acquired smokeless tobacco subsidiaries, they are promoting those products as an alternative to quitting smoking. Advocates should analyze the industry’s smokeless tobacco “cessation” rhetoric through the lens of its prior cessation efforts.

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