

- ISSUE BRIEF -

TOBACCO INDUSTRY MANIPULATION OF THE PRESS

This issue brief is designed to support counter-marketing efforts by state tobacco control programs and tobacco control advocates. It sets forth a compelling topic and provides evidence from recently released tobacco industry documents to support its claims, concluding with statements that emphasize possible counter-marketing messages.

THE ISSUE

The tobacco companies tried various Corporate Social Responsibility tactics to influence the press's interpretation of their scientific positions, particularly on the subject of secondhand smoke.

THE EVIDENCE

The tobacco industry tried to enlist journalists as its allies in the fight for the hearts and minds of the general public and regulators.

- * A 1989 memo regarding the secondhand smoke activities of the Tobacco Institute, a tobacco industry trade group, recommended new strategies for approaching journalists that included trying to "make the media more skeptical" and to "hammer[] away at the inconclusiveness of the studies" through the dissemination of a briefing book to "targeted" journalists.¹

The tobacco industry studied how the media covers it and created a strategy based on psychology to manipulate the media's biases in its favor.

- * The Tobacco Institute recommended making non-American scientists more available for interviews on secondhand smoke because it noticed that they were more favorably received by American journalists.²
- * R.J. Reynolds employees strategized in 1997 about how best to influence reporters and editorial boards on the topic of secondhand smoke. It was suggested that the company should proactively organize one-on-one meetings with reporters with only one scientist and a public relations person in the hopes that such an approach "might garner more credibility with the press."³ The theory was that journalists would be less apt to feel like they were being given a sales pitch if they were approached individually. The company hoped to avoid creating a group dynamic in which the journalists would feel pressured to write a story adverse to the tobacco industry's interests because they got the impression that the "[t]obacco industry meets with journalists because industry is running scared."

THE MESSAGE

- * The tobacco industry tries to manipulate and game the press using psychology to try to turn them into allies.

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¹ ETS Coordinating Committee. September 15, 1989. Bates No. 515541697, 515541698. Available at: <http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/pbc77a00>.

² *Id.* at Bates No. 515541698.

³ Moskowitz, Seth W. IARC Communications. January 16, 1997. Bates No. 700900322. Available at <http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/oob77a0>.