

Why Banning Cigarettes Ads Doesn't Reduce Smoking

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As pressure grows for the prohibition of all cigarette advertising, research has failed to establish that adverts increase the incidence of smoking. Martha Rogers, Assistant Professor of Marketing at America's Bowling Green State University, summarises the evidence.

IN the US as elsewhere, public-health officials have advocated a ban on cigarette advertising as a means of reducing cigarette consumption. Against this, the American advertising industry argues that the manufacturer of any product that is freely and openly sold has the right to advertise freely and openly: a right protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution, which guarantees freedom of speech.

This paper offers a response to those who, with the best of intentions, want to ban cigarette advertising in the misguided belief that banning cigarette advertising will somehow reduce the desirability of smoking cigarettes. What the US decides to do may affect the Australian advertising industry as more American ad agencies decide to produce ads and entire campaigns in Australia.

Results of Ad Bans in Other Countries

In eight countries with centrally-planned economies studied in 1983, both overall and per capita consumption of cigarettes rose steadily in the previous eleven-year period, despite the total absence of **any** tobacco advertising (Boddewyn, 1983). In free market economies where tobacco advertising has been banned, the evidence indicates that the consumption trends apparent before the ad ban continued after the ban. Even partial bans have backfired. In 1970 the US Congress passed an advertising prohibition act that outlawed cigarette advertising on television or radio; cigarette consumption, which had been declining prior to 1970, began to increase. Boddewyn (1983) and Waterson (1984) concluded that every country in the world that has tried to reduce smoking by restricting tobacco advertising has failed to do so. Furthermore, evidence strongly suggests that the absence of advertising can significantly repress the development of less dangerous and more advanced products, such as lower-tar and reduced-nicotine cigarettes. As John E. Calfee notes, companies will not build a better mousetrap if they're not allowed to tell anyone about it (1986).

Results of Advertising Regulation in the US

Regulation has not always served consumers well. Calfee (1986) has noted that the result of the 1955 Federal Trade Commission (FTC) regulations against 'health' claims in cigarette advertising (lower tar and/or nicotine content, etc.) was to necessitate more upbeat lifestyle advertising, which has no negative information (besides the mandated warning) as did the earlier ads. Regulatory efforts such as these FTC guidelines, as well as the 1971 broadcast ban, reveal an inadequate public appreciation of how advertising works for competitive brands where human health is a factor. Regulation that overlooks the way advertising functions in a competitive market can be expected to work poorly.

Why Do People Smoke?

For over 30 years, psychologists and communicologists have repeatedly demonstrated that interpersonal influences far outweigh mass media influences on the attitudes and behaviours of individuals. In other words, teenagers start smoking because their friends do, or because peers believe it's 'cool', or because their parents smoke. People quit smoking because their friends, children, or spouses convince them that they should.

Medical doctors can have a big influence. And although the American Medical Association has taken the lead in the war on cigarette advertising, a United Press International (1987) report indicates that doctors, who may be in the best position to persuade their patients to kick the habit, simply avoid the issue interpersonally; more than half of 5875 American smokers polled said their doctors had never advised them to quit smoking. To a much lesser extent, the decision to smoke or not to smoke is influenced by mass media, but not necessarily by mass media **advertising**. The purpose of cigarette mass media advertising is to persuade those who have already decided to smoke to

select a particular brand. Other mass media have much greater influence on the decision to smoke or not.

Countless movie stars, athletes, rock stars, and other influential celebrities have smoked in public. And they have looked very sexy and sophisticated doing it. This is not advertising. It is a strong if non-commercial message. Marshall McLuhan suggested that when the movies came to America,

the entire pattern of American life went on the screen as a non-stop ad. Whatever any actor or actress wore or ate was such an ad as had never been dreamed of. (1964:205)

And, we might add, such an ad as could never be paid for.

Learning is often viewed as a formal and intentional effort, yet accumulating evidence indicates that some learning occurs incidentally and indirectly. While watching television shows and reading magazines, people learn not only what the story is, but also how to walk, dress, sit, interact with others, and they learn many odd facts about the world we live in.

This 'incidental learning' is much more pervasive than advertising alone. Advertisers are accused of telling people that they will be more popular or more admired or whatever if they will only follow 'these simple instructions'. Actually, that message is all around us. It is from James Dean and Steve McQueen movies that teenagers learn it's okay to smoke, and as long as these incidental uses prevail in the mass media, it will be ineffective to control cigarette advertising.

Even if television and movie writers, producers, and directors agreed never again to portray a character smoking cigarettes, and the sports, news, and rock video broadcasters agreed as well — even that would not be enough. No one would approve of banning all

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the old Clint Eastwood or Humphrey Bogart movies, or foreign films, or TV reruns in which people smoked.

As one writer put it, 'you cannot contain a beast by arbitrarily closing one of the many doors to its cage' (Whelan, 1985).

The Problems with Restrictions — and Alternatives

Some of those who feel responsible for the public's health have focused on an ad ban as a magic bullet that will kill the tobacco beast. Cooler heads — even among public-health authorities — have proposed that advertising regulation, more or less as we now know it, should be but one facet in a prism that reflects our society's general and growing disapproval of smoking (Whelan, 1985), and restrictions of cigarette smoking in many public areas.

Many authorities suggest a substantial increase in the cigarette excise tax and the use of those new funds to educate all age groups about the dangers of smoking. Furthermore, they recommend that society make smokers pay for the health-related costs of their habit through increased health and life insurance premiums for smokers. And then, say those who advocate personal freedoms, **leave them alone** to smoke their lungs out, if that is the informed free choice they make.

Many public-health defenders have assumed that people won't smoke if they just know how bad it is for them. In fact, people are aware of the dangers of cigarette smoking; a Gallup poll reported over a decade ago that more than 90 per cent of the American public is aware of the claimed hazards of smoking. And why not? Thanks to the Surgeon General's warning in every ad, 'truth in advertising' is nowhere so explicit as it is in cigarette ads; every ad run in America says that smoking is likely to kill you.

If advertising is banned, cigarette manufacturers may use some of their freed-up funds to pay movie makers to include specific cigarette brands in relevant scenes. After that, with no Surgeon General's warning, cigarettes would be seen as glamorous, pleasurable, sophisticated. Young people and other publics may be better served by the constant reminder of the dangers of smoking through required warnings in ads which are, themselves, necessitated by brand competition. One report concluded:

The decreases in cigarette smoking are associated with times when the public received information on both sides of the issue: when consumers heard the Sloan-Kettering report **and** saw cigarette advertising, or heard about the Surgeon-General's report and saw cigarette advertising, or saw anti-cigarette advertising **along with** cigarette advertising. The absence or presence of cigarette with no counter information is associated with increased consumption. The critical difference is receiving information on all sides of the issue. (Schuster & Powell, 1987:31)

Abernethy and Teel concluded that, 'considering that the [broadcast] ad ban was coupled with a limitation of counter ads in the broadcast media', the banning of broadcast advertising was 'ineffective' and additional regulation would likely be 'ineffective and even

counterproductive' (1986:55). Whatever it's worth, the Surgeon General's warnings provide far more caution than any of the movies or TV shows or other incidental users provide.

Conclusion

Tobacco is a mature product, in a 'product life cycle' sense. It's been around for hundreds of years, since long before advertising began. It is part of most of the world's social fabric. Furthermore, tobacco and smoking products are widely and legally offered for sale. Limiting or banning advertising would not alter the widespread availability of smoking products. More important, banning ads would not alter the powerful influences of mass media **other** than advertising as well as the personal influences of significant others and reference groups. Few would suggest that smoking be made illegal. (The US has already conducted one experiment with the prohibition of a widely acceptable practice — namely the prohibition of alcohol in the 1920s — with disastrous results.)

Smoking is deemed by some to be acceptable because it has been accepted for many reasons, by many individuals, as a satisfying activity. Cigarette advertising is the result, and not the cause, of that acceptance.

Advertising is a highly visible and pervasive phenomenon, and so some cigarette ad-ban advocates find it difficult to look beyond advertising to the real causes of cigarette smoking. As long as anyone is focusing (wrongly) on advertising as the cause of cigarette

smoking, then everyone is likely to be distracted from the actual interpersonal and mass media influences. However desirable a smokeless society may be, banning cigarettes can't accomplish that end. And neither can banning cigarette advertising.

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