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## Sign of the Times: 'Sin' Ads Target Blacks

### Marketing Raises Question of Exploitation

By Cynthia Durcanin  
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Perched above dilapidated shops encased with burglar bars, the temptress beckons to the Colt 45 set — "It works every time."

Young, sleek and attractive, they cannot be missed — blacks in billboards pitching cigarettes and beer. The ads blanket the mostly black Southside but are conspicuously absent from affluent white Northside neighborhoods.

It is an intentional marketing caste system employed nationwide. Faced with

declining consumption among health-conscious upscale consumers, alcohol and tobacco companies are spending billions on advertising and public relations campaigns designed for black audiences.

Ad agency representatives say the strategy makes good business sense. "If blacks have a higher consumption index than whites, it seems reasonable to me that you would go where the most potential consumers are," said Bill Sharp, a senior vice president for Burrell Advertising Inc., a black-owned agency based in Chicago.

But blacks are also dying in disproportionate numbers from preventable smoking- and alcohol-related diseases.

Therein lies a dilemma for organizations such as the National Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which have traditionally railed against black exploitation. They have become economically dependent on the very corporations that saturate their communities with billboard ads. In many instances, the same corporations donate millions of dollars each year to financially struggling black organizations.

"If it weren't for the tobacco and liquor industries, we could not have sur-

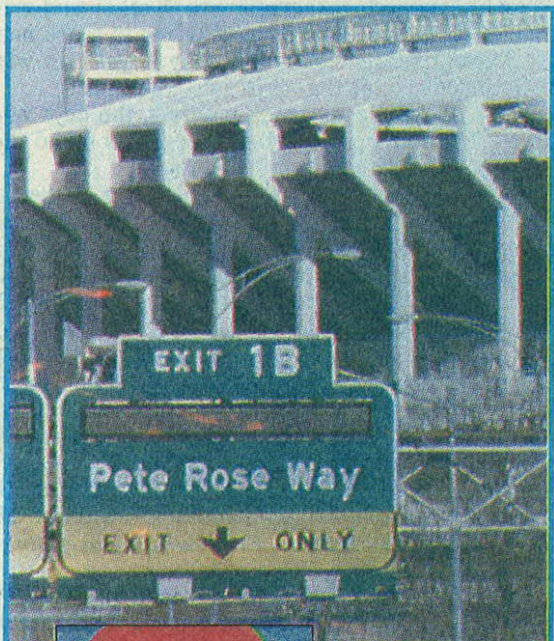
vived," said William J. Haskins, director of training and development for the National Urban League in New York. "They've been one of our strongest supporters over the years."

Mr. Haskins said that accepting contributions from liquor and tobacco companies "has not deterred us from us from speaking out on the issue."

Dr. Allen Blum, founder of Doctors Ought to Care, a national anti-smoking group, disagreed.

"I think they've been bought off," he said. "All of those groups are virtually sewn up by the tobacco industry. These

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# Health Groups Doubt Motives Behind Ads Aimed at Blacks

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organizations speak no evil, see no evil, hear no evil when it comes to the tobacco industry."

In a recent informal survey by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution of several Atlanta neighborhoods, 16 of 22 billboards along a two-mile stretch on Cascade Road — a major Southside thoroughfare — advertised either cigarettes or beer. By contrast, a survey of 34 billboards on a two-mile stretch of bustling Piedmont Road turned up only four cigarette ads among the signs for theater performances, express mail and copiers. There were no signs advertising beer.

Such ratios are common in cities nationwide. In St. Louis, a city survey found nearly three times as many billboards in black neighborhoods as in white communities. Of those, 62 percent in black neighborhoods advertised cigarette and alcohol products compared with 36 percent in white neighborhoods. A San Francisco study produced nearly identical results.

## Won't Release Ad Figures

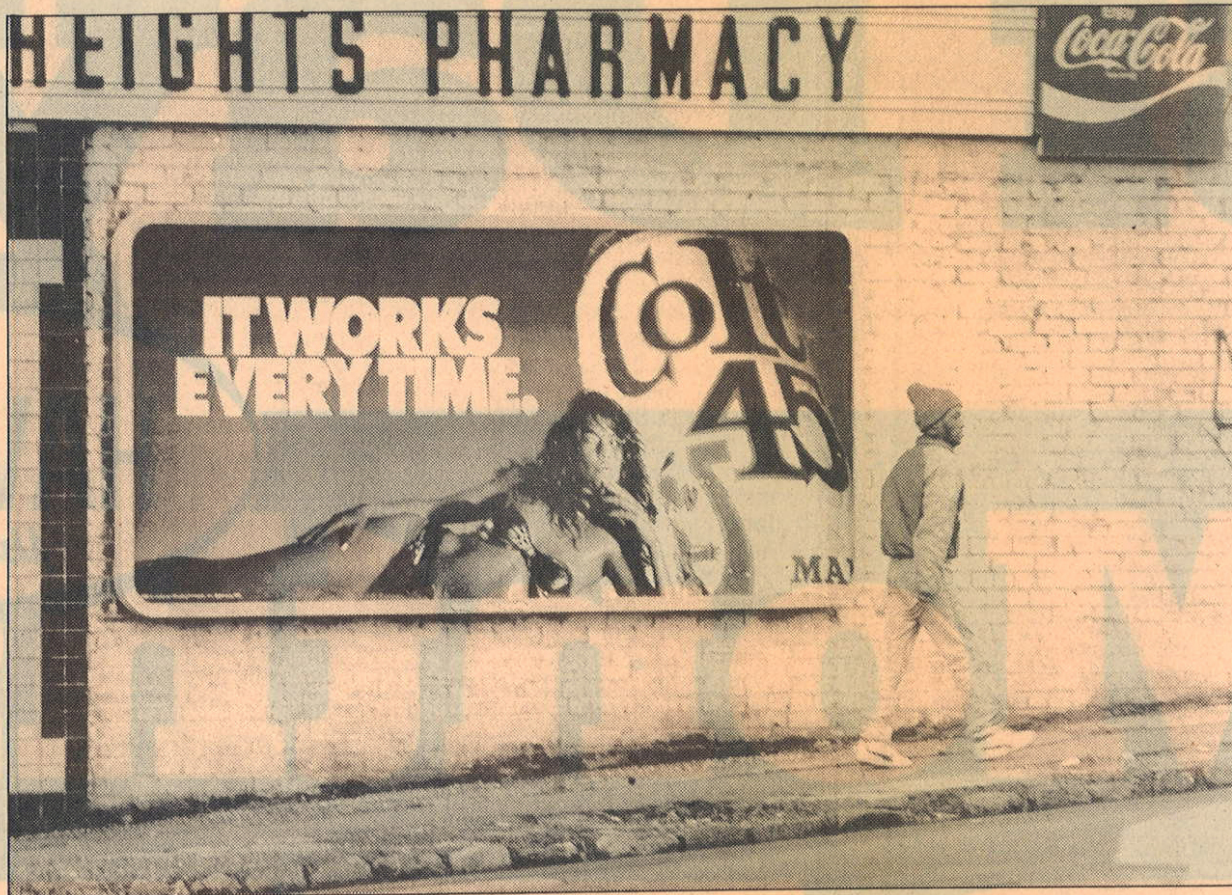
Health and consumer advocates say the national billboard barrage is cause for concern, given that black men have a 70 percent higher death rate from liver diseases and cirrhosis than whites, according to the Center for Science in the Public Interest in Washington, D.C. Moreover, the cancer death rate among blacks has increased four times faster than among whites in the last 30 years.

Ad companies refuse to release figures on how much they spend to reach black consumers. However, 1987 industry studies suggest they invest a lot. Producers of prepared cocktails devoted 57.5 percent of their ad budgets to billboard advertising, and manufacturers of Canadian Whiskey spent 41.9 percent on outdoor signs that year.

Edward T. McMahon, executive director of the Coalition for Scenic Beauty, an anti-billboard group, said cigarette companies spent more than \$300 million on billboard ads in 1987.

"Billboards are the only tobacco ads which the public is forced to look at and it's the only kind of advertising on which you cannot read the warning label," he said.

When asked about the tobacco industry's advertising in black communities, George Knox, staff vice president of public affairs for Philip Morris Companies Inc., noted that his industry has a long history



RENEE HANNANS/Staff

**Black models, like this one on a Colt 45 billboard ad at the corner of Beecher and Cascade roads in Cascade Heights, are being used more**

**often as beer and cigarette companies are switching their advertising campaigns to focus on the black consumer.**

of corporate giving, and was making contributions to black organizations long before smoking became a health issue.

When asked about the proliferation of alcohol and tobacco billboards on Atlanta's Southside, he said, "Do you think people in the Southside are interested in Xerox machines?"

U.S. Rep. John Lewis, who as an Atlanta city councilman fought for billboard reforms, called the proliferation of cigarette and beer advertising on the Southside an "insult and an affront to the black community. This form of advertising is really targeted toward the most vulnerable segment of our population," Mr. Lewis said. "When little kids are on their way to school they can see over and over again a message to smoke or to drink wine or beer, and that's sad to me because this says, 'This is the way to get ahead or be happy.'"

Representatives of alcohol and tobacco companies say they are good corporate citizens who give millions to black causes and organizations. And they say criticism suggesting that their corporate giving is part of a marketing strategy is unfounded and unfair.

**Some health advocates and black leaders have begun to take measures to offset the proliferation of 'sin advertising' in black communities. This month in Baltimore, for example, city officials began erecting billboards that promote literacy.**

## 'Trying to Buy Complacency'

"It doesn't make sense to me to say that because we make contributions to an organization that is black that we are fostering advertising. When we make contributions to predominantly white organizations it's not seen as advertising to a white organization," said Marshall B. Bass, a former senior vice president for RJR Nabisco turned consultant.

The anti-smoking opposition sees it differently. Dr. Ron Davis, director of the office on smoking

and health of the U.S. Public Health Service, said what black institutions that depend on funds from cigarette companies "should realize is that the tobacco industry is not being the good corporate citizen that they're claiming to be because they're trying to buy the complacency of these organizations."

Jazz festivals, black fashion shows, scholarships, art exhibits, even the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. are regularly sponsored by breweries and cigarette companies.

"I am not aware of any major black cultural event that does not have a liquor or tobacco company as a primary sponsor," said Peter Bell, executive director of the Institute on Black Chemical Abuse.

During King Week in Atlanta, the Anheuser-Busch Companies covered the cost of the social responsibility awards breakfast and provided each guest with a souvenir glass and calendar. At the breakfast, August Busch III accepted an honor on behalf of his corporation for its commitment to bringing about "positive social change." The next day, King Center officials praised the Strohs brewery for its contributions to the black community at a \$50,000



Special

**Baltimore officials have begun erecting billboards such as this one to promote literacy in an effort to offset the proliferation of 'sin advertising' in black communities.**

black-tie dinner that was underwritten by Strohs.

King Center officials requested that questions pertaining to their corporate sponsorship be submitted in writing, but then refused to respond to the questions.

Officials at the United Negro College Fund bristle when asked about their heavy reliance on funds from liquor and tobacco companies given the fact that blacks have the highest rate of coronary heart disease and lung cancer of any group in the country.

"We are a fund-raising organization," said Harriet S. Schimel, vice president of communications. "We exist to raise money. All contributions are important to us."

## Don't Neglect Bread, Butter

While the liquor and tobacco industries spend liberally on advertising to promote such things as minority scholarship and Black History Month, they don't neglect their bread and butter.

For instance, in 1987 Phillip Morris Companies Inc. provided \$47 million in corporate grants and in-kind services, according to Mr. Knox. It spent \$1.7 billion in marketing cigarettes, beer, coffee, bakery goods and other products.

Black advertising agencies also participate in alcohol marketing campaigns aimed at minorities. For instance, Burrell Advertising has been tapped to handle the Martell cognac account. Blacks consume at least half of the 2.3 million cases of cognac sold each year.

Officials with black advertising agencies say they accept such accounts partly because they understand black consumers and they

bring a sensitivity to marketing that other ad agencies lack.

"It isn't just 'Hey, let's call everyone dude and listen to some music.' It's understanding the demographic differences," said Mr. Sharp, who works in Burrell's Atlanta office.

Moreover, Burrell officials said they have their limits — the agency does not accept cigarette accounts.

"We feel morally and philosophically bound not to," said Mr. Sharp. "Here's something that's been proven to cause lung cancer, heart disease and a host of other diseases."

Some health advocates and black leaders have begun to take measures to offset the proliferation of "sin advertising" in black communities. This month in Baltimore, city officials began erecting billboards promoting literacy.

"We've been getting the ad people to take these signs down and replace them with 'Baltimore, the city that reads,'" said Baltimore Mayor Kurt Schmoke.

Others have called for funding input from other industries to help ease minority organizations' economic dependence on the tobacco and alcohol industries.

"It's a shame that we can't find replacement dollars for that money from the tobacco industry," said Dr. Davis.

Mr. Lewis stopped short of calling for black organizations to reject contributions from tobacco and alcohol companies. He said he favors a compromise.

"To accept the funds and not say anything about what's going on is not the best position for black leaders to be in," he said. "Somewhere along the way black leaders and organizations must have the courage to say enough is enough."