

The Black Press and The Tobacco Industry

[Editor's Note: This article is taken from several commentaries that Dr. Calvin W. Rolark has contributed to over the past few years on this subject. Dr. Rolark is a co-founding enabler—along with the Rev. Dr. Leon Sullivan—of the Assault On Illiteracy Program (AOIP), chairman of the AOIP publishers, publisher of the Washington (D.C.) Informer newspaper and president and founder of the United Black Fund of America. Dr. Sullivan is the well-known community activist.

Also incorporated are the very thoughtful opinions of other distinguished leaders from the Black community, including Dr. Donald Wilson, Grand Exalted Ruler of the IBPO Elks and chairman of AOIP's Black Business and Professional Support and Involvement Committee.

Included also are opinions from Marshall Bass, who recently retired as senior vice president and a director of RJR/Nabisco, Inc., and George Knox, vice president of Philip Morris Companies, Inc.]

The readers of our *community-building* media have often asked us the question: "Knowing that cigarette smoking is harmful to the health of all of us, how is it that we as Black community publishers justify running national advertising from the various—and now diversified—tobacco corporations?"

This article is in no way intended to be a blanket endorsement of the tobacco industry. However, when an attack does not deal in the same manner with other—potentially—harmful products, and when the generous, positive support received from leading companies in the tobacco industry are not considered, it is time to present that other side of the story.

How have the leading corporations within this industry related to the interests of Black American communities?

Black Economic Survival

The tobacco industry has stood almost alone (with the exception of a few in the alcoholic beverage and soft drink industries) as a *pioneer* for the survival of—and uplifting causes for—Black America. The issues of how this industry now relates (as well as its historical relationship) to Black economic survival is as follows:

* For the working masses of Black Americans, the tobacco industry provides an unusually high percentage of factory jobs and farming opportunities.

* For the higher educated Black American, the tobacco industry was the first to hire them in sales

representative capacities and also in the upper echelons of management. Three of the most respected and influential corporate executives ever to achieve a high measure of their potential were Marshall Bass (RJR/Nabisco board member, R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company) Stanley Scott and Thomas Shropshire (Philip Morris). It also produced such pioneers as Reggie "Champ" Edgehill (The American Tobacco Company); D. Parke Gibson (Lorillard, Inc.); Charles Lewis (R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company) and Herbert Wright (Philip Morris USA).

The industry still has Black executives like George Knox of Philip Morris in the upper echelon of management, as well as Leonard Lyles of Batus, Inc., Brown & Williamson Tobacco's parent company; and Gail Strange of Brown & Williamson Tobacco.

* For the educational needs of Black Americans, the tobacco industry was among the first of the major industries to support higher education via massive and pioneering support of the United Negro College Fund, the National Urban League and a host of similar causes.

* For the business support and cultural uplifting needs of Black Americans, the tobacco industry was among the first to advertise in Black-owned media and to use Black models both for the positive image-building needs with—and profit advantages from—Black America. And,

Through its loyal support—via advertising schedules—in Black community-building (or "affirmative") weekly newspapers, the tobacco industry has—along with other concerned companies within Corporate America—indirectly provided most of the support for the national Assault On Illiteracy Program (AOIP). This historic interorganizational coalition of 94 national Black-led organizations has begun work over the last decade to combat the social forces that are important and unique root causes underlying the high rates of illiteracy among Black Americans.

The tobacco industry has been a consistent leader in these respects among consumer goods companies. Years ago, and even today, Black newspapers—the means of communication for Black America's internal needs—could not have survived without the past and continuing support from the tobacco industry.

[As an example, 100 percent of the net proceeds of AOIP's national interorganizational medium—the *National BLACK MONITOR*—has been over the last ten (10) years, and will continue to go into the de-

velopmental and community-building needs of AOIP, which includes the administrative, communications, initial organizing and project demonstration costs, nationally.]

And, whether AOIP preferred support that way or not from the tobacco industry, were it not for strong advertising dollar support from this industry, there was no other known way wherein this unprecedented all-volunteer coalition could have been amassed to focus on eradicating the societally-induced and societally-unremediated root causes of "functional illiteracy" from Black America.

Thus, one could say that whatever inordinately hurts the tobacco, liquor and soft drink industries, in a practical real sense, hurts any Black American institution. As some Black leaders say--the main thing tainted about the money they receive from some sources is that there "aint" enough of it.

Simple Justice for All

Black-oriented media and the tobacco industry have continued to be attacked in White-oriented media because of what is claimed as "inordinate support" these media receive from the tobacco industry. Actually, Black newspapers and magazines receive far less national advertising dollars from this industry (and all others) than do White-oriented print media.

Without this critical national advertising dollar support, primarily from--but not limited to--the tobacco industry, these AOIP organizations and their community-building publishers could neither begin--nor continue as they so courageously have--the assault on the unique root causes of illiteracy--and all of its resultant "ills" within Black America, which represents over 30 percent of the entire illiterate population.

Those in AOIP need support from all industries. But, even with that "alternative" support--if it were available, as it is felt it should be from others in Corporate America and the media--these Black community-building publishers--under Dr. Calvin Rolark's guiding leadership--would never turn their backs on friends in time of need whom they see as friends "indeed."

Dr. Rolark, a former two-packs-a-day smoker, a victim of heart disease, and one who underwent a successful triple bypass several years ago, reminds us that the tobacco industry is the only consumer-oriented industry that runs versions of "Warning... Cigarette smoke is harmful to your health..." And, as long as we are fortunate enough to live in a Democracy, we will have "freedom of choice". For quite sometime, Dr. Rolark, as a smoker--like countless others--exercised his "freedom of choice" despite seeing these warning labels on each package of cigarettes. He now chooses to exercise another option as his "freedom of choice."