

Tobacco companies target blacks

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Special to the Register

CIGARETTE BILLBOARD ads loom over the poverty-stricken core of nearly every American city.

Black publications, like Ebony or Essence, run far more tobacco ads than most other adult-oriented magazines. And lately, black fashion shows, sponsored by cigarette companies, have featured beautiful models smoking as they walk down the runway.

Welcome to the tobacco industry's new marketing target: blacks.

Some 350 years after slaves were imported to perform the gruelling labor of tobacco cultivation, American blacks have become the industry's greatest consumers. Almost 45 percent of black men now smoke (compared to 35 percent of all U.S. males). And as more middle- and upper-class Americans quit smoking, blacks are becoming an increasingly important market for cigarette manufacturers.

The shift to minority markets — women and Hispanics also remain attached to the habit — reflects a new strategy the tobacco industry has been forced to assume in re-

cent years.

Indeed, since relatively mild warnings about smoking's effects were first mandated by Congress 21 years ago, tobacco companies



have found themselves more and more under siege. Everywhere they turn, it seems, they're swamped with moral criticism: Why is the most lethal product sold in America today also the most heavily advertised?

Medical reports consistently blame cigarettes for a variety of fatal diseases (claiming 350,000 lives annually). Anti-smoking ac-

tivists now seek to extend the 15-year-old injunction against TV and radio advertising of tobacco products to newspapers, magazines, billboards and even skywrit-

ing. And most recently, new data on the effect of environmental smoke on non-smokers has further fueled the movement to restrict smoking in public places.

These developments have put the tobacco industry on the defensive: So manufacturers have established a new magazine exclusively for the smoking subculture; they've dramatically increased their poli-

tical lobbying forces; they've downplayed national magazine advertising and emphasized discount coupons and event sponsorships instead; and of course, they've begun targeting minorities.

"Blacks may have begun smoking long after whites, but they've quickly caught up," said Dr. Alan Blum, founder and chairman of Doctors Ought to Care (DOC), a community health organization which addresses issues like smoking. "And with the ads aimed at them increasing, I don't see [the habit] declining.

"As long as you have a less educated, less sophisticated audience surrounded by promotions for a product, they're going to want that product. And the tragic thing is, it's devastating them, economically and physically."

Blacks now suffer the highest rates of coronary heart disease and lung cancer — the illnesses most often linked to smoking — of any population group, according to a report by a federal task force on
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black and minority health.

"I see the patients who've suffered the results of a lifetime of smoking," added Dr. Harold Freeman, director of surgery at New York's Harlem Hospital and chairman of the National Advisory Committee on Cancer and the Socioeconomically Disadvantaged for the American Cancer Society. "They tend to be middle-aged to old, smokers for 20 or more years and poor. They come in coughing relentlessly. It's usually cancer and that means their chances of being cured are almost lost."

Over the past decade, cigarette companies have succeeded in making certain brands favorites among blacks through a combination of intense advertising in black-oriented publications, sponsorship of events that draw large black audiences and generous contributions to black charities and interest groups.

This marketing strategy, say many, has successfully neutralized institutions that should be speaking out against a serious health problem.

"There are very few people in the black community willing to speak out," said Blum. "Usually their line is that they already have too many other problems to worry about, but that's like saying we

can't go after the muggers until we get the rapists. These people are being exploited, and black leaders, in not speaking up, are selling them out. I'd like to know why someone like Jesse Jackson hasn't said something. It doesn't suffice to say, 'There are more important problems.' You have to handle *many* problems."

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"I've also been mystified that no major religious denominations have spoken out and that some religious charitable organizations have accepted contributions from tobacco companies. Don't they know these people are not in business for the good of the community? Their product kills. Would these charities take money from the Mob?"

But blacks are by no means the only group exploited by cigarette makers. R.J. Reynolds sponsors Hispanic heritage street fairs in Los Angeles and Brown & Williams puts on numerous Spanish and jazz

music festivals in Miami and other Hispanic communities. Advertising Age lists Philip Morris as the leading marketer to the 17 million Americans for whom Spanish is the first language.

Industry spokesmen accuse critics who question the morality of marketing cigarettes to disadvantaged people as "paternalistic." But, said Blum, "everyone rips off minority groups: There are more liquor stores in poor area; goods are more expensive; why should tobacco companies be any different? But for them to accuse others of being paternalistic while *they* rip these people off takes gall.

"The thing to remember about the advertising of cigarettes is, every year [the industry has] to replace the more than 1 million Americans who quit smoking or die from smoking-related illnesses. And the ones they recruit are young, usually kids, and they're disproportionately from disadvantaged backgrounds. [The manufacturers] don't spend all that money on advertising for nothing."