Introduction

Counteradvertising by Alan Blum

Try this simple test: think of the last time you saw or heard an ad that discouraged you from buying cigarettes. Now think of the last time you saw an ad promoting cigarettes.

When asked this question, people quickly realize they can barely remember any ads against cigarettes, yet they encounter messages promoting smoking everywhere.

When considered numerically, the ratio of pro-to-anti-tobacco advertising messages in the United States could be described as millions to one. Approximately $3.3 billion is spent to promote cigarettes versus virtually nothing on media to counteract tobacco use and promotion.

One notable exception is the advertisements of Tony Schwartz (see page 3), which are directed at a specific short-term objective, such as passage of a clean indoor air law or divestment of tobacco company stocks by a university. Schwartz's background as a creator of political advertisements is well-suited to what he calls "this guerrilla media." However, few organizations have been willing to purchase Schwartz's time.

The necessity to purchase broadcast time to un-sell tobacco use and promotion is a far cry from 30 years ago when Tony Schwartz was creating the first anti-smoking public service announcements for the American Cancer Society. Such ads became widely viewed between 1967 and 1970 as the result of a ruling by the Federal Communications Commission on a petition by John Banzhaf, III, to mandate the broadcasting of anti-smoking ads as an application of the Fairness Doctrine.

The counterads were so effective, in fact, that the tobacco companies couldn't take the competition. For the first time in this century, cigarette sales leveled off. By agreeing to withdraw cigarette ads from television in 1971, the tobacco companies knew this major weapon—counteradvertising—would no longer be a factor.

Even more disturbing is the fact that the tobacco companies never really left the airways, shifting instead to the sponsorship of countless nationally televised sporting and cultural events. The failure of the Justice Department for the past 20 years to enforce the law against cigarette promotions on television, coupled with the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine under the Reagan administration, means that paid advertising campaigns must be developed to undermine every aspect of youth-oriented tobacco marketing.

Counteradvertising should focus on two basic themes: to raise children in an environment free of tobacco smoke and to raise them in an environment free of tobacco advertising and promotion.

We must now measure our success in the decline of the tobacco industry. It is essential to put our money where our mouth is. We should turn to mass media specialists such as Tony Schwartz, NSRA, and DOC, who have been ahead of the pack for the past generation.