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▶▶ Conversation Piece ◀◀

Doctor isn't just blowing smoke with his anti-tobacco campaign

By ROSA SALTER
Of The Morning Call

Dr. Alan Blum believes in fighting smoking with fire. When he sees an advertisement for cigarettes say, in an airline magazine he whips out one of the brightly colored stickers he carries with him and plasters it on the cover for the next reader to find.

"Many of the ads in this publication are misleading, deceptive and/or a rip-off," the stickers read. "For example, smoking doesn't make you glamorous, macho, successful or athletic. It does make you sick, poor and dead."

When the Virginia Slims tennis tournament comes to town, Blum buys billboard space for the mythical "Emphysema Slims," bombards tournament-goers with counter slogans (such

as "You've Coughed Up Enough, Baby") and recruits Martina Navratilova to do public appearances for his anti-tobacco cause.

No, Blum is not one to take the subtle approach, and some of his professional peers might consider him something of a firebrand.

But these days, the Houston, Texas, physician also is finding a growing following among some of his medical colleagues.

Just two weeks ago, Blum, founder of Doctors Care, or DOC for short, spoke to a group of Lehigh Valley physicians interested in stepping up the area's anti-smoking message. The doctors met again last week to consider forming a local DOC chapter.

Dr. Ralph Stolz of Emmaus, an osteopathic physician and longtime anti-tobacco crusader, is one of the group's leaders.

To physicians, Blum's message is simple. For years, Blum says, doctors were co-opted by the tobacco sellers, and it's time to abandon the role of medical patsy.

To make his point, Blum flashes an ad from the 1950s featuring a friendly looking doctor in a white coat and informing the public that "more doctors smoke Camels than any other cigarette."

Today, he says, most doctors wouldn't be caught dead promoting a cigarette, but even well-meaning members of the medical profession continue to abet the tobacco industry by not being vigorous enough in denouncing it.

Blum believes that for the last 20 years anti-smoking forces have been cautiously treading around the edges of the problem.

They've talked vaguely of the "dangers" of smoking. They've wagged their disapproving finger at the smoker — "Don't you know that's bad for you?"

Their mistake, he says, is focusing on cutting off the supply of cigarettes — for example, by making them more expensive through taxes or more difficult for minors to obtain — instead of trying to cut off demand.

And the best way to do that, he believes, is to beat the tobacco marketers

at their own game — by countering the clever images and slogans cigarette companies use to create demand with equally clever and compelling messages. To do that, "you've got to buy ad space," he says, and you have to name names. It's not heart disease that's the No. 1 killer of women, he says by way of example, "it's Marlboro."

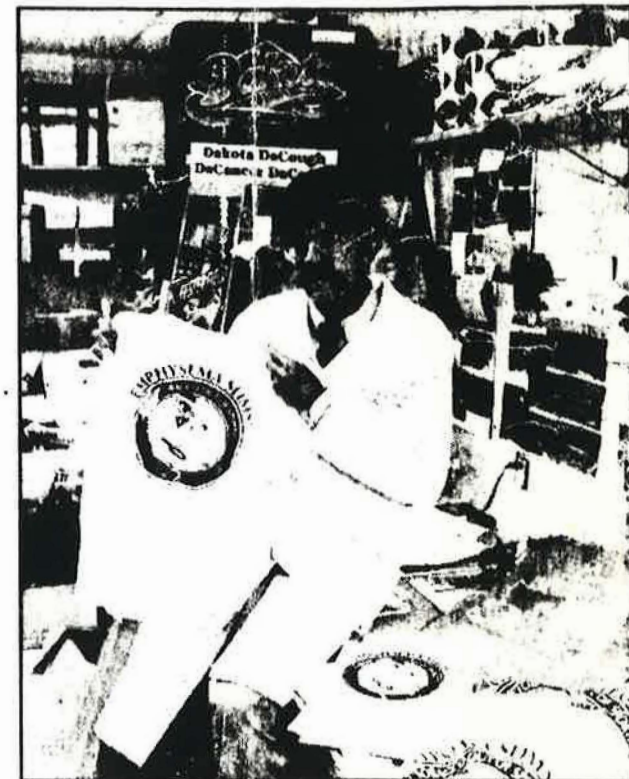
And you have to constantly show up wherever tobacco sellers push their products — auto races, ballparks, music festivals. In other words, you have to be in their face. "You've got to annoy the hell out of your competition."

In the DOC arsenal, Blum said, perhaps the most effective weapon is cigarette advertising parody.

For example, one ad DOC devised turned the popular and controversial Joe Camel into a really "smooth character" by picturing him without a hump. He'd lost it to cancer, Blum said.

The tactic the counter-ads use is what academics call deconstruction, Blum says. But, he adds, fancy concepts aside, for DOC's cause laughter may well be the best medicine.

"I'm trying to get people to look at the issue differently," he says. "We need to give ourselves permission to laugh these products and these pushers out of town."



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Anti-smoking campaign paraphernalia surrounds Dr. Alan Blum.