



**Thom  
Marshall**

## Tobacco's road sinfully smooth

**T**HE tobacco issue continues to flare up just like your daddy's Zippo with a new wick and too much lighter fluid.

Houston's main crusader on the side of not using the stuff, Dr. Alan Blum, said he is heading to Washington this week for a House subcommittee hearing.

Blum said he expects his testimony to focus on how tobacco peddlers have continued to get their products before TV audiences despite a law passed 25 years ago to end regular commercials.

If you're old enough, you likely remember many of those spots. They were real slick productions. The tobacco folks could afford the best that the advertising industry had to offer.

Just for the fun of it, see if you can fill in the blanks, using the right melody, rhythm or inflection:

"----- tastes good, like a cigarette should."

"Call for -----"

"Show us your ----- pack."

Blum is an obvious choice to testify. He said he has been called to do it a couple of times before.

The outspoken critic has been monitoring the tobacco industry for about 30 years. He founded and heads DOC, which stands for Doctors Ought to Care, a national organization that focuses a lot of efforts on keeping kids from getting hooked on nicotine.

### The sponsorship loophole

Even though cigarette commercials were outlawed, Blum said, you still can see a gob of tobacco products on television.

That is because of all the sporting events sponsored by the various smokes and chews. Boat races, auto races, motorcycle races, golf, rodeo, tractor pulls . . .

Oh, and let's not forget tennis. It was not long ago that we had that big tournament here in the Bayou City, when the tobacco company sponsor donated a big chunk of proceeds to AIDS research.

Blum got himself invited to leave one of the big tennis matches after he shouted out

Blum got himself invited to leave one of the big tennis matches after he shouted out a question during check-presentation ceremonies. He was wondering how many lung-cancer deaths have been caused by the sponsoring product. Didn't get an answer.

Various brands of tobacco items sponsor events in some 30 sports, Blum said. Of course, since a sponsor's name is part of the name of the event, it becomes impossible to cover it without adding to the product's name identification.

Furthermore, the sponsor's name and logo and slogan are plastered on signs and banners and T-shirts and jackets and every place you can imagine. So the cameras are going to pick up product plugs practically everywhere they point during coverage.

Which just goes to show there's more than one way to skin a Camel. Or Lucky. Or Winston. Or Virginia Slims. Or . . .

As a former two-pack-a-day smoker who switched to using that snufflike stuff that comes in those little round cans before finally managing to kick the nicotine addiction altogether, I'm now pretty much anti-tobacco, myself.

But this does not diminish my admiration for the talents and abilities of the folks in charge of promoting the tobacco companies. Those who contrive ways of getting favorable publicity. And who work to keep the stains polished off the corporate images.

Some of their efforts are high profile, such as the recent ad that featured a non-smoker saying even though she doesn't use tobacco, she doesn't want the government telling her what to do.

Pretty darned shrewd, eh? Changes it from a tobacco-health issue to a government-control issue. Puts the shoe on the other foot.

### Can charity head off criticism?

And some of their efforts are more subtle. Like generous gifts of money to worthy causes. Such as the donation to AIDS research, already mentioned.

Or, more recently, a \$300,000 donation from Philip Morris Companies Inc. to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department for a "Natural Classroom" program.

It wouldn't seem nice to criticize or question the activities of a company that spreads a piece of its profits around in the form of such admirable donations, would it?

But the way things are shaping up, tobacco industry image makers may be facing their greatest challenge ever. And not in the areas of government controls or increased taxation.

Maybe you saw in the paper the other day a story about those 60 big law firms getting together to sue U.S. tobacco companies on behalf of addicted smokers and former smokers and their families.

Whew! No telling how many millions of people that eventually might involve. Or how many jillions of dollars.

The story said the coalition of lawyers plans to buy a building in New Orleans to hold the huge volume of documents the case is expected to generate, and to house a special staff to work on the case.

Imagine. If this ever reaches trial stage it will be more exciting than all those tobacco-sponsored sports events rolled into one.