

Cigarette sponsorships place money over life

IT IS QUITE disconcerting to see what good friends cigarette and alcohol manufacturers are to black people. If black organizations need money, the cigarette and alcohol people will be there with open pocketbooks.

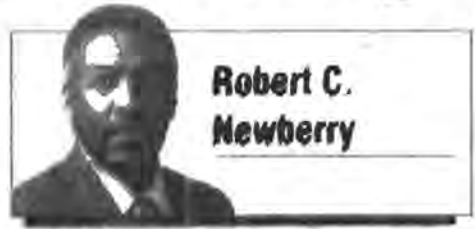
A list of organizations receiving donations from just one tobacco company, Philip Morris, included 76 black groups. The next highest number of gifts wasn't even close. A mere 16 Hispanic groups got money; nine women's groups; eight business, political and cultural groups; seven Asian; and six Native American.

The catch, of course, is that their names and the names of their products be prominently displayed, in the biggest of type, attesting to the fact they are great friends of the black community.

The latest foray into the black population is being made by Philip Morris through its sponsorship of black artists.

And Houston's Museum of Fine Arts, the folks the Houston City Council gave \$500,000 in federal funds instead of giving it to minority anti-poverty programs, is taking tobacco money to finance an upcoming exhibit of works by a local black artist. The exhibit, titled "The Art of John Biggers: View From the Upper Room," opens April 2.

Printed material about the exhibit says in bold letters — set apart from the



Robert C. Newberry

rest of the type — that the exhibit is sponsored by Philip Morris Companies Inc. Other national and local sponsors are in smaller type in a long list.

Philip Morris has become a great supporter of the arts and has just about cornered the market on black art exhibitions. It has sponsored exhibitions by Jacob Lawrence as well as several large-scale ones featuring the works of various artists. It even sponsored the Frida Kahlo exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts and the Houston Grand Opera's musical portrait of the Mexican artist's life.

There is no doubt that it is great to have a John Biggers art exhibit in Houston. He is a gifted artist and his work should be exhibited in the museum.

But to be sponsored by a product that is linked to a disproportionate number of cancer, lung disease and heart disease deaths among blacks is saddening.

Even sadder is the reality that if tobacco and alcohol companies don't sponsor exhibitions of minority artists, the

public would rarely see the artists' work.

This makes it understandable why some black artists accept funding from cigarette firms. They are doing no more than the black publishers and organizations that accept advertising dollars and sponsorship money from the companies.

Still, it is no excuse.

Dr. Alan Blum, who has long crusaded against cigarettes and alcohol, says the money some black people get from tobacco companies leads those blacks to ignore the dangers of smoking, as well as the fact cigarette advertising might entice young people to start smoking.

Numerous studies, including a recent one by the Stanford Center for Research in Disease Prevention, show that poorly educated people smoke more than well-educated people. Blacks, as a group, are on the lower end of the education scale.

Blum, who founded Doctors Ought to Care, wrote in a monograph for the 1995 Surgeon General's Report that two national black magazines, Jet and Ebony, "contain cigarette advertising in nearly every issue, and neither has ever published an article focusing on the impact of smoking in the black community."

He adds: "A similar situation exists in the approximately 100 black-oriented newspapers. . . . The result is that a substantial proportion of the black press

does not publish . . . content antithetical to tobacco use and promotion.

"Through such willful ignorance of the tobacco pandemic, the problem has not come to be regarded as a priority in the black community. Questions about the subservience of African American publishers to the interests of tobacco advertisers have been rebuffed as paternalistic. Indeed, minority publishers express gratitude for the financial contributions of tobacco advertisers that enable the preservation of the minority press and other cultural institutions."

Indeed, few advertisers, except maybe makers of alcohol, have come close to funneling as much money into black publications as does the tobacco industry.

It is troubling that some black people accept advertising for such destructive products, but it is also understandable.

And although some blacks have spoken out against heavy cigarette advertising in the black community, support for the companies by continued acceptance of their largess remains too high.

The final results of cigarette advertising hurt rather than help black people.

The subtle message to young and old alike is: "We are your friends. We stick by you when no one else does. So buy our products to show your gratitude — even if it kills you." Money over life.