

## Getting women hooked: defending the indefensible

The following dialogue was written by Bobbi Jacobson, MB, BS, author of *The Ladykillers—Why Smoking is a Feminist Issue* (New York, Continuum, 1982). It is based on statements made by tobacco industry (TI) representatives in the mass media, in tobacco trade publications, and in interviews with the author.

**Dr Jacobson:** *The World Health Organization, the Royal College of Physicians, the British Medical Association, the Surgeon General's office of the United States, and countless other national and international medical bodies have all stated that smoking is the largest single avoidable cause of premature death in developed countries. These organizations also point to the high smoking rates among women and girls, who seem destined to be the next century's victims of lung cancer and heart disease. Is there any justification for the increase in cigarette promotion directed at young women?*

**TI:** First of all, we sell a product that is legal and for which there is enormous demand. We cater to the needs of tens of millions of smokers. Our advertising is directed only at current smokers and informs them of the choices available. As to the smoking and health controversy, we are not competent to make medical judgements, but we are aware that there is considerable disagreement within the medical profession itself concerning the smoking and health issue. Further research—to which we ourselves contribute heavily—will, we hope, lead to a fuller understanding of the complexities involved. Until then, we are happy—and are, indeed, obliged—to inform smokers and provide for their smoking needs.

**BJ:** *In March 1983, in an article entitled "Look to the ladies," Tobacco magazine asked the question "Is there a manufacturer not setting out to win or consolidate a share of the woman smoker's habit?" And Tobacco Reporter noted in February 1982, "Women [are] a prime target as far as any alert European marketing man is concerned. So despite previous hesitancy, might we expect to see a more defined attack on the important segment represented by women smokers?" How much responsibility is the tobacco industry willing to accept for creating and reinforcing the women's market?*

**TI:** We simply cater to the demands of existing smokers, be they men or women. Obviously, we are aware of changing roles in society, and it is quite natural for us to market cigarette brands to women who are independent, self-confident, and who are looking for a cigarette that reflects their lifestyle.

**BJ:** *Are these brands aimed at girls?*

**TI:** No cigarette advertisement is ever specifically aimed at persons under 18 years of age. Our products are aimed

at advertising, a fact that was accepted by the ruling tennis body, broadcasting authorities, and the Minister for Sport.

**BJ:** *In an article mentioned earlier it was reported that marketing to women involves the three 'L's': low tar, longer length, and lower price. Indeed, sales figures show that women are two to three times more likely than men to smoke low tar cigarettes—or "Lights" as you prefer to call them. These brands are favored by women over men in all age groups—including the*



FIGURE 1. Cigarette brand heavily advertised to women in several countries.



FIGURE 2. Cigarette brand logo worn by tennis player at Wimbledon, televised worldwide.

at women smokers between 20 and 40 years who are looking for a distinctly female cigarette (Fig 1). The tobacco industry adheres to the letter of the stringent criteria of the voluntary self-enforcement agreements.

**BJ:** *Why do you think in England in recent years women tennis players at Wimbledon have worn dresses imprinted with cigarette brand name logos and designs (Fig 2)? Does not the exposure of these championship matches to 350 million viewers around the world suggest that tobacco companies are eager to associate smoking with athletes and to circumvent the ban on the advertising of cigarettes on television?*

**TI:** Tobacco companies had nothing whatsoever to do with the promotion of what was a line of leisurewear. Clothing does not constitute cigarette

young. Would you say that your lower tar promotions make it easier to get women and girls to smoke?

**TI:** I reiterate that our advertising is designed to appeal to both men and women smokers. If more women prefer a light cigarette, we are happy to help them make an informed choice of milder brands. This is in keeping with government policy to reduce the tar content of cigarettes. Furthermore, our promotion is strictly not directed at the young.

**BJ:** *If tobacco companies do not direct promotions at young people, why do they advertise cigarettes in magazines like Mademoiselle, a sizeable proportion of whose readership is teenage girls?*

**TI:** If it is legal to sell cigarettes, it is legal to advertise them.