

CONTROVERSY SMOLDERS AS DAKOTA HITS RACKS REYNOLDS BEGINS MARKETING FOR CIGARETTE

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The advertising blitz began more than a week ago in and around Houston and Nashville, with the product slowly making its way onto store racks.

In the process, the battle lines over Dakota - a new cigarette being test marketed by R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. - are slowly being drawn. 'I think it's going to be a busy week here in terms of what's going to be done with Dakota,' said Ross Bannister, executive director of the American Lung Association in Houston. 'It's not like we're mad now and are going to forget about it later. We're just getting started.'

'The Heart Association in Tennessee is absolutely outraged by this particular campaign, and there will be some response to it,' said Dr. Rose Marie Robertson, a cardiologist at Vanderbilt University in Nashville.

'It's clear that smoking is decreasing in the general population, except among young women. So we see a further appeal to young women as a particular problem,' she said.

When the Dakota story broke several weeks ago, the controversy centered on reports that the new cigarette's chief goal was to capture the lucrative market among 18- to 24-year-old women with a high school education or less, the only group of Americans whose rate of smoking continues to increase.

Officials at Reynolds have consistently and vehemently denied that marketing strategy. They claim Dakota is gunning for all adult smokers of Marlboro, the world's best-selling cigarette made by Philip Morris, Reynolds' chief rival.

The first round of advertising to hit newspapers in Houston and Nashville last week - the two cities where Dakota is being test marketed - appears to support that claim. The full-page ads, in which a pack of Dakota is pictured next to a pack of Marlboro, read:

'Houston is known for big deals, big domes and individuals who make up their own minds. You Decide.'

'Nashville is known for golden hospitality, steel guitars and individuals who make up their own minds. You decide.'

The ads also read, 'Dakota. Designed with the Marlboro smoker in mind.'

The lone pictorial ad thus far produced shows three men, apparently in their mid-20s, walking down the street laughing, holding cigarettes in their hands.

``All of our advertising is designed to attract current smokers of competitive brands who are at least of legal age to buy cigarettes,' Reynolds spokesperson Maura Payne said.

On Friday, a group of about 100 public health officials from across the country met, coincidentally, in Houston for a conference on tobacco prevention and control. The group unanimously approved a resolution that decried the health hazards associated with cigarette smoking, while taking Reynolds to task for its purported strategy behind Dakota.

The resolution asked Reynolds to pull Dakota from the market and to stop targeting cigarettes toward vulnerable populations like women, children and minorities.

Payne brushed off the resolution as a continuing effort by anti-smoking forces to keep themselves in the news by bashing the tobacco industry.

``We will pull Dakota from the market if smokers in Tennessee and Texas tell us, by virtue of their cash register receipts, that we do not have a viable competitor for Marlboro,' Payne said, adding that the testing will last at least six months.

Meanwhile, health advocates in Houston and Nashville said they are in the process of building coalitions and devising plans to combat the sale of Dakota.

Jim Smith, with Doctors Ought to Care, a national anti-smoking group based in Houston that represents medical professionals, said efforts are under way to coordinate ``Houstonians against Dakota.'

``We want an outcry as to what an ugly distinction it is to be singled out for a test market like this,' said Bannister, with the lung association. ``We don't want that distinction in Houston.'

Similar opposition efforts have been slower getting underway in Nashville, mainly because of the recent controversy about a smokers' rights bill in the state legislature that awaits Gov. Ned McWherter's signature.

The bill essentially requires state agencies that pass smoking restrictions to also set aside specific space for smokers.

``We've had other fish to fry,' said LaDonna McDaniel, a spokesperson for the American Heart Association in Nashville. ``Also, a lot of the hoopla about Dakota hasn't really hit home since Tennessee is such a tobacco-oriented state. The pro-smoking people have managed to keep a lot of the furor down.'