Selling Cigarettes: The Blue-Collar, Black Target

By Alan Blum

CIGARETTE SMOKING has become a class act, but not the way advertising would have us believe. The numbers show that cigarette smoking increasingly is a habit of lower-income individuals, especially among blacks.

Although cigarette advertising continues to carry much the same suggestions of sex, youthfulness, virility and elegance that cigarette companies have always made, important changes—reflecting the new demographics of smoking—have occurred in the way that cigarette companies now are getting the message to their market.

Overt cigarette advertising left television in the 1970s. Now cigarette advertising also seems to be moving away from upscale publications while maintaining or increasing advertising in other, down-scale publications and other media more likely to catch the eye of blue-collar, black and ethnic minority readers who increasingly constitute the smoking public. An informal survey of current magazines found a wide disparity in the number of cigarette ads: Harper's (1), Time (1), Newsweek (2), Ebony (7) and People (8).

The most recent data available from the National Center for Health Statistics show the class disparity of cigarette smokers:

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<th>White Collar</th>
<th>Blue Collar</th>
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<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>28 percent</td>
<td>43 percent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>30 percent</td>
<td>38 percent</td>
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The only group showing an increase in smoking rates were women with incomes of less than $5,000. Among that group, smoking increased from 28.3 percent in 1976 to 32.9 percent in 1983, the last date for statistics.

That cigarette smoking has become less fashionable among upper and upper-middle income groups over the past decade may have lulled many to believe that the U.S. is well on its way to reducing the enormous toll taken by smoking. But overall consumption has only slightly declined—by about 1 percent per year since 1980. America still has one of the highest smoking rates in the world—about 4,000 cigarettes per adult per year. And an increasing percentage of these cigarettes is being smoked by those with the least disposable income and lowest levels of education.

Blacks have been especially hard hit by cigarette smoking. Principal among the rising preventable causes of death in minority populations, according to a report by a federal task force on black and minority health, are heart disease and lung cancer, the two major consequences of smoking.

Blacks now suffer the highest rates of coronary heart disease and lung cancer of any population group, a fact Chicago heart specialist Richard Cooper says is obscured by a tendency in medicine to focus attention on rare but highly publicized diseases such as sickle cell anemia.

There is little mystery why warnings about the dangers of smoking have failed to make a dent in public consumption. Cigarettes are by far the most heavily advertised product in America.

And just as tobacco companies have been able to ride out what they call the “cancer scare” by introducing the gimmickry of filtered, low-tar and ultra-low-tar brands, so they have been quick to use advertising and promotions to mitigate the impact of price.
Cigarettes and Class

Although tobacco company spending on billboard advertising is down 10 percent in 1986, cigarettes are still by far the most commonly advertised product, according to the Institute of Outdoor Advertising. Cigarette advertisements now account for more than 25 percent of all advertising in some communities, especially those in lower-income areas, more than half of the billboards carry cigarette ads.

Mass transit systems, used by many low-income commuters, are an increasing showcase for cigarette advertisements. On some blocks, cigarettes are sold in virtually every retail outlet, including drug stores, supermarkets, convenience stores, laundromats, and even laundromats and dry cleaners. In inner city mom-and-pop stores, cigarettes are sold illegally, for as little as seven cents a piece, and children can freely purchase them in such stores, or else one of a growing number of cigarette vending machines in public places.

Last month the United States Tobacco and Candy Journal, a trade publication, reported that cigarette advertisers are more valuable, even in going out of business, than their counterparts in other industries. R.J. Reynolds, for instance, has moved away from such "upscale" publications as Vogue and U.S. News and World Report toward more consumer-oriented magazines such as Field and Stream and Popular Mechanics. This trend has led major publishers like The New York Times and Newsweek to step up their courting of cigarette advertisers. People magazine, which carries the most tobacco advertising of any magazine for the past five years and which reaches a predominantly low-middle income readership, purchases frequent advertisements in the U.S. Tobacco and Candy Journal, hoping to attract the tobacco industry for its "consistent support.

The tobacco industry has been specifically adept at exploiting racial identity for profits in a profitable market among ethnic minorities. R.J. Reynolds sponsors Hispanic heritage street fairs in Los Angeles and Brown and Williamson foots the bill for numerous stage and jazz music festivals in Miami and other Hispanic communities. Advertising Age lists Philip Morris as the leading marketer to the 17 million Americans for whom Spanish is their first language. Not that R.J. Reynolds has forgotten its Hispanic customers. But only a visit to a typical bodega to confirm that virtually all advertisements there are for cigarettes.

In the black community, three brands in particular—Newport (made by Loews), Kool (Brown & Williamson) and Salem (R.J. Reynolds) have been promoted for maximum visibility. These plans account for more than 60 percent of cigarettes purchased by blacks. Cigarette advertisements are, along with those for alcohol, the mainstay of such upscale publications as Jet and Ebony.

A minimum of 12 percent of the color advertisements in each issue of Essence ("the magazine for today's black woman") are for cigarettes, second only to advertisements for alcohol (20 percent). Among advertisers, advertising into February, Black History Month has been R.J. Reynolds, which offers a consumer magazine for its sale of cigarette advertisements under the headline, "Salute to Black Scientists and Inventors."

But, as so often the case with black-oriented publications and billboards, cigarette advertising has begun to raise eyebrows among those charged with lowering health-care costs. Tobacco companies have steadily shifted away from traditional forms of advertising and into space for civic, cultural, and entertainment sponsorship. For instance, in Washington in July, Brown & Williamson will present what it calls the "Kodak Achiever Awards" to five "outstanding adults who are working to improve the quality of life in inner city communities." B & W will also donate $10,000 to a nonprofit community-service organization chosen by each recipient. And the tobacco company in the nominating process are: the National Urban League, the National Newspaper Publishers Association and the NAACP.

In July 1984 Philip Morris hosted the 40th anniversary of the United Negro College Fund (Hugh Cullman, former chairman and chief executive officer of Philip Morris, is a member of the UNCF board of directors and served as co-chairman of its corporate golf drive)

In November, 1984, R.J. Reynolds marked that same anniversary of the UNCF by donating a $250,000 ruby necklace to the fund. The presentation of the black education giving rubies on 40th anniversaries. The presentation was made during the intermission of an Ebony Fashion Fair—by actress Ruby Dee.

The extensive public-relations campaign in which these companies may explain the virtual absence of black leaders on the subject of smoking. To the contrary, such respected civic leaders as Reverend Jesse Jackson, former head of the National Urban League, and Mrs. Margaret Young, widow of Whitney Young, serve on the boards of R.J. Reynolds and Philip Morris, respectively. Philip Morris publishes a "A Guide to Black Organizations," which is sent each year to black politicians and others. The introduction by Hugh Cullman in a recent edition notes that "the diversity of positions [does] not suggest [we] are for blacks—and for all Americans—how much can be done when people work together in the name of progress and prosperity."

One apparent beneficiary of such promotions, as well as the cocktail parties hosted for legislators by Philip Morris and other tobacco companies, has been the state legislature and policy makers. African-American lawmakers are said to be more likely to accept gifts and to attend events sponsored by the industry. In 1982, California, Florida, and elsewhere, tobacco company public relations personnel and tobacco wholesalers through a Tobacco Action Network have urged local blacks to lobby against such legislation.

In April Philip Morris advertised in New York City's black newspapers that Mayor David Dinkins' recent restrictions on smoking in the workplace would provide "a perfect backdrop for employers who wish to discriminate against minority employees."

Philip Morris has not invited white editors as a group to New York for similar meetings. The reason, according to Tom Ricke, the editor of media relations, is that "black publishers are a group where you can invite all of them in." Ricke said there are too many white publishers to invite them to New York. Philip Morris sponsors other activities to which it invites journalists from the general media. "It wouldn't be fair to say that we invite black publishers because of any demographic information we have," Ricke said.

VIRILITY/ATHLETIC PROWESS

Carter (RJR)
Winston (RJR)
Marlboro (PM)
Kent (PM)
Viceroy (BAY)
Raleigh (BAY)
Lucky Strike (ABB)

HEALTH (low tar)
Carlon (ABB)
Barclay (BAY)
True (RJR)
Cambridge (PM)
Now (RJR)

ECONOMY

Century (RJR)
Richfield (BAY)
True Gold (Loews)
generics (Liggett, PM, BAT, RJR)

FASHION/SOPHISTICATION/LUXURY

More (RJR)
Virginia Slims (PM)
Eve (Liggett)
Salem (Loews)
May (ABB)
Silva Thin (ABB)
Flir (RJR)
Sterling (RJR)

PLEASURE/POPULARITY/ESCAPE

Salem (RJR)
Newport (Loews)
Marlboro (PM)
Parliament (PM)
Players (PM)
Kool (JW)

RJR, R.J. Reynolds: PM—Philip Morris, BAT—British American Tobacco (BATUS), AB—American Brands.

*Figures are based on a random sampling of recent issues of these publications.

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