

# News analysis

## Russia: rushing to beat the ban

Outdoor cigarette advertising is expected to finally be prohibited in Russia in 2007, five years after the first, albeit toothless, law attempting to ban it. Not surprisingly, tobacco companies are taking advantage of what might be their last few months of wooing new customers via this effective means of advertising, by stepping up their campaigns on billboards and public transport. Noteworthy are the actions of Japan Tobacco International (JTI), which in March introduced a new brand of cigarettes unashamedly targeted towards youth. The company has publicised that the target audience for the new “Wings by Winston” brand is 18- to 24-year-olds, and a company representative has stated, “We figure that these cigarettes will be bought by young people, who don’t yet earn enough to buy our more expensive [brands].” Selling cigarettes to those under 18 years of age is illegal in Russia, though the law is rarely enforced and a recent survey found that by the age of 18, over 40% of school pupils are already smokers.

On the occasion of World No Tobacco Day in May, the chief epidemiologist at the Ministry of Health, Gennady Onishchenko, lamented that there had been a sharp rise in smoking among teenagers, the long term effects of which would only add to the country’s well-known demographic crisis. While JTI may claim that those under 18 are not part of its target group (and the company website may claim that one of its marketing principles is “Ensuring that our brand marketing has no particular

appeal to youth”), the advertising campaign is likely to be found appealing by teenagers under 18 as well. Advertisements promoting the new brand in subways, on bus stop shelters and on billboards feature brightly-coloured silhouettes of a young, hip couple dancing, and bear a slogan that is close to the heart of every teenager—“Being different is being yourself”. The campaign, estimated to cost approximately US\$10 million, spread to print media, with a special insert to an entertainment magazine sponsored entirely by “Wings by Winston”, advising readers how to best spend their summer breaks. Photographs in the insert remove any remaining doubts about who the company is targeting.

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## Mexico: backroom deal blunts health warnings

Mexico signed the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) in August 2003 and the Senate ratified the treaty in May 2004. Although Mexico was the first country in the Americas to become a party to the FCTC, legislation to implement fully the provisions about packaging and labelling has not been passed. Some bills introduced by national legislators sought to increase the size of the warning labels up to 50% on both main faces, to print more rotating messages, to ban deceptive descriptors, and also to include large pictorial warning labels similar to those introduced in Brazil, Canada,



USA: Sir Walter Raleigh, having returned from the dead and admitted that bringing tobacco back from the Americas had been a terrible mistake, hands it back to president George W Bush. The scene was part of a presentation at the world conference on tobacco and health in Washington DC in July by British health education specialist Cecilia Farren, with the help of a cardboard cut-out and a friend in costume.

Uruguay, Australia, and Thailand. None of these bills was passed.

However, only three weeks after Mexico’s ratification, the Secretary of Health made an agreement with the two transnational tobacco companies that control the cigarette market in Mexico, Philip Morris and BAT. The agreement, whose title translates as, “Agreement to establish additional restrictions to the current regulations and legislation for advertising, marketing and warning labels of tobacco products”, did make some changes on tobacco packaging and labelling, among other measures. Tobacco companies agreed to increase



Billboard and magazine insert advertisements for “Wings by Winston”, introduced by Japan Tobacco International, which overtly target the youth market in Russia.



Health warning labels on a pack of cigarettes marketed in Mexico, where the larger warnings are restricted to the back of the pack (left). Images or pictures have been specifically precluded from the front of the pack (right).

the size of the three current health warning labels (“Smoking causes cancer and pulmonary emphysema”, “Smoking during pregnancy increases the risk of preterm delivery and low birth weight of newborn”, and “Stopping smoking reduces important health risks”) from 25% to 50% of the *back* face of the cigarette packages. The total size actually pertains to the frame that delimits the label, and not the label itself. The agreement avoids stronger and more effective pictorial labels on the front of the packages as recommended by the FCTC. In fact, it explicitly precludes “images or pictures”.

In addition, the tobacco industry voluntarily included a new warning label to be printed on the lateral side of the packs, which translates as, “Currently there is no cigarette that reduces the health risks” [of smoking]. This label has an ambiguous message, which holds out the promise that cigarettes could have either a protective effect against risks or even a health benefit in the future, just not yet—very different from Philip Morris’s warning in the USA, “There is no such thing as a safe cigarette, including this one”. At the same time, the inclusion of this label may be presented as an alternative to the banning (as required by the FCTC) of misleading or deceptive descriptors such as “mild” and “light” that continue to appear in print on Mexican cigarette packages. Although the intention of the message is not completely clear, it might be used to undermine the labelling policy.

Philip Morris and BAT also agreed to include a leaflet tucked between the cigarette package and its cellophane covering, with “information” for

smokers in 25% of the packages produced of each brand sold in Mexico. The leaflet size is between 38×63 mm and 50×76 mm, in Arial font sized between 6 and 8 points. The leaflet warns: “A message from the Secretary of Health. There are good reasons to quit smoking.” The first paragraph lists the main health outcomes of smoking using technical (medical) language. It reads: “Tobacco consumption causes different types of cancer, as well as heart disease or cerebrovascular disease such as embolism, chronic bronchitis and emphysema.” The wording is complex, misleading and incorrect—the last two are respiratory diseases, not cerebrovascular diseases. More importantly, all of these disease terms are unlikely to be well understood by the general public. The second paragraph describes some of the effects of smoking during pregnancy (similar to one of the health warning labels already in force). A third paragraph tells some of the benefits of stopping smoking after three months, one year and 10 years. The leaflet ends with, “It is advisable to stop smoking. Request professional help by telephone ...”, and provides a free hotline number. The reverse side of the leaflet has the same health warning label that is displayed on the back face of the pack.

The leaflet is not only difficult to read and understand, but also its content is unlikely to be relevant to most of the smoking population in Mexico: one third of the leaflet (the same as one third of the warning labels) addresses the harms of smoking while pregnant, yet only a very small percentage of the smoking population in Mexico are pregnant women. In contrast, a health warning label about the harmfulness of secondhand smoke would be relevant to all smokers. It is likely that rather than convince people to stop smoking, both the lateral warning label and the leaflet will be used by the tobacco industry to defend itself from future lawsuits brought by injured smokers or their families as has happened in the USA.

These actions appear to be innovations by the tobacco industry to circumvent the implementation of the FCTC in developing countries, such as Mexico, that have already ratified it.

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## India: oral tobacco kite ads

Despite tobacco advertising having been completely banned in India for more than two years, manufacturers of oral



Manufacturers of oral tobacco products in India have taken to using kites as a marketing tool—one that is particularly attractive to children.

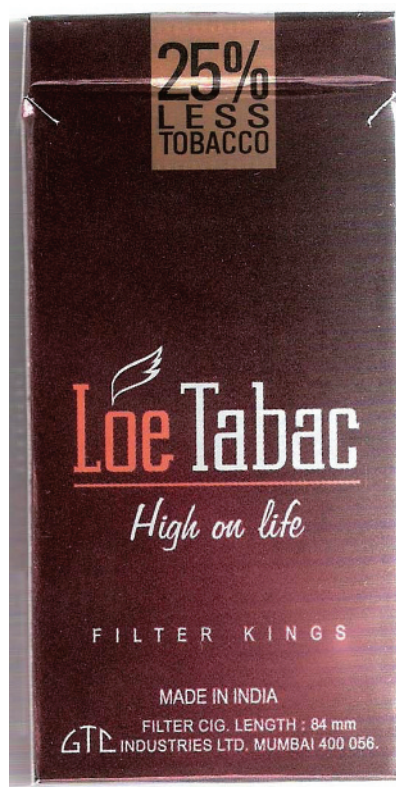
tobacco products have found a medium to promote their brands that is not only cheap, but particularly attractive to children. Kite flying is a popular pastime among children in many parts of India, and tobacco companies print their advertisements on material which is then passed on to kite makers free of charge, and sometimes with further incentives to ensure their ads reach their ultimate destination. Whereas other cheap kites are commonly made of packaging material, the tobacco ad kites are made from specially printed polythene. Due to the free material and incentives, the kite makers can price the finished kites at less than 50 paisa each—about one US cent—though often they simply give them to children free of charge. Understandably, the tireless members of the Burning Brain Society have lodged a complaint with the health ministry, and await action to ensure that the tobacco ad ban is enforced.

## India: “low-risk” launch

In recent months, there has been mounting concern about two new and apparently related developments.

First, a previously unknown non-governmental organisation (NGO) had appeared on the scene, predominantly web-based and calling itself simply [www.LowTobacLife.com](http://www.LowTobacLife.com). Its website carried a range of soft lifestyle features, and in a health section, apparently credible advice about tobacco. However, this led on to “Doctor’s quotes on Low Tobacco Cigarette” [sic], which led readers into a discussion strongly reminiscent of the discredited industry line that what is really needed for smokers who cannot give up is a new, reduced toxicity product. There was no information about who was behind the new NGO, which was starting to receive widespread publicity. What was of most concern to health advocates was that its spokesperson was quoted alongside comments from established tobacco

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The newly launched LoeTabac brand, which claims to achieve “safer delivery levels” of tar, carbon monoxide and tobacco-specific nitrosamines.

control organisations. In June, the NGO took its first newspaper advertisement, in the Mumbai edition of *The Times of India*, informing readers, “Tobacco is injurious. Go Low on Tobacco. High on Life”, and inviting them to visit its website.

Next, and more serious, came the news that a new brand of cigarette had been launched, called LoeTabac, made by an Indian company, GTC Industries Limited (formerly known as Golden Tobacco Company Limited). The near-identical names of the new brand and the new NGO seemed too great to be a coincidence, and suspicions of a formal link were strongly reinforced by the appearance of the slogan “High on life” under the brand name on the pack. GTC was reported as claiming that LoeTabac had been found to have “safer delivery levels” of tar, carbon monoxide and tobacco-specific nitrosamines than other brands.

This is clearly a worrying development, seemingly aimed at the millions of addicted smokers who desperately hope that by changing to a new brand like this, they may escape the majority of risks of continued smoking. Holding out the prospect of “safer” smoking was being perpetrated by the big tobacco companies in countries such as the UK



**Canada: now you see it, now you don't** Intention or chance? The apportionment of the health warning text on this oral snuff container, and of the French language version on the other side, creates a serious flaw when the lid is removed.

and the USA more than a quarter of a century ago, and it seemed reasonable to hope that they would not be seen in the 21st century. Of course, it is just possible that the new brand could be significantly different, but it would take a long time for a properly designed trial to prove it. It is to be hoped that the Indian government steps in to investigate and, at the very least, regulate it properly.

Meanwhile, even the tobacco trade journal *Tobacco Reporter* observed that the international marketing of the brand “will raise some interesting questions in some countries” and that the suggestion in the word “Loe” and the slogan “High on Life” slogan below the brand name “might well cause apoplexy among some health ministers”. And probably among some readers of *Tobacco Control*, too.

## Sweden: low tech, hi smell

Sweden’s well deserved reputation for good design and technology, earned by



A smoking booth at Sweden’s Skavsta airport.



**USA: White House, black coffins** Dr Javid Khan of Pakistan holds a banner over coffins symbolising those dying from tobacco, including those who smoked cigarettes sold abroad by US tobacco companies. The demonstration was one of a series of newsworthy events carried out mainly by youth advocates from around the world who were attending the world conference on tobacco and health in Washington DC in July.

companies such as car manufacturers Volvo and Saab, has been seriously dented by Skavsta airport. Claiming to be Sweden’s fastest growing airport, and popular with low cost airlines, it calls itself Stockholm Skavsta, although it is an hour and a half’s journey from the capital. Its recent attempt to solve the problem of passive smoking by passengers seems to have been equally over-ambitious, not even aspiring to the inefficient tobacco industry-commissioned devices found elsewhere (see UK: familiar smell at the airport. *Tobacco Control* 2006;15:275–6).

Skavsta’s smoking booth looks as though it was run up by the airport’s carpenters during their lunch break, but it is not so much the disappointing aesthetic sense that draws attention to its existence, as another striking feature—the strong smell of tobacco smoke in the surrounding areas.

## India: blood money

The story so far: Godfrey Phillips, Indian subsidiary of Philip Morris and makers of Red & White, one of the country’s most popular cigarette brands, enjoyed many years of outrageous association with other people’s brave deeds and bucketfuls of publicity for the awards it gave them—in the very useful company of many state premiers and cabinet ministers. Memorably, a top company official asserted that the Red & White Bravery Awards “...have nothing to do with our products” (*Tobacco Control* 2003;12:120).

One highly publicity-productive and photogenic awardee was film star Preity Zinta. Her award recognised her bravery in sticking to her original story in a court case in which key figures in



Bollywood film star Preity Zinta, giving blood as part of the scheme operated by Godfrey Phillips, the Indian subsidiary of Philip Morris.

Bollywood were linked to organised crime, after other witnesses withdrew their earlier statements. Stories of awards to people like this ensured massive publicity around the country, and no shortage of acceptance letters to the award ceremonies from politicians often too busy to attend to many of the papers in their in-trays, such as draft tobacco control bills. Then members of the social action group Burning Brain

Society protested that the scheme was merely a scam to promote Red & White cigarettes and the whole thing was ruined.

But was it? While the company was forced to let go of the brand name (though apparently it was still seen at some of the presentation ceremonies), the renamed Godfrey Phillips Bravery Awards allowed all the hobnobbing with dignitaries to continue, and so useful must it have been that the company has now launched a spin-off to encourage an important element of health policy: the giving of life-saving blood. Who could they get to front it? Who would get massive publicity for this selfless corporate altruism, and lead the masses into the blood donor clinics?

The answer was staring them in the face, in the Red & White Bravery Awards role of honour: the beautiful and courageous film star Preity Zinta. Her new ambassadorial role will not be confined to the blood donor scheme—the company will also be using her in two other programmes, one on national pride and another on women’s empowerment. With the opportunities for access to decision makers that these projects will bring, perhaps the loss of direct brand advertising may not be such a high price to pay.



**UK: Marlboro racing packs** Tobacco sponsorship of motor racing may have been banned in European Union member states, but Philip Morris seems unable to resist letting go of associations with the sport that it has found so helpful in enticing people to buy its cigarettes over the years. This “racing pack”, which appeared in the UK earlier this year, uses Formula One racing images, apparently blurred for speed, above the decidedly unequivocal text of the health warning.

# The Lighter Side



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