

News analysis

Lebanon: saying it with the packaging

Despite admissions about the unparalleled dangers of smoking that British American Tobacco (BAT) has been forced to make, some of its marketing activities are as inappropriate as ever. In Lebanon, where it seems to enjoy the government's perpetual dithering, BAT forges ahead with new developments. The latest is a re-packaging of its Kent brand, with a level of design glitz and hype that must beggar the understanding of those trying to treat patients with tobacco-related disease in Lebanon's hard-pressed hospitals.

A toenail curling, cringe making account of the launch, or reveal as it was termed, appeared in a glossy magazine in Beirut. Among the less absurd statements about the new pack was its description by a BAT man as a winning combination of metallic packaging and components to emphasise "quality and luxury, a brand identity of sophistication par excellence". The magazine's panegyric went on to report that the re-launch was held in Otium, one of Beirut's top bar-restaurants. "An all white, Zen-like conceptual setting, coupled with a futuristic podium, stressed the style of Kent. Mini champagne bottles personalised for Kent, fusion finger food to delight the palate, lighting and music to set the mood, the select few invited were drawn into a New York loft atmosphere, for a reveal like no other. Revealed with high tech animations, sound effects and all, the new pack truly spoke for itself."

Quite enough problems already face Lebanese public health workers trying to reduce their country's large burden of diseases caused by tobacco. With stuff like this still being pumped out by BAT and its friends, how on earth can they persuade the young people who throng Beirut's nightclubs that there is a 50% chance that smoking cigarettes will kill them?



An image of BAT's new Kent packs for sale in Lebanon.

Lithuania: PM tries it on again

Lithuania is the westernmost of the three Baltic states—the others are Latvia and Estonia—and is now a member of the European Union. Remarkable progress has already been made since regaining independence after many years in the former Soviet Union. But while Lithuania appears to be thriving under democracy and a re-established market economy, it suffers the major disadvantage of being on the receiving end of attention from the tobacco companies.

Philip Morris (PM) has owned a factory in Klaipeda, in the north west of Lithuania, since 1994, the biggest tobacco factory in the Baltic states, where it makes cigarettes for Latvia and Estonia, as well as for local sales. In addition, its holding company, Altria, has a Kraft factory in Lithuania. Not surprisingly, PM has the largest share of Lithuania's cigarette market. Perhaps such relatively large operations and the need to try to persuade the Lithuanian government not to take action that might depress their profitability, are why the company has seemed desperate recently to spend its stockholders' money on public relations stunts.

For some years PM has been among the major sponsors of New Baltic Dance, a prominent feature in Lithuania's cultural events calendar since 1995. The company's persistent efforts to worm its way into the life of the country's non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are also of concern. On several occasions in recent years, the vigilance of health advocates, in particular those of the national coalition on tobacco and alcohol control, has

brought to light activities that must be designed to win political influence.

For example, the health coalition learned that PM, already among the official sponsors of an information centre serving some NGOs in Klaipeda, was organising and sponsoring a youth prevention project, "I can." Worse, the ministry of education was apparently involved, as were some NGOs. The coalition generated publicity explaining the real intentions of tobacco companies in doing such activities, following which the ministry of education withdrew from the project, which was later abandoned.

Later, another initiative came to light: PM, apparently in collaboration with the economic ministry, was reportedly floating the idea of being allowed to participate in a special market zone with reduced tax rates in Klaipeda, designed to attract new businesses rather than to benefit those already established there. Once again, timely publicity probably helped to stop the proposal in its tracks, with the economic ministry issuing a specific denial that any such initiative would take place.

Most recently, in October, PM issued a call for project grant applications for NGOs in the Klaipeda region. PM said it particularly wanted to give financial support to projects promoting social aims, as well as independent activities of NGOs and other, more informal groups. Priority is to be given to projects concerned with the social integration of disabled people, decreasing social deprivation and exclusion, and environmental protection. Needless to say, the health coalition circulated an open letter to NGOs asking them not to apply or participate.

PM does not work alone in its efforts to continue business as usual. For example,

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Japan Tobacco joined in efforts to persuade the government to implement the World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) more weakly than it proposed. Presumably several tobacco companies are at work behind the scenes at any one time on lobbying activities and recently, what was almost certainly a result of such work, was seen.

Having worked hard with the Ministry of Health to ensure tougher, not weaker FCTC implementation, health advocates are proud of Lithuania now having a smoking ban in bars, restaurants, discos and other places that the industry, at the very least, would like to make exceptions to workplace smoking bans. Indeed, the Lithuanian ban is one of the strongest in Eastern Europe. However, just after the law came into force, the tobacco industry found politicians willing to take up its cause to try for at least a partial reverse. These hired guns are now pushing discussions about the need for smoking rooms. In addition, the tobacco industry also sponsored a study about abolishing the state tobacco and alcohol agency.

As in so many other smaller, independent countries, tobacco control work in Lithuania has to be carried out by busy people who all have other, paid jobs, including doctors in highly demanding and responsible clinical posts. International tobacco control funding agencies please note: for the foreseeable future, Lithuania would benefit greatly from having a dedicated, independent tobacco control agency with a paid staff.

Iceland: a pioneer's saga

When people talk about the history of tobacco control, Norway and Finland are mentioned as the two western countries that pioneered tobacco advertising bans. During the 1980s, these nations' tobacco consumption data was endlessly analysed by other countries striving for a ban. It was also used, selectively of course, by the tobacco industry, desperate to show that the bans had no effect or that somehow they even increased smoking. In fact, another northern European country had got there first: Iceland.

With a population of under a third of a million, it is perhaps unsurprising, if unjust, that less is heard of Iceland than of the countries in other parts of Europe from which it is, geographically at least, relatively remote. In the first half of the twentieth century, few outside Iceland knew much about it. One factor for it beginning to be better known later may have been the award of the Nobel prize for literature in 1955 to its most famous

modern writer, Halldór Laxness. He is probably best known for his novel *Independent People*, a compelling saga of a poor farmer's endurance through thick and often very thin times. That work's title in Icelandic, *Sjálfstætt fólk*—literally self-standing people—gives a clue to one of the most important characteristics of Iceland: standing on its own feet, as it were, and doing things in its own way. This is as true in tobacco control as in any other aspect of this unusual nation's achievements.

It is almost 40 years since Iceland placed health warning labels on cigarette packs by law—this was in 1969, when “leaders” such as the UK were still consulting tobacco companies about what texts they might be prepared to print on their packs by “voluntary agreement”, as the infamous system was known. In 1971, Iceland scored its world first when it banned tobacco advertising in mass media, cinemas and outdoors, with 0.2% of total tobacco sales revenue being set aside for tobacco control; but warning labels on packages were no longer mandatory.

After all remaining tobacco promotion was banned in 1977, a national tobacco control committee was established and new proposals were developed. In 1984, the first comprehensive tobacco control act was passed. Warning labels on packages were made mandatory again; sales to minors under 16 were banned; and smoking was restricted in service areas of public and private buildings, in schools, healthcare premises and in public transport and in other workplaces. The total ban on promotion was reaffirmed and made clearer.

Subsequent changes, many still well ahead of most other countries, included provision of help for smokers to quit through primary health care (when 40% of adults aged 18–69 were smoking), smoking bans and restrictions in Icelandic aircraft and ships, and an increase in the proportion of revenue allocated to tobacco control, to 0.7%. An unusual addition in a market economy in recent times was the introduction of tobacco sales licences in 2001. At the same time, all mass coverage of tobacco was banned, other than warnings about its harmful effects; point of sale displays were swept away, with the requirement that tobacco products must not even be visible at the point of sale.

Through all this, smoking prevalence has continued to decline to just under 20.7% for males and 17% for females aged 15–89, down from levels of nearly 30.9% and 28.8%, respectively in 1991.

In June, all bars and restaurants became smoke free, except for those with special, separately ventilated smoking

areas. Reaction was highly favourable, to the extent that very few hospitality industry venues have implemented a smoking area. So Iceland now has among the world's most comprehensive tobacco control policies, showing what a small but progressive country can achieve.

India: death of a simple health warning

In recent years, health advocates in India have had something of a roller coaster ride. After years waiting for the thing to get going, at last they were up and away, only to feel that empty, falling feeling as they swooped down again, although still above their starting point. This is nowhere better illustrated than with tobacco pack health warnings.

Having at long last got a superb health minister and, having grown a tobacco control lobby worthy of its size and the massive task in hand, hopes were riding high that the federal government would press ahead with some truly world-leading warnings. Special factors had been taken into account, the most obvious being language. India, the second largest country in the world, still has large numbers of people who cannot read or write—40% is the commonly accepted figure. In addition, while Hindi is the national language, India must be the ultimate multi-lingual country: its constitution recognises 22 regional languages, but these also have dialects so, in total, there are more than 100 languages and 200 mother tongues. What sort of health warning could inform the maximum number of people about the unparalleled dangers of smoking?

One answer is to use a graphic image, but with so many who could not read the captions of a disease-specific image whose gory detail might not be recognisable, is there not a universally accepted danger sign that might warn the maximum proportion of Indians? As in so many countries, there



India: Mock-up of a health warning with the skull and crossbones, as originally proposed by the government.