COVER ESSAY

GASP! The crazy world of tobacco

Philip Boys

When comic artist Graham Higgins mentioned in passing that he had decided to quit smoking, I gave thanks. First, because he wanted to give up. Second, because I knew we could turn his decision and his skills to wider advantage.

That very week, Corinne Pearlman and I had started to work up ideas for GASP!, a comic magazine Comic Company had been commissioned to produce for Smokebusters UK, with funding from the Health Education Authority. (Corinne is Comic Company's Art Director, I am its Editorial Director.) Graham's resolution gave me the idea for a visual feature that would work without the need for a single word.

We commissioned Graham to visualise how much better streetlife would be if *nobody* smoked, and to render it in what he calls his over-the-top "big nose" style. The artwork on the cover of this issue of *Tobacco Control* shows what he came up with.

Spot the difference invokes the popular children's puzzle where two superficially identical images turn out to be very slightly different. In Graham's version, of course, it's nothing of the sort – the changes could scarcely be *less* subtle. Above, tobacco rules: the city is dirty, dull, and dangerous. In Nosmokia, however, streetlife is paradise. The air is clear, colours more vivid, trees flourish, window boxes burst into bloom, fit and healthy people beam all over their faces, an epidemic of Love has broken out.

Yes, it's absurd and corny, but it's also crazy and immediately comprehensible to children of all ages (and most countries). Blown up to billboard proportions, it might even beat the tobacco manufacturers at their own game!

Comics in education

Comic Company, as our name implies, specialises in intensely graphical and in most cases pretty jocular approaches to potentially quite difficult subject matters. Nearly all of our work has been in the health field, including resources dealing with HIV/AIDS, menstrual periods, and skin cancer.

Our work stems from a firm belief in the power of the cartoon and the comic strip to inform, entertain and educate. To this end we have developed the comic art vocabulary, using a wide range of artists, to respond flexibly and simply to the demands made by sensitive issues in the real world.

The overall brief for GASP! certainly had its challenges. Smokebusters, with its nearly 100 000 members aged between about 8 and 14

years, has national co-ordinators but is essentially local in character – groups of various sizes from less than 100 to many thousands exist throughout the United Kingdom. This meant that GASP! would have to be sent by mail to every child individually, limiting its size to whatever could be carried for the cost of the basic-rate stamp – a maximum sheet-size of 42 cm × 60 cm (A2).

Members, moreover, were of very different ages (and, presumably, levels of literacy). Children would have to be able to read GASP! for themselves without the presence of a teacher.

We knew how we could make the material serious-yet-humorous, but there was still a problem of content. There is no lack of things to say about smoking, just a question of how to shape it in a way that is fresh and interesting. Young people easily become tired of hearing about how they *personally* will suffer if they smoke.

We decided that we should therefore try to appeal to a wider – in a sense, more *selfless* – concern. We would remind readers that smoking is indeed a personal health issue, but it is also an environmental issue, and a development issue too.

On the front page of the GASP! comic, David Simpson (now the news editor of *Tobacco Control*) introduced the global theme: how tobacco manufacturers in the rich world – increasingly deprived of markets at home because fewer people are taking up smoking and more are giving up – are now targeting young people in developing countries with illusory claims that smoking global brands is a symbol of wealth and modernity. He also discussed the environmental, economic and other problems brought about by the spread of tobacco as a cash crop throughout the developing world.

These themes were taken up in more detail in *The crazy world of tobacco*, an A2 poster formed by unfolding the A4-sized magazine. I researched and wrote the copy, Corinne designed and illustrated it. *The crazy world* locates the world's largest tobacco manufacturers and growers on a map of the world seen within an ashtray, which underlines the grubbiness of the trade. All around, vignettes and brief captions illustrate an aspect of the history and global spread of tobacco, and the harm that it causes (figure 1). In this way, a huge amount of information was condensed into bite-sized chunks that would also support school students' writing projects on tobacco.

of smoke between two faces seen in profile. These faces derive from the well-known demonstration of gestalt shifts. Do we see two faces or do we see a vase? But there's another twist – the faces are not symmetrical. One person is smoking a cigarette; the other is backing away (figure 2).

Do children "get" all the jokes and allusions we cram in? Probably not, but does this matter? As Graham Higgins says, comics are like buses. You can miss one, but there's always another coming along behind. As it happens, our experience is that children are highly visually literate – in some ways more so than their parents – and relish all kinds of playful absurdity, pun and paradox. That's what they find in the best comics, and that's what we try to include in all Comic Company resources.

Note to readers

We hereby solicit your ideas and contributions for future covers of *Tobacco Control*. Like previous covers, we would like future covers to be colourful and creative – with a tobacco control theme. Original artwork, anti-tobacco posters, photographs, and cartoons may all be considered. Material with an international flavour would be particularly desirable. A cover essay will generally appear in each issue to provide appropriate background information and commentary on the cover.

Please send ideas and submissions (originals or high-quality, camera-ready photographs) to the editor at the address on the inside front cover. – ED

THESE SPOKESPEOPLE WILL NEVER SMOKE, DRINK, TAKE DRUGS, RETIRE OR DO ANYTHING TO EMBARRASS A CLIENT.

How would you like to tell your client or your CEO that you have a representative for his product who will never abuse a substance or anything else, will never try to renegotiate a contract, never make the checkout rags, and never, ever retire? Impossible? Not in the world of Marvel.

Marvel has a whole staff of Super Heroes like Spider-Man, Captain America, and many, many more. They're all experts on communicating with kids.

Marvel reaches an incredible 50% of all U.S. households with kids 6 to 17,* and they do it in a far more compelling and cost-efficient way than broadcast or print.

Marvel is the leading publisher of comic books in North America and will soon introduce a number of new books that will appeal to the youngest reading segment. Add to this the top Nielsen-rated Saturday morning animated TV series, X-Men, and the Spider-Man series which will debut in the fall of '94. They offer you a marketing powerhouse that can add super strength to the weakest budget.

Marvel can put this powerhouse to work for you by providing you with integrated marketing programs specifically designed to meet your advertising needs.

So call David O'Brasky at (212) 576-8511 and let us show you how these nice guys can help you finish first.

IF YOU WANT TO TALK TO KIDS, YOU'D BETTER TALK TO MARVEL.

*Source: The Kids Study, 1993. All Marvel Characters TM & ©1993 Marvel Entertainment Group Inc. All Rights Reserved.

Marvel Comics seeks advertisers with the pitch that its Superhero spokespeople "will never smoke...or do anything to embarrass a client" (Advertising Age, 14 February 1994). Marvel did have characters (villains and heroes) smoking on some of its trading cards, but ended the practice in response to a letter to the editor published in N Engl J Med (1994; 330: 1321) from Sammy Blum, aged 7.