

COVER ESSAY

A promise is a promise

K M Cummings

Philip Morris promised to “shut down instantly” if cigarettes were found to be harmful. Now that the company has admitted that “smoking causes lung cancer, heart disease, emphysema, and other serious diseases”, when will they keep their promise to stop making cigarettes?



In January 1954, Philip Morris co-sponsored an advocacy advertisement in major US newspapers entitled “A Frank Statement to Cigarette Smokers” which questioned research findings implicating smoking as a cause of cancer, promised consumers that their cigarettes were safe, and pledged to support impartial research to investigate allegations that smoking was harmful to human health.¹ The promises articulated in the “Frank Statement” have been made repeatedly by Philip Morris executives over the next four decades.^{2,3}

In 1954, immediately following publication of the “Frank Statement” Philip Morris vice president George Weissman announced that if the company had any thought or knowledge that in any way they were selling a product harmful to consumers, that they would stop business immediately.⁴ This promise was repeated again in 1972 by Philip Morris vice president James Bowling who, in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, stated that “if our product is harmful, we’ll stop making it”.⁵ In October 1997, Philip Morris CEO Geoffrey Bible reiterated the company’s promise to stop selling cigarettes if they were found to be harmful while testifying in a court case in Florida. Mr Bible was asked “What he would do with his manufacturing plants if scientists proved that cigarettes were a cause of cancer?”, to which he replied he would “shut it down instantly”.⁶

INTERNAL DOCUMENTS

Evidence recently revealed in internal tobacco industry documents now shows that senior scientists and executives at Philip Morris internally had accepted that cigarettes were a threat to human health, even though they publicly continued to argue that this had not been proven to be the case.^{3,7} Recent litigation and the absurdity of continuing to defend smoking as an unproven cause of cancer and other serious illnesses appears to have caused Philip Morris to alter their long held position defending smoking as an unproven cause of ill health and premature death. In October 1999, Philip Morris announced to the public on its website that “there is an overwhelming medical and scientific consensus that cigarette smoking causes lung cancer, heart disease,

emphysema and other serious disease in smokers”.³ While the public undoubtedly interpreted this message to mean that Philip Morris had changed its long held position that smoking was not a cause of disease, in fact the message only acknowledged that there was medical and scientific consensus that smoking caused disease, not that Philip Morris accepted this consensus. A response from the Philip Morris board of directors to a shareholders’ resolution on this subject revealed that the company had not changed its position about smoking and health. The shareholders’ resolution asked the company to produce a report on how it intended to correct the defects that resulted in its products causing disease.⁸ A letter sent to the Securities and Exchange Commission, dated 10 February 2000, on behalf of Philip Morris responding to the proposed shareholders resolution, noted that “Mr Neuhäuser’s letter mischaracterizes the Company’s web site as constituting a public admission that cigarettes causes illness. It does not”.⁹

Perhaps motivated by several adverse jury verdicts occurring since 2000, Philip Morris has recently modified its positions on several smoking and health issues. On 13–17 November 2002, Philip Morris placed informational inserts in 28 major newspapers around the USA, including the *New York Times* and *USA Today*, to inform the public about their policies and positions related to smoking and health (fig 1). According to Philip Morris the newspaper insert was published by the



Figure 1 Advertisement placed by Philip Morris in newspapers across the USA.

Correspondence to:
K Michael Cummings, PhD,
MPH, Department of Health
Behavior, Division of
Cancer Prevention and
Population Sciences,
Roswell Park Cancer
Institute, Elm and Carlton
Streets, Buffalo, New York
14263, USA;
michael.cummings@
roswellpark.org



Figure 2 Advertisement directed at Marlboro smokers, being run on the inside of buses in upstate New York.

company in an effort to better inform the public of its positions on tobacco related issues. The statements on addiction and smoking and health articulated in the insert and website (www.philipmorrisusa.com) are very different from what the company has told the public in the original “Frank Statement” advertisement that had been published in 1954. For example, on the topic of smoking and health Philip Morris states, “We agree with the overwhelming medical and scientific consensus that cigarette smoking causes lung cancer, heart disease, emphysema, and other serious diseases in smokers”.¹⁰ On the subject of addiction, Philip Morris states, “We agree with the overwhelming medical and scientific consensus that cigarette smoking is addictive”.¹⁰ On the subject of low tar cigarettes, Philip Morris states that, “. . .smokers should not assume, that lower yielding brands are safe or are safer than full-flavor brands . . .There is no such thing as a safe smoke”.¹⁰

While Philip Morris’ newly articulated positions on smoking and health should be applauded, recent polling data reveal that the majority of smokers remain unaware of the company’s new positions on smoking and health issues.¹¹ It is unlikely that many Marlboro smokers will be checking out the company’s website for health information. Thus far, Philip Morris has been unwilling to use its more traditional marketing channels to inform its customers about their new positions on smoking and health. For example, the company has not used its massive mailing list to send smokers information about how their products cause addiction and increase a person’s risk of premature death.

KEEPING CUSTOMERS IN THE DARK

Perhaps Philip Morris would prefer to keep their customers in the dark since they recognise the inherent conflict in their public statements that on the one hand have promised smokers that they would discontinue the sale of a harmful product while at the same time now admitting that their cigarettes are harmful to health.

A small coalition of health agencies located in upstate New York has recently created a novel public awareness campaign intended to shine light on Philip Morris’ doublespeak and challenge the company to keep their promise to stop manufacturing cigarettes that are harmful to health. The

campaign, which targets Marlboro smokers, includes an ad running on the inside of buses (fig 2) and a postcard (see cover) addressed to Philip Morris asking the company to keep their promise to stop making Marlboros now that they’ve acknowledged that they cause cancer, heart disease, emphysema, and other serious diseases. The campaign targets Marlboro smokers since they represent over 50% of Philip Morris’ domestic cigarette sales, although the health coalition is considering targeting smokers of other Philip Morris brands. As indicated in the coalition’s press notice announcing the campaign, “we think it is great that Philip Morris has now accepted the evidence that Marlboro’s cause cancer, now it is time for them to put their money where their mouth is. If Marlboros really do cause the diseases that YOU (Philip Morris) say they do . . .please keep your promise and stop making them. Actions speak louder than words.”

REFERENCES

- 1 **Tobacco Industry Research Committee.** A Frank Statement to Cigarette Smokers. 4 January 1954. Bates No. 03046592-03046593.
- 2 **Cummings KM, Morley CP, Hyland A.** Failed promises of the cigarette industry and its effect on consumer misperceptions about the health risks of smoking. *Tobacco Control* 2002;**11**(suppl 1):i110–17.
- 3 **Pollay RW.** Propaganda, puffing and the public interest: the scientific smoke screen for cigarettes. *Public Relations Review* 1990;**16**(3):27–42.
- 4 **Weissman, George, Philip Morris Inc.** Facts versus fancy. 26 February 1954. Bates No. 1002366389-1002366397; see also Weissman, George, Philip Morris Inc. Public relations and cigarette marketing. 30 March 1954. Bates No. 1002366398-1002366402.
- 5 **Kwitny J.** Defending the weed: how embattled group uses tact, calculation to blunt its opposition. *The Wall Street Journal*. 24 January 1972. Bates No. 500324162-500324164.
- 6 **Cerriden M.** Tobacco exec stuns observers. *Dallas Morning News*. 22 August 1997. Bates No. 86329862-86329865.
- 7 **Wakeham H.** “Best” program for C.T.R. 8 December 1970. Bates No. 2022200161-2022200163.
- 8 **Bible G.** Notice of annual meeting of stockholders and proxy statements. Philip Morris Companies, Inc, 10 March 2000.
- 9 **Whitson J.** Jerry, Hunton & Williams. [Letter to Securities and Exchange Commission on behalf of Philip Morris regarding] Shareholder proposal submitted by Gregory N. Connolly. 10 February 2000.
- 10 **Philip Morris USA.** *Where can you find information on . . .the serious health effects of smoking, quitting smoking, cigarette ingredients, how to talk to your kids about smoking, and more?* Information booklet that appeared in national and local newspapers in the USA from 13–17 November 2002.
- 11 **Cummings KM, Bansal M, Bauer J, et al.** Are smokers adequately informed about cigarette product characteristics and the health risks of smoking? Presentation at the Society for Research on Nicotine and Tobacco annual meeting in New Orleans, Louisiana, 21 February 2003.