

News analysis

USA: Sex and the Ciggie

The much hyped season finale of the US cable TV smash hit “Sex and the City” featured the return of smoking by the leading lady.

Iconic, independent woman Carrie Bradshaw smoked throughout the first few seasons but managed to quit during the third. The series won a 2001 PRISM award for accurate depiction of a nicotine addiction.

Her downfall in the finale came while she was in Paris, where “everybody smokes”. It’s hard to miss the glorification of smoking in this episode. Not only is her Marlboro Lights pack prominently displayed for long periods, but Carrie’s enjoyment of her first smoke can only be described as radiant.

There is a remarkable sequence when her boyfriend, played by Mikhail Barishnikov, tells Carrie what his ex-wife thought of her. Carrie has just retrieved a cigarette from her purse when Barishnikov says, “She found you...” and here’s where the timing is key: just as the flame touches Carrie’s cigarette and she begins puffing, we hear the lines, “beautiful smart and chic”. Barishnikov later takes a puff of the cigarette, and even, as he’s getting into a cab, tells her, “I like the smoking. It’s very sexy”.

Sarah Jessica Parker, who plays Carrie, has said she didn’t want to do the smoking scenes, but the writer, Michael Patrick King, apparently insisted. “I told Michael Patrick, I said, oh, please, don’t—must she smoke again?... But he writes great stories and it’s hard once you read one not to see his point.”

Parker dutifully smoked, and soon became hooked once again herself. “I would say I had to smoke for work and then I slipped.”

We hear of this addiction-through-acting process quite often. An actor is given a role in which the character must smoke, according to the writer and/or director. After the show is over, a little something of the role remains with the actor, a nicotinic memento—he or she is still smoking. So what can an actor do?

In the case of “Sex and the City”, Ms Parker might have chatted with William B Davis, the “cigarette smoking man” of the wildly successful series, “The X-Files”. Davis, the arch villain of the series, was almost never seen without



The “Sex and the City” season finale, in which the central character Carrie Bradshaw took up smoking again, appeared to glorify the activity.

addictively sucking on a cigarette. Smoking was an integral part of his persona, reflecting his sickness and despair. He was even known derogatorily as “cancer man”. While I think it’s a mistake to excuse smoking by villains—villains always have great power along with other attractive qualities that can be associated with smoking—it seemed to work for this particular character.

So how did ex-smoker Davis deal with the requirements of his role? Being well aware of nicotine’s potential from his own experience, he demonstrated his screen character’s serious nicotine addiction by smoking herbal, not tobacco cigarettes. After all, it’s well accepted that actors don’t have to drink alcohol or shoot heroin for their roles.

He also used something known in the entertainment trade as “acting”.

Directors and writers: please, have a heart—be kind to your actors. Don’t addict them. There are alternatives to the smoking cliché, and when smoking is absolutely necessary, there are even alternatives to tobacco.

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UK: acting normal without smoking

The issue of actors being made to smoke on stage or screen is not a new one, but compared to the “Sex and the City” story above, British actor Paul Eddington had more luck 30 years ago. Although he was best known worldwide

for his role as Jim Hacker, the hapless minister, later prime minister in the 1980s British television comedy series “Yes, Minister” and “Yes, Prime Minister”, Eddington first rose to fame a decade earlier in a British sitcom called “The Good Life”. This featured two couples, neighbours, one relatively successful and wealthy, the other doing less well in life. Eddington played the husband of the successful couple, and his screen character was a smoker. But being an intelligent, thoughtful man with a strong social conscience, and realising how inappropriate it was to portray smoking as part of the good life, he asked the writer whether a scene or two could be inserted about him giving up the habit. To his pleasant surprise, the writer immediately agreed with him, and told him simply not to smoke again in the part. It was not even necessary to refer to it, he said; from then on, the character would simply be a non-smoker.

Eddington, a Quaker, had a long history of quiet involvement with important causes. When necessary, he was prepared to be a little less quiet, as when he publicly resigned in protest from the board of trustees of the Bristol Old Vic theatre company after it refused to end sponsorship from Wills Tobacco, which had a large factory in the city. He was a founder of a high profile group opposing tobacco sponsorship of the arts, and helped Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) on several occasions. Sadly, he did not live to see the UK’s ad ban—he died of a rare form of skin cancer in 1995—but he inspired and enlivened ASH’s work towards it.



Actor Paul Eddington: an ASH supporter.

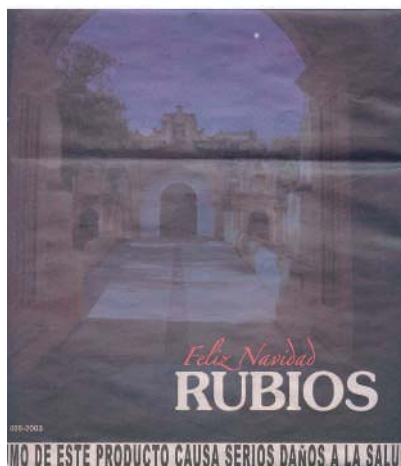
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When the “Yes, Prime Minister” team was considering topics for future episodes, Eddington suggested they cover the tobacco epidemic, and telephoned ASH to tell them to expect a call from the writers. The show’s central character, James Hacker MP, thought he was in charge of things but in reality was all too dependent on and manipulated by civil servants, led by the scheming Sir Humphrey Appleby. Sir Humphrey, whose agenda was usually somewhat different from that of his political master, was not immune to being manipulated himself, so the series was a natural for taking a satirical look at one of the greatest scandals of political negligence of our time.

The writers set to work on their research, including discussions with key public health people, to learn what went on behind the scenes to try to ensure that cigarette sales continued to flourish undisturbed. The ensuing episode, “The Smokescreen”, broadcast in 1986, was as hard hitting as it was hilarious, and can still be found in use as an entertaining teaching aid in discerning schools of public health the world over. At one point, in a robust defence of inaction encompassing many of the classic tobacco industry arguments and sophistries, Sir Humphrey pleaded with Hacker to recognise the economic heroism of smokers whose tobacco tax helped fund the health service, but whose early deaths relieved the state from having to pay their pensions: “We are saving many more lives than we otherwise could because of those smokers who voluntarily lay down their lives for their friends.” Incredible though it now seems, it was but a modest paraphrase of what some industry briefed politicians were saying at the time.

Guatemala: snow stopping ‘em

Some interesting examples of horses for courses in tobacco advertising were to be seen early this year in Guatemalan newspapers. Snow is about as common in Guatemala as palm trees in Antarctica, but when you are selling a myth to educated people, you can use a wide range of reference points. Philip Morris’s Marlboro brand is mostly smoked by the higher and middle socio-economic classes, so a pretty cowboy



Philip Morris ads for two of its brands marketed in Guatemala: snow and cowboys for upmarket Marlboro smokers, more traditional Guatemalan scenes for its local Rubios brand.

scene with snow is no barrier when wishing people a happy holiday season from the world of Marlboro.

However, Philip Morris also makes the local Rubios brand, smoked mainly by

people at the lower end of the socio-economic scale, so for its “Merry Christmas” ad, a traditional Guatemalan scene, with a starlit courtyard looking suitably nativity-like for the Catholic audience, was more appropriate. It is all a long way from the total ad ban that is so urgently needed in Guatemala, as in all countries where tobacco promotion is still permitted. The big question is whether the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, which Guatemala has already signed, will succeed in banishing ads like these for good—traditional scenes, cowboys, snow and all.

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Sri Lanka: exploiting the fallen

It is hard to believe that a tobacco company, responsible for pushing products that cause thousands of premature deaths every year, would have the nerve to sponsor a shrine to those who gave their lives for their fellow citizens, far less plaster its company logo all over it. But British American Tobacco’s (BAT’s) subsidiary in Sri Lanka, CTC, which shares the parent company’s none-too-subtle golden tobacco leaf as a logo, has done just that, at the National Remembrance Park opened in October 2002 in Kandy district, in the centre of the country.

CTC’s name and logo appear not only on signs leading visitors to and around the park, but prominently engraved for posterity on a stone memorial tablet at the solemn heart of the place, above the inscription: “In sincere appreciation of those who sacrificed their lives for our nation so that we may live in peace.”



BAT’s golden tobacco leaf logo is prominently displayed on a stone memorial tablet in Sri Lanka’s National Remembrance Park.



A young Sri Lankan protester “improving” one of the BAT sponsored signs in the Sri Lankan National Remembrance Park. The completed message read “CTC kills children”.

Doubtless the BAT/CTC people responsible were sincere in their appreciation of the fallen, but a cynic might consider the irony that tobacco executives may hold a parallel, sincere appreciation of all those who are addicted to their company’s products. These customers risk sacrificing their lives by the daily satisfaction of their addiction, in a commercial process encouraged by massive promotion, so that the executives and shareholders may live in greater personal, economic peace than might otherwise be likely.

Interestingly, the exploitation of such an important national landmark by a tobacco company has prompted one of the first acts of civil disobedience prompted by tobacco in a developing

country. In a scene reminiscent of BUGA-UP, that famous group of early graffitiists in Australia, a young Sri Lankan protester was captured on film “improving” one of the signs, as BUGA-UP might have put it. His message, when completed, read, “CTC kills children”. Whether he had in mind children who die because of malnutrition due to the drain on family income caused by their fathers’ addiction, or to future deaths among the children of today currently being recruited to smoking, the appearance of such protests must be worrying for tobacco companies.

Pakistan: seizing the moment

Not many of us have walked up to the head of state of our country and personally pointed out shortcomings in the government’s public health policies, with *prima facie* evidence at hand to back up our case, far less repeated the process a few minutes later with the prime minister. But in March, Dr Saeed ul Majeed, president of the Pakistan College of Family Medicine, did precisely that. His audacious but exemplary use of the ultimate lobbying opportunity came at a ceremony in the capital, Islamabad, where he was one of an elite group being awarded the distinguished honour Tamgha-i-Imtiaz (Medal of Distinction), with which the government recognises distinguished merit in the fields of literature, arts, sports, medicine, and science.

After the investiture, Dr Majeed noticed people smoking in the hall, in contravention of Pakistan’s law on smoking in public places. Wasting not

a second of time, he went up to the country’s president, General Pervez Musharraf, and pointed out that the Ordinance issued by him against smoking in public places was being violated in his presence. He also mentioned his disappointment that Pakistan had not yet signed the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), despite the fact that 71 other countries had seen fit to do so. Next, he approached the prime minister and asked him to get the FCTC signed by the government—just like that; as one does. Like the consummate advocate that he clearly is, when he got home he wrote follow up letters to the president and the prime minister, with copies to the federal health minister, reinforcing the importance of signing the FCTC. That’s the way to do it.

Australia: a career in cancer promotion?

Last year protests by staff and students at the University of Sydney saw the university senate vote to not endorse the chancellor’s appointment of former state premier and current BAT Australia chair Nick Greiner to an advisory position in political science at the university. As if to rub salt into Greiner’s public humiliation, the university then advised BAT that they were no longer welcome to set up a stand at the annual student careers fair and extol the virtues of working for a tobacco company—“You get to do lots of great stuff like talking to government and the media,” one student was told by a gushing BAT staffer.

Website checks this March saw BAT poised to woo students at three other Sydney university careers fairs. Alerts to



Madagascar: selling dreams. Even in the poorest countries, such as Madagascar, whose more than 15 million inhabitants have an average annual income of around US\$250 and a life expectancy of under 60 years, there is always a market for tobacco. Cigarettes usually cost about US\$1 for 20, and advertisements such as the one shown above often portray a lifestyle far beyond the reach of most people. Imperial Tobacco of the UK, whose recent takeovers enable it to boast being the world’s fourth largest tobacco company, has been investing there. One of the few links from its website’s home page is to a section dealing with its operations in Madagascar, which it describes as its most extensive in Africa. Last year, Imperial launched its West brand at the Hilton hotel in the capital, Antananarivo, where West’s much vaunted sponsorship of Formula One motor racing seemed about as far as could be imagined from the home made model cars handled by the country’s younger generation.





Mr Sigi Butt, who enthusiastically urges students to sign up with BAT to help kill thousands of Australians each year.

staff and student bodies saw swift action. The University of Western Sydney reversed its decision to allow BAT to participate within hours of a 'phone call being made. Macquarie University expressed regret that nothing could be done this year to reverse its acceptance of BAT, but has said it will be the last time. As we go to press, the University of New South Wales is bracing itself for a rowdy reception for BAT led by Mr Sigi Butt, who enthusiastically urges students to sign up with BAT to help kill thousands of Australians each year while making lots of money.

Mary Assunta and I accompanied Sigi to the Macquarie careers fair, and before being evicted by some rotund security

guards, managed to get a flavour of the latest company line fed to BAT's new recruits. Lavina, a chirpy media graduate, was unfazed by my question about whether she felt comfortable working for a company whose products kill thousands of its customers each year. "Oh, you can't say that!" she trilled. "There are many other things that cause cancer. You just can't put it down to smoking," declining to allow the conversation to be recorded by a radio reporter. I congratulated her on how well she had absorbed her training, and enquired whether they were any companies producing legal products for whom she would not work. Mercenary recruitment agencies, perhaps? "What do they do?" she asked. "They pay you to go to other countries to kill people," I explained. Lavina said BAT was a "great company". So, I understand, it was said of some of those who supplied slaves to America, ran opium out of China, and sent children down mines in the 19th century. All legal activities then.

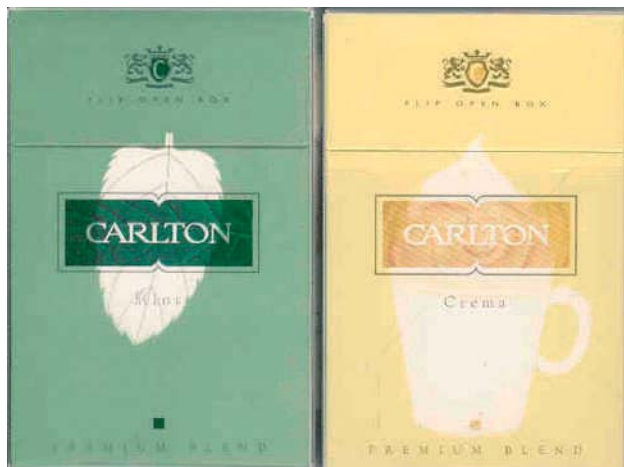
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USA/Brazil: the flavour of things to come?

As more countries sign and ratify the FCTC, giving the structure for ending all forms of promotion, naturally people are asking how it will really affect the tobacco companies. Does the fairly unconcerned image they project mean they have worked out sufficient ways of getting round the national bans that should ensue to keep pushing their products, especially to the young, or have they done deals with some countries to get bans with built-in loopholes?

Perhaps, as usual, they will simply try any and every avenue they can think of. In the last few years, after all, we have seen a spate of new techniques being tried, including exclusive invitation only parties and nightclub websites aimed at trend setting young people, and the increasing use of carefully built up mailing lists. Another practice that has intensified recently is brand extension, using colours, images, and other associations that are not necessarily a logical development of the original brand, but which can reach a new sector of the market. With around 90% of smokers starting to smoke before they are out of their teens in many countries, it is not surprising that the youth market is the usual target.

In the USA, for example, Brown & Williamson Tobacco (B&W), the US subsidiary of BAT, has introduced a flavoured extension of its menthol brand Kool. Called the Smooth Fusions range, flavours include Caribbean Chill, Mocha Taboo, Mintrigue, and Midnight Berry. Take Midnight Berry, which at first hearing might be mistaken for some sort of grim drugs underworld slang, perhaps for the sort of dark and slimy blood clot that a terminally ill tobacco junkie might cough up in the delirious, hacking depths of the last night of this mortal life. In reality, it is a new brand in a highly coloured pack with an unusual design: it has rounded corners and opens out like some of the personal digital assistant (PDA) gadgets that many get-ahead young people carry nowadays. Opened out, it holds 13 cigarettes on one side and seven on the other. What health campaigners are most concerned about, in addition to this new level of absurd glamourisation of an addictive and lethal product, is that the cigarettes' strong fruit flavour may mask the retch inducing effects of



Tobacco companies continue to seek new ways of promoting their products to get around the restrictions imposed by the FCTC. Flavoured cigarettes are now being promoted in Brazil (left panel: Carlton Crema and Carlton Mint) and the USA (right panel: Kool Midnight Berry fruit flavour).

inhalation among first time smokers, especially young ones.

B&W says 45% of Kool smokers are African American and 8% Hispanic, and the Fusions range will be targeted at hip, trend setting smokers, more heavily skewed to the Hispanic population, in bars and nightclub venues, with print ads appearing in publications such as *Playboy* and *Vanity Fair*. A B&W executive called Mr Cremers, appropriately (see below), was quoted as saying that the response from consumers was that "This is a pack to be seen with". That sums up much of what underlies health officials' objections, and conversely, is no doubt why RJ Reynolds, which is in line for acquisition by B&W soon, has been trying similar brand extensions. The latest range, Camel Exotic Blends, has Crema, apparently tasting like cream; Izmir Stinger, like a cocktail of brandy and crème de menthe; Dark Mint, chocolate and mint; and Mandarin Mint and Twist, both citrus flavoured. It had already launched Camel Turkish Jade in 2001, with Mandarin Mint, Creamy Mellow Mint, Light and regular Mellow Menthol blends.

In Brazil, BAT has been even bolder with a new extension of its Carlton brand. Souza Cruz, its local subsidiary, has launched Carlton Crema and Carlton Mint, both with flavours, striking new packaging, and a printed insert. The insert seems designed to flatter smokers who would like to be considered sophisticated, with notes on the origins of the word "mint", for example, and the history of vanilla for Crema. They make ample use of words such as "refreshing", "perfume", "sweet", and "smooth". Each insert ends with the slogan, "Carlton, a rare pleasure". The packs also have a semi-clear plastic cover on the outside: on Carlton Mint, it is green with a mint leaf, while Crema's is cream coloured with a coffee and cream image print. These wrappings also carry the government health warning images—not necessarily the same as the photograph on the actual pack, but frequently one with less impact. For example, in one case, the image on the pack reflected a person being resuscitated from a heart attack, but that on the plastic wrap showed a couple with problems caused by the smoking man's bad breath, an image the government has decided to replace because evaluation has shown it to be ineffective.

Public health authorities in Brazil, the region's leader in tobacco control, view the inserts as advertisements circumventing Brazil's legislation, which only permits printed tobacco ads in the internal area of points of sale. It is to be hoped that if they are right, a case is

taken to court. Its outcome might help seal off one way tobacco companies may think they can get round laws that in due course should be spawned worldwide by the FCTC.

Malaysia: racing round the hurdles

Anyone who visited Malaysia in the 1980s and who turned on the television set in their hotel room was likely to see more tobacco promotion than they had ever seen before in a half hour of channel hopping. If they were there on public health business, they had an additional shock when they learned that the country had banned tobacco advertising on television. Ministry of health officials would announce this with sincerity, though some of them would admit that there were problems of circumvention. Did these stem from cross border television, which can be so troublesome to a tobacco control leader with less enlightened neighbours? No, the ads were on Malaysian TV, but were not for cigarettes at all, but for those well known but impossible to obtain products such as Marlboro and Kent holidays, or Camel clothing. In those days, no tobacco control advocate's conference presentation was complete without slides or video clips showing how tobacco companies were exploiting Malaysia and its innocent government.



Saturation tobacco promotion was very much in evidence at the recent Formula One motor race in Malaysia.

But all that was a long time ago, and now Malaysia has a strictly enforced advertising ban, and frequent, strong anti-tobacco rhetoric from government ministers. So when Formula One negotiated the introduction of this new spectator sport in Malaysia, with the construction of a brand new racetrack in Kuala Lumpur, it was bound to be interesting to see how the health ministry would fare against the tobacco industry. Could it prevail in preventing this most tobacco saturated, adrenaline loaded burst of show business from undermining its laudable efforts to educate people about the realities of



USA: Life or Death playing Cards in California, USA produces health promotion playing cards containing health messages targeted at young people. Each of the cards features a different cartoon character alongside a reason not to smoke, or take drugs—Life Playing Cards and Death Cigarette Playing Cards deal with smoking, and Drugs Playing Cards with drug use. The cards are available to view or purchase from their website (www.deathcards.com), or for a free sample pack contact Life or Death Playing Cards, PO Box 3134, San Luis Obispo, CA 93403, USA; tel +1 805 545 9625; fax +1 805 542 0860.

smoking, and to protect them from grossly misleading images about cigarettes? From the outside, at least, it seems that the ministry tried. It was reported to have sought assurances that there would be no brand promotion, and eventually to have received them. The trouble was, with that old innocence in danger of turning into gullibility, it believed the assurances. When the big event, Malaysia's first on the Formula One circuit, actually took place, it was nothing less than a three day orgy of pro-tobacco hype: not a shred of tobacco promotion had been sacrificed. For the tobacco companies, it must have been a triumphant justification of the decision of Formula One, which they effectively control, to pull out of some of those stuffy old countries that had clamped their efforts to push cigarette promotion to the ultimate boundaries of possibility.

Mere words will not convey what eye witnesses experienced. An atmosphere of excitement, festivity, and celebration was generated by banners, flags, huge video screens, music and disco events, a plethora of kiosks, all with staff decked out in their brand's colours, some of them students hired just for a day, or a night—some of the events, such as the Dunhill party on the Saturday night, went on into the small hours of the next day. At the "Regenerate Red Zone", Marlboro's extravaganza held the same night, Marlboro girls were everywhere, in knee high red leather boots, red miniskirts, and white Marlboro tank tops. At every event, the dominant cigarette brand had its vehicles, lots of them—from sports utility vehicles and

trucks, to plinth mounted, spot lit racing cars, and even three Dunhill cars to be given away, pre-painted in the brand's colours, to the lucky winners of a prize draw. Entry to the draw was the same as to the party: a form had to be completed that captured personal information for BAT's future direct marketing.

A similar price was paid by those entering the Marlboro zone. Entry was supposed to be restricted to the usual 18 years and over—no doubt the restriction of branding to within the events would be the companies' and the government's defence—but witnesses were unanimous in pointing out that ages were never seen to be checked. In any case, the promotion was so over the top that any such nuance seemed utterly irrelevant. In addition to the large scale attractions mentioned above, the events were awash with attractive handouts promoting the brands—free coasters, ashtrays, banners, promotional mobile phone downloads, and competitions offering the opportunity to win branded prizes such as computer games, to name but a few; and there was smoking, everywhere. Almost everyone in the events was young, and almost all were smoking.

Dunhill, Marlboro, West, Lucky Strike, and Mild Seven—half the Formula One teams are sponsored by tobacco and they were all there, and all at it, big time. Tobacco companies do not knowingly throw money away, so the importance to them of this sort of unrestrained promotion can be judged from what a BAT official told one visitor to the Dunhill party. The one night event had cost the company around

US\$1 million, he said, and it had taken over the entire Park Inn International hotel for the weekend. But this is small money in the scheme of Big Tobacco's Formula One spending: Marlboro's Ferrari team is estimated to get around US\$150 million a year, and the others up to another US\$200 million between them.

As for the race itself on the Sunday, most notable was an entire stand, Hill Stand G, which the organisers had filled with students—to get more young people interested, involved, and able to experience firsthand this new sport. Although they probably forgot to mention it to the government, they will also have wanted them to experience the lightning fast cigarette packs on wheels driven by young heroes who are the modern day cowboys of tobacco promotion—tough, fearless, macho, independent, glamorous—you name it, as long as it is positive and seductive, and as far as you can get from lung cancer, emphysema, and heart disease.

So now we know how tobacco companies and Formula One see life beyond the European Union ban that looms in a couple of years. How it squares with what ought to be implemented under the FCTC is unclear; but as the event had to be approved by the health ministry, and since there was supposed to be no direct branding present at the event, it seems that what took place did not constitute direct advertising and branding under Malaysian law. If this is the size of coach and horses that can be driven through one of the more sophisticated Asian country's legislation, it does not bode well for the future.