

RESEARCH PAPER

A "clean cigarette" for a clean nation: a case study of Salem Pianissimo in Japan

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Objective: To illustrate, through internal industry documents, how RJ Reynolds exploited the concerns of the Japanese society about cleanliness to market the concept of cleaner, implicitly healthier cigarettes in Japan.

Design: Systematic keyword and opportunistic website searches of formerly private internal industry documents.

Results: Industry documents show that RJ Reynolds developed marketing plans based upon their cultural assumptions of Japanese people as fastidious about hygiene and manners, and with relatively high penchants to try new products. RJ Reynolds found there was also a growing concern for health, the environment, and smokers were conscious about annoying others. Deodorised consumer products were one of Japan's biggest trends. These characteristics presented RJ Reynolds with a profitable formula for marketing Salem Pianissimo, a clean cigarette with less smell and smoke. Salem Pianissimo, a 100 mm cigarette claiming to contain 1 mg tar and 0.1 mg nicotine, targeted women since menthol cigarettes were popular among 18–24 year old female smokers, although Japan's law prohibited those below 20 years to smoke and the tobacco industry had a voluntary code disallowing advertising to women and youth.

Conclusion: RJ Reynolds successfully launched its clean cigarette, Salem Pianissimo, in Japan aiming to exploit perceived cultural characteristics such as a penchant for cleanliness, an eagerness to try new products, and social harmony.

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"The pen is mightier than the bacterium" was a 1995 Japanese advertisement for "bacteria-free" pens.¹ This product was one among many of a new genre of anti-germ and anti-bad odour products such as stationery, bicycle handles, musical instruments, oral-hygiene products, and deodorising underwear. Such products were particularly popular among young Japanese women.² It is not uncommon for young women to have their own personal microphones at karaoke bars because of fear of infection. This phenomenon, dubbed "prig syndrome", was seen particularly among young female office workers who feared catching an infection from others.¹ Etiquette buttons are installed in toilets to allow women concerned about projecting a pristine image to flush the toilet continuously from the moment they enter the cubicle.³

In the 1970s when identifying marketing opportunities in Japan, the advertising agency, Dentsu, noted that cleanliness was valued very highly by the Japanese who would reject any product that did not look clean: "The preference for new products also has its roots in consumer attachment to cleanliness and the perfection of a product. ...Not only do they care about functional and internal standards, but they are concerned also with exterior cleanliness. ...Irrational enough, but this sort of consumer attitude-placing priorities on newness and ostensible cleanliness is believed to be likely to prevail in future."⁴ Another observer noted "every neighbourhood has an amazing number of dry-cleaning stores and laundries".⁵

The Japanese reputation for cleanliness may have its origins in Shinto ideas of purity. While there appears to be no easy single explanation for it, this has been a consistent observation made about Japanese people. Early references to the phenomenon include Sir Edwin Arnold who in early 1900s described a Japanese crowd as being the sweetest, least objectionable in the world where the natural odour of the people is like lemon geranium and how there may be a clue in

the Japanese concept of *kirei*, which means simultaneously "beautiful" and "clean".³ The ubiquitous public baths and their significance to keeping the body clean are often recognised as a distinctive part of Japan.⁶

Against this background, smoking prevalence among Japanese men had dropped from 80% in 1970 to below 60% in the early 1990s, while 13.8% of women smoked.⁷ Intolerance to smoking in public was increasing, albeit slowly. At home, men were being described as "fireflies" as they retreated to the balconies to smoke away from families.⁸

It was in such a climate that RJ Reynolds (RJR) launched Salem Pianissimo, the "clean cigarette" in Japan in August 1995. It is available only in Japan. At ¥250 the clean cigarette was considered to be "an evolution of the ultra low tar brands addressing key personal and social concerns".⁹ Pianissimo was introduced as a new product that would be seen as "caring for others" and "putting down the scent of smoke".¹⁰ It was the first menthol cigarette that offered "less lingering smell" and "less sidestream smoke" to Japanese smokers.

Earlier research has documented how tobacco companies developed "social" cigarettes by using additives to alter both smokers' and non-smokers' perceptions of exposure to secondhand smoke.¹¹ This paper looks at how RJR capitalised on the Japanese penchant for cleanliness and successfully marketed a new cigarette brand that claimed to emit less smoke and smell.

METHODS

This paper is based on revelations from tobacco industry document searches conducted on the Master Settlement Agreement websites of the tobacco companies: www.tobaccoarchives.com between May and November 2003.¹² Initial key words used in the search were "Japan" and "Less sidestream smoke". A snowballing strategy was then used where terms from the metadata were formulated into new searches to run on the industry sites. The initial keywords

search resulted in clues for subsequent key words such as “Pianissimo”, “clean cigarette”, “Guilfoile”, “Takagi”, “toritomo”, and “less smell”. A main limitation of this paper is industry documents searched and reviewed are confined to those in the English language and exclude those in the Japanese language. Background information on cultural concepts was obtained from sociocultural publications on Japan.

RESULTS

Salem Pianissimo was not the first “clean” cigarette developed by RJR. In the 1980s it developed Premier and Vantage Excel which failed in the US market.¹¹ A newspaper report referred to Pianissimo as a remake of an older version, Salem Preferred, which merely gave second wind to products and technologies that flop in the U.S.¹³ RJR denied the charge claiming Pianissimo was not identical to Salem Preferred which “uses a proprietary technology to reduce the lingering room aroma of cigarette smoke. But Salem Preferred ...does not reduce sidestream smoke”.¹⁰

After the release of the US Environmental Protection Agency’s report on secondhand smoke in 1992, passive smoking gained more publicity.¹⁴ However, the Japanese public’s response was different from that in the USA. RJR summed up the situation in Japan: “...most other countries just come up with an easy conclusion to ban smoking or enlarge no smoking area[s]. However, in Japan, people will examine and develop curtains, cushions, hair spray that will absorb cigarette smoke and improve the quality of air ... Japanese are always looking for resolution with effort and pursue a method of co-existence.”¹⁰

The cultural significance of *meiwaku* (meaning things that are bothersome, particularly upon others) may have helped tobacco companies in Japan to push accommodation among smokers and non-smokers more effectively than other countries. *Meiwaku* implies an understanding that Japanese people should try to avoid doing anything that will cause others to feel dismayed, dissatisfied, displeased, uneasy, or angry.¹⁵ Accordingly, at least some Japanese smokers may be more likely to feel anxious or uncomfortable about the burden they impose on others.

The tobacco companies singled out technology which can help enhance social harmony: “Japanese society compromises to maintain harmony. The Japanese view of peaceful coexistence requires respect for others and places a high value on togetherness. This environment creates a high level of interest in technologies which preserve harmony.”¹⁰ Government support for office ventilation and air cleaning equipment helped push the concept for accommodation even further.¹⁶

Since the 1970s passive smoking has been treated as a “manners” issue rather than a health issue by the government and Japan Tobacco.¹⁷ According to an RJR survey, 80% of Japanese were concerned that their cigarette smoke may disturb others and that the smell may linger on their body and in rooms.^{10, 18} The marketing opportunity was too great to miss as RJR noticed in the early 1990s an explosion of new hygiene products aimed at younger Japanese that claimed to erase tobacco smells.¹³ Their market observations revealed that “Japanese consumers have become very conscious about odors and reduced-smell products, and deodorized products have become one of Japan’s biggest trends”.¹⁹ Consumer products were developed to meet the needs: “the concern about the influence of cigarette smoke and scent as smoke to living is escalating among smokers as well as non-smokers. As a result, hair sprays, curtains and cushions with a function of deleting scent of smoke are in high demand, and an air cleaner is being developed and spreading. As such, under the current society in which to live with tobaccos is a critical issue

...”¹⁰ The less sidestream smoke technology in cigarette was seem to “meet with market demand in Japan”.¹⁰

Appealing to the socially conscious young Japanese smoker

In 1993 Philip Morris reported that the consumer trends of the 1990s showed a shift in the values towards more environmental awareness and social welfare.²⁰ RJR similarly observed: “Social concern is a younger adult phenomena”²¹ This shift suggested consumers were aware of maintaining a clean environment and smoking was construed as annoying to others, hence the importance was growing of exercising smoking manners, particularly among young adults.

In 1994, RJR noted consumer attitudes were changing toward a “hunger for change, personal choice, more discriminating, soft individualism”.²¹ Among the new values were concerns about health and well being, and the environment. When translated into smoking trends this meant “females smoke more openly and switch more often, ...importance of smoking manners recognized, health concerns particularly among males”²¹ and that these concerns will increase. Cosmetics company Shiseido’s survey had shown cigarette smoke as the smell most widely despised by women.²²

Other clean cigarettes

The low tar era seems to have started around the late 1980s in Japan.²³ By 1992 the ultra low tar segment was the fastest growing segment in the market.²⁴ Pianissimo’s success boosted the launch of other less smell and less smoke cigarettes such as Philip Morris’ Virginia Slims One and Japan Tobacco’s Bevel Flair and Frontier Pure¹³ (table 1). A 1993 RJR report revealed plans for developing “the most refreshing menthol cigarette” code named Project Toritomo. The cigarette was to be introduced as an extension of Salem to meet the “social and personal concerns among Japanese consumers” such as carcinogens, teeth staining, odour on clothing/hair, low tar, and being annoying to others.²⁵

What’s in the name

“Pianissimo” is a universally understood musical term meaning to be performed very softly.²⁶ As a term and concept, Pianissimo was well understood in Japan where western music is ubiquitous. Many children learn the piano or violin and Japan is the world’s largest manufacturer of pianos. According to RJR, the low sidestream, the 1 mg tar and reduced cigarette smoke aroma matched the image conveyed by the word Pianissimo and results from consumer testing of the name were “excellent”.¹⁹

Appeal directed at women

Salem Pianissimo, advertised on green and pink billboards featuring an emaciated Nordic looking woman, was clearly directed at women (fig 1).²⁷⁻²⁹ The white cigarette pack, consistent with the cleaner cigarette theme, contained slim 100 mm cigarettes popularly smoked by women. RJR claimed each cigarette contained only 1 mg of tar and 0.1 mg of nicotine.³⁰ Menthol cigarettes were popular among female smokers.³¹ According to RJR the target audience was between 18–24 years, who were “perceived by their peers as trendsetters, upscale, westernized and socially active.”³²

Although female Pianissimo smokers outnumbered male smokers fourfold,¹³ RJR prepared advance public relations responses denying the brand targeted women, claiming their consumer research indicated “this brand will appeal to both male and female smokers”.¹⁰ Internal documents indicate otherwise: “1995 introduction address females and personal/social concerns”²¹ Another 1995 document refers to more effort put behind cigarettes focusing on women and on a

Table 1 Types of cleaner cigarettes

Brand name	Company	Characteristic	Year launched
Eclipse	RJR	Smokeless cigarette – Heats tobacco, no exhaled smoke.	1996
Premier Pianissimo	RJR	Seen as improved version of Premier	1996
Salem Pianissimo	RJR	Less sidestream smoke, less lingering smell (non-menthol)	1995
Salem Preferred	RJR	Less sidestream smoke, less lingering smell (menthol)	1991
Vantage Excel	RJR	Launched in the USA	1989
Premier	RJR	Reduced smoke	1988
Accord	Philip Morris	Smokeless cigarette, tobacco is heated. Withdrawn after 6 months. Smokers found it hard to light and bad tasting	1998
		Rechargeable, electronic, chip based cigarette holder, eliminate all sidestream smoke, 3 mg tar/0.2 mg nicotine, still exhale smoke	
Virginia Slims One	Philip Morris	Less sidestream smoke, better smelling	1997
Merit	Philip Morris	Low tar, 4 mg, launched in Japan	1992
Lucia (Citrus)	Japan Tobacco	Masks cigarette odour	2003
Mild Seven Prime	Japan Tobacco	Masks cigarette odour	2003
Frontier Pure	Japan Tobacco	Less sidestream smoke	1997

“cleaner cigarette”. The Salem Slims Lights, for example, is referred to as a “stylish, ultra light menthol product positioned against Virginia Slims to address personal (& social) concerns of young adult female smokers”.⁹ The report also refers to introducing a “cleaner cigarette” using “technology as the base to target mainstream smokers who have personal and social concerns about smoking”.⁹

Internal correspondence four months after the launch of Pianissimo records the success of Pianissimo among women: “Pianissimo has expanded Salem’s share of the female 100 mm slim segment from 10.7% to 24.2% in just four months. Importantly, Pianissimo has driven Salem’s share of the total menthol segment from 23% to 25.6%, significantly widening the gap with Virginia Slims, and improving our lead as the No 1 menthol brand in Japan. ...incremented spending is required to maximize the brand’s potential.”³³ RJR put 70% of its marketing expenditure on Pianissimo and the increased funds were needed to expand vending distribution, increase brand awareness, trial and conversion.³³

Salem was RJR’s flagship brand that drove its business in Asia: “SALEM, our largest volume Asian brand and #1 menthol worldwide, has been highly successful in creating and exploiting a unique territory—a combination of freshness, cleanness, vitality, and modernity which young adult smokers in this region find intrinsically appealing. Since 1990, brand has achieved 14% CAGR [cumulative average growth rate], responding to aggressive advertising and satellite support programs appealing to YAS [young adult smokers] (music and sports). Additionally, SALEM Slim Lights was successfully introduced in Japan to defend against Virginia Slims. Net, SALEM, given its impressive track record of response to aggressive marketing programs, continues to drive our business growth in Asia.”³²

Cleanliness, new technology, co-existence: a profitable formula

Low tar cigarettes have done well in Japan. According to Philip Morris in the USA ultra light cigarettes delivering 3 mg tar had about 13% of the market and only 2% smoked brands containing less than 3 mg of tar. In Japan ultra light cigarettes was the fastest growing market at 40%, while 13% of Japanese smokers purchased brands delivering less than 3 mg tar.³⁴ The Japanese market potential for greater demand in low tar cigarettes was clear.

Two years after the launch of Pianissimo, RJR reported: “Since 1995, RJR has launched four new brands which have less lit-end smoke and less lingering smell of cigarette smoke. These cigarettes were designed to encourage peaceful



Figure 1 Pianissimo advertisement at Osaka Umeda station. More images are available at <http://tobacco.health.usyd.edu.au/site/gateway/docs/pdf/pianissimo.pdf>

co-existence among smokers and non-smokers, and have been well accepted by Japanese smokers.”³⁵

In 1996 Salem Pianissimo had 0.5% of the share of market pushing the Salem stable of brands to 2.2% of total market.³⁶ By 1997, Pianissimo accounted for nearly half of RJR’s cigarette business in Japan, and was the reason why RJR’s share grew from 2.1% to 2.7%.¹³ While the figure is modest, in a market worth \$33 billion it is significant. One year after the introduction of Pianissimo, RJR became Japan’s “most rapidly-growing” tobacco company.³⁷ RJR described Pianissimo as a “roaring success”³⁸ and Japan as the “first market where a new technology brand has been seen as a significant success”.³⁸ Market share is so competitive that a new cigarette is considered successful if it can garner 0.3% of market share.³⁹ In 1997 both Salem and Premier Pianissimo held 1.2% of the 2.2% (8 billion units) market share of the low smoke brands.³⁸ Between 1999 and 2000 Pianissimo sales grew by 18.6% and by 2001 its market share was more than the entire volume of cigarette sales RJR had held in 1988.⁴⁰

The 1 mg tar cigarette had more than 1 mg

In late July 1995, before the launch of Pianissimo, Philip Morris suspected that Pianissimo’s tar delivery was “significantly greater than 1 mg” as claimed.⁴¹ Philip Morris’ suspicions were confirmed when its tests on Pianissimo

What this paper adds

RJ Reynolds marketed the concept of cleaner, implicitly healthier, cigarettes in Japan, to exploit the concerns of a society fastidious about cleanliness. This paper also provides evidence RJ Reynolds targeted underage youth and women and marketed cigarettes as 1 mg tar although they contained a higher level.

showed the product contained closer to 2 mg: "JT told me that their original analysis of Salem Pianissimo indicated that they were getting higher tar numbers than PM."⁴²

The findings revealed: "...some manufacturers may be producing their reported 1 mg products at the high end of the tolerance level, closer to 2 mg. We believe that, if so, this may deceive a consumer, is unfair to those competitors who manufacture at 1 mg and with much tighter tolerance (like PMs), and may invite attention from entities outside the industry."⁴²

However RJR's press release on the introduction of Pianissimo went on to claim as one of its three major characteristics: "Realized 1 mg tar and refreshing smoking with high menthol"⁴³

DISCUSSION

RJR could have launched Pianissimo in any other country, so why did it choose Japan? The internal documents reveal that RJR marketers perceived Japan as having cultural characteristics that could be tapped effectively to sell the brand. A cigarette emitting less smoke and smell in a nation purportedly obsessed with cleanliness and hygiene could fit well into a society where issues were said to be resolved through co-existence rather than confrontation and a market hungry for new technologies and new consumer products. Social concerns were also recognised as a growing phenomenon among young adults, which further enhanced the climate for Pianissimo's potential success.

It appears the absence of a strong public policy to create a smoke-free society in Japan¹⁶ helped push the industry's message of accommodation more persuasively. Not smoking in public places, or even quitting, was not an option for smokers to consider. The downward trend in smoking prevalence among men and the potential exploitable female market presented good opportunities to develop a cigarette appealing to women. The clean, hence "healthier" cigarette addressed the immediate concerns of smell and annoying sidestream smoke and health. The promise was reflected in the name itself.

Although the law prohibits smoking by youth below 20 years,⁴⁴ RJR's target market included 18–19 year olds. Besides this the tobacco industry in Japan also had a voluntary code not to target women and children in their advertising.^{45–46} The Pianissimo campaign clearly contravened this code as revealed in the internal documents. However publicly RJR maintained Pianissimo was not targeted at women. This non-adherence to both the code and law calls for more effective monitoring of promotions by the industry and better implementation and enforcement of restrictions.

The market potential for cigarettes offering less smell and less sidestream smoke has continued through the years and in 2003 JT launched Lucia, a citrus smelling cigarette aimed at women³⁹ followed by Mild Seven Prime. These cigarettes aim to "mask unpleasant odors".⁴⁷ Although JT concedes smokers tend to be fiercely loyal to their brand and it's difficult to persuade them to switch for long, it can still aim

the products at young smokers who have a penchant to try something new.

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