What brands are US smokers under 25 choosing?

It is well known that the most heavily advertised brands tend to attract the younger smoker market. In the USA the most heavily advertised brands are Marlboro, Newport, and Camel. Few analyses have delved into the specific varieties popular among youth. Do “Lights” or “Full Flavors” predominate? To answer this question, data on the cigarette brand preferences of smokers in the 2002 US National Survey on Drug Use and Health were analysed.

Using the on-line analysis feature of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Data Archive, cigarette brand used in the last 30 days was cross tabulated with the type of cigarette (Full Flavor, Light, Ultra Light, self reported) used in the past 30 days. Separate analyses were conducted on three age groups: 12–17 years old (n = 2290), 18–25 years old (n = 7321), and 26 + years old (n = 5238).

Analyses accounted for survey design characteristics and percentages were weighted to the US national population.

Figure 1 shows the top five varieties in each age group. Marlboro Lights were the most popular brand style among smokers in the USA. Marlboro Full Flavor and Newport Full Flavor are quite popular, with Camel less so. Five of the top nine varieties in all three age groups are Lights or Ultra-Lights, though the specific varieties varied by age. Discounted brands (Doral and Basic) account for a sizable percentage of the market but a miniscule percentage of the youth market sold in the USA appears dominated by varieties of the major advertised brands; other products make up a more modest percentage of the market. Conversely, the adult market is much more diffuse, with the major varieties commanding smaller overall percentages of the market.

Light varieties appear to be popular choices for younger smokers. Similar investigations in other countries could shed further light on younger smokers’ brand choices, particularly in those countries that have banned descriptors such as “Light” and “Mild”.

Figure 1 Top five cigarette brands among 12–17, 18–25, and 26 + years old, National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2002. Percentages are weighted to the US national population.
We know that large numbers of Australian smokers continue to believe that “light” and “mild” cigarettes provide relative health benefits. Although product promotions are now tightly restricted, Australian smokers continue to be lured with what is probably the largest and most complex variety in the world of “milds” (the term Australian manufacturers prefer), all designed to create a compelling illusion of reduced harm.

Major Australian brand families typically have six notional strength variants, based on Commonwealth labelling regulations: “1 mg or less”, “2 mg or less”, “4 mg or less”, “8 mg or less”, “12 mg or less”, and “16 mg or less”. Government mandated information on the side of each pack includes notional tar, nicotine, and carbon monoxide yields in these six “tar bands”. This is scheduled for replacement by qualitative information in March 2006, when new Commonwealth labelling regulations come into force. The industry also differentiates variants with various “mild” descriptors and/or more prominent use of the “tar band” figure. It is unclear whether the industry will be able to use notional tar figures once “light” and “mild” descriptors are prohibited.

Current industry conduct demonstrates that tar yields are very important to it. The most recent Australian Retail Tobacco has a cover advertisement for leading “budget” brand, Horizon, informing retailers:

Now your Horizon customers can get their favourite brand in an exciting new look pack. With new descriptors and clearer numbers all our packs are much easier to identify. Research proves that your customers will find the new pack more appealing and a lot easier to recognize.

Moreover, a number of brands are labelled with notional tar yields not listed in the labelling regulations. For example, Marlboro Lights and Winfield Special Mild 6 are both labelled as “6 mg or less”. Trade promotional material for Winfield Special Mild 6 indicated that the “6 mg or less” notional tar yield was intended to attract smokers of the “8 mg or less” variant of Winfield interested in switching to a lower yield brand.

The new Peter Jackson Select Blend varieties push the envelope by combining innovative verbal descriptors with non-prescribed notional tar yields. “Full flavour” is labelled “9 mg or less”, “smooth flavour” is labelled “6 mg or less”, and “fine flavour” is labelled “3 mg or less”. The backs of the packs describe the “6 mg or less” variant of Winfield interested in switching to a lower yield brand.

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By sociodemographic characteristics.

Income > $25 000/yr

Income < $25 000/yr

Figure 1 Support for cigarette tax increase according to proposed use, smoking status, and household income.

Sponsors/Acknowledgements

This research was supported by a grant from the National Institutes of Health (US-NIH). State funds were not used in the preparation of this report. Interpretations of the findings are solely those of the authors.

A L McAlister, B H Howard

University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston - School of Public Health

Department of Health Policy and Management

Correspondence to: Professor Alfred L McAlister; Alfred.L.McAlister@uth.tmc.edu

Ethis approval: Ethics approval for this study was received from the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston Institutional Review Board.

doi: 10.1136/tc.2005.016767

Competing interests: The authors have no competing interests.

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What was “light” and “mild” is now “smooth” and “fine”: new labelling of Australian cigarettes

We have just discovered (February 2005) a new “premium” sideline of Australia’s second largest selling brand, Peter Jackson. The new members of the Peter Jackson “brand family” come in black, grey, and white packs, respectively labelled “full flavour”, “smooth flavour”, and “fine flavour” is labelled “3 mg or less”, “smooth flavour” is labelled “6 mg or less”, and “fine flavour” is labelled “9 mg or less”. The backs of the packs describe the “full flavour” variant of Winfield interested in switching to a lower yield brand.

Moreover, a number of brands are labelled with notional tar yields not listed in the labelling regulations. For example, Marlboro Lights and Winfield Special Mild 6 are both labelled as “6 mg or less”. Trade promotional material for Winfield Special Mild 6 indicated that the “6 mg or less” notional tar yield was intended to attract smokers of the “8 mg or less” variant of Winfield interested in switching to a lower yield brand.

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responses which amount to continuing the deception by new means.

B King, R Borland
VicHealth Centre for Tobacco Control, The Cancer Council Victoria, Australia

Correspondence to: Bill King; bill.king@cancervic.org.au
doi: 10.1136/tc.2005.011692

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Banning smoking in public places
This book is simultaneously depressing and reassuring for people involved in the battle to remove environmental tobacco smoke from public places. The tactics used to oppose a bylaw requiring all public places, including bars, to be smoke-free in Greater Victoria in Canada in the late 1990s are depressingly familiar to those currently fighting for smoke-free bars in Australia. On the other hand, it is reassuring that the opposition does not seem to have developed any new strategies, their moves becoming increasingly predictable.

For that reason, this is an excellent tool for people trying to bring about tobacco control through legislation and public policy and will provide a good insight for people working in other areas of public health. While the players in this story are very specific to Greater Victoria, Canada, the logistics of the campaign strategy are almost universally applicable. The tactics used to oppose tobacco control are global and the lessons learned from this campaign are worth sharing with the international tobacco control community.

Smoke-free has been written by a journalist, Barbara McLintock, so it is a comfortable, easy to read story. Those who want more academic details of the campaign, with statistics, evaluation, and analysis, can find that in journal articles published elsewhere. The value of this book is the insight into the power struggles and spheres of influence which are the hidden drivers of legislative change.

It also puts a human face on the battle and reinforces the need to support staff given the unenviable job of enforcing tobacco control policies among people who do not want them. I have to admit that I found the description of the aggressive hostility against the Capital Health Region staff, orchestrated by some of the bar owners, confronting and wondered what provision has been made in Australia to deal with the possibility of such tactics.

But it is those details which make the book a very powerful blueprint for what is needed to bring about effective policy change. The growing acceptance of anti-smoking strategies by the general community has not removed all the heat from the issue and the battle does not end with the passing of legislation. The need for strong leadership and a commitment to resources to enforce the legislation once it is in place may well continue for a number of years.

W Oakes
The Cancer Council NSW, Australia; wendyo@nswcc.org.au

BOOK REVIEW
Smoke-free: how one city successfully banned smoking in all indoor public places

This is a place that did everything right. —Sharon Osbourne,RTL, Director of Research, University of California, San Francisco, and Tobacco analyst.

SMOKE-FREE
How One City Successfully Banned Smoking in All Indoor Public Places
BARBARA McLINTOCK
JEFREY WIGAND

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