

News analysis

Lebanon: saying it with the packaging

Despite admissions about the unparalleled dangers of smoking that British American Tobacco (BAT) has been forced to make, some of its marketing activities are as inappropriate as ever. In Lebanon, where it seems to enjoy the government's perpetual dithering, BAT forges ahead with new developments. The latest is a re-packaging of its Kent brand, with a level of design glitz and hype that must beggar the understanding of those trying to treat patients with tobacco-related disease in Lebanon's hard-pressed hospitals.

A toenail curling, cringe making account of the launch, or reveal as it was termed, appeared in a glossy magazine in Beirut. Among the less absurd statements about the new pack was its description by a BAT man as a winning combination of metallic packaging and components to emphasise "quality and luxury, a brand identity of sophistication par excellence". The magazine's panegyric went on to report that the re-launch was held in Otium, one of Beirut's top bar-restaurants. "An all white, Zen-like conceptual setting, coupled with a futuristic podium, stressed the style of Kent. Mini champagne bottles personalised for Kent, fusion finger food to delight the palate, lighting and music to set the mood, the select few invited were drawn into a New York loft atmosphere, for a reveal like no other. Revealed with high tech animations, sound effects and all, the new pack truly spoke for itself."

Quite enough problems already face Lebanese public health workers trying to reduce their country's large burden of diseases caused by tobacco. With stuff like this still being pumped out by BAT and its friends, how on earth can they persuade the young people who throng Beirut's nightclubs that there is a 50% chance that smoking cigarettes will kill them?

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An image of BAT's new Kent packs for sale in Lebanon.

Lithuania: PM tries it on again

Lithuania is the westernmost of the three Baltic states—the others are Latvia and Estonia—and is now a member of the European Union. Remarkable progress has already been made since regaining independence after many years in the former Soviet Union. But while Lithuania appears to be thriving under democracy and a re-established market economy, it suffers the major disadvantage of being on the receiving end of attention from the tobacco companies.

Philip Morris (PM) has owned a factory in Klaipeda, in the north west of Lithuania, since 1994, the biggest tobacco factory in the Baltic states, where it makes cigarettes for Latvia and Estonia, as well as for local sales. In addition, its holding company, Altria, has a Kraft factory in Lithuania. Not surprisingly, PM has the largest share of Lithuania's cigarette market. Perhaps such relatively large operations and the need to try to persuade the Lithuanian government not to take action that might depress their profitability, are why the company has seemed desperate recently to spend its stockholders' money on public relations stunts.

For some years PM has been among the major sponsors of New Baltic Dance, a prominent feature in Lithuania's cultural events calendar since 1995. The company's persistent efforts to worm its way into the life of the country's non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are also of concern. On several occasions in recent years, the vigilance of health advocates, in particular those of the national coalition on tobacco and alcohol control, has

brought to light activities that must be designed to win political influence.

For example, the health coalition learned that PM, already among the official sponsors of an information centre serving some NGOs in Klaipeda, was organising and sponsoring a youth prevention project, "I can." Worse, the ministry of education was apparently involved, as were some NGOs. The coalition generated publicity explaining the real intentions of tobacco companies in doing such activities, following which the ministry of education withdrew from the project, which was later abandoned.

Later, another initiative came to light: PM, apparently in collaboration with the economic ministry, was reportedly floating the idea of being allowed to participate in a special market zone with reduced tax rates in Klaipeda, designed to attract new businesses rather than to benefit those already established there. Once again, timely publicity probably helped to stop the proposal in its tracks, with the economic ministry issuing a specific denial that any such initiative would take place.

Most recently, in October, PM issued a call for project grant applications for NGOs in the Klaipeda region. PM said it particularly wanted to give financial support to projects promoting social aims, as well as independent activities of NGOs and other, more informal groups. Priority is to be given to projects concerned with the social integration of disabled people, decreasing social deprivation and exclusion, and environmental protection. Needless to say, the health coalition circulated an open letter to NGOs asking them not to apply or participate.

PM does not work alone in its efforts to continue business as usual. For example,