# New directions in tobacco promotion and brand communication

## Timothy Dewhirst

Traditional marketing communication options are becoming evermore limited to the tobacco industry, on a global basis, with 163 countries ratifying the World Health Organization's (WHO) Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) to date. Consequently, the issue of tobacco representation in the entertainment and digital media, and its potential promotional effect, has been gaining attention. For example, research has examined the prevalence and impact of pro-smoking images in youth and fashion magazines, and taken into account the extent of corresponding editorial coverage on smoking and health.[1–3] Moreover, considerable research has suggested that youth are influenced to smoke by positive smoking portrayals in the movies and celebrities serving as role models.[4 5] In particular, a recent study suggests that exposure to smoking portrayals in entertainment media may be more important in prompting initiation among adolescents, whereas tobacco marketing may exert a specific influence on their progression to more established smoking.[6] Additionally, there are several instances in which celebrity media interviews include mentions of cigarette brands as well as content that serves to normalise smoking. In the December 2008 issue of the British magazine *Arena*, an interview with Josh Brolin, the actor whose recent credits include *W*, *Milk* and *No Country For Old Men*, reveals that he is chain smoking Marlboro Lights.[7] Journalists may name particular brands—including those that are non-tobacco—to convey authenticity in their narrative (ie, describing the setting of the interview and to reinforce that it was conducted in person), yet in doing so obviously provide publicity for the brand and in effect provide an unconventional form of celebrity endorsement.

Digital (interactive) communications are also becoming increasingly important promotional tools for marketers, particularly for those attempting to reach a youthful target market.[8] In this issue, Freeman and Chapman **(see page 212)** give important insight about how Web 2.0 technologies can serve an important market research function for tobacco firms, as well as a promotional effect through the information-sharing that typically takes place through online or digital communities.[9] They provide a case study of Camel Signature Blends and explore how Web 2.0 was strategically used by RJ Reynolds through engaging consumers in the development of the brand's package design. The research by Freeman and Chapman is very timely, yet it is also apparent that RJ Reynolds has recognised for some time—at a minimum, more than 10 years—the value of engaging consumers interactively in its product design[10] and by direct marketing initiatives (eg, "What do you think?" was asked to prompt insight about potential advertising creative for the Salem brand).[11] Moreover, the Camel Signature Blends case study seemingly illustrates an attempt by RJ Reynolds to reproduce the successful efforts previously demonstrated by Jones Soda Co, in which the firm was granted a patent for customising branded products over the internet. Consumers, via the internet site, http://MyJones.com, could customise the label on bottles of Jones Soda, by submitting their own photos, and the personalised approach proved popular among the brand's core customers (ie, those aged 12 to 24).[12 13]

The term "Web 2.0" reflects that, initially, the internet was strategically approached by many marketers like traditional media (eg, television), yet "2.0" reflects a second wave of thinking for web content and creative. The digital revolution has prompted marketing communication that is more participatory, interactive, dynamic and engaging, in which brand communication is conceptualised more as a "conversation", rather than as a "lecture". Such trends have posed challenges to firms or organisations with traditional integrated marketing communication (IMC) mindsets, which often include themes of maximising "control" of their messages; IMC is defined as "a cross-functional process for creating and nourishing profitable relationships with customers and other stakeholders by strategically controlling or influencing all messages sent to these groups and encouraging data-driven, purposeful dialogue with them".[14] Accordingly, IMC approaches seemingly need to shift from being conceptualised as unidirectional to bidirectional or multidirectional, given that the ever-evolving mediums of consumer and stakeholder touch-points for brand communication are increasingly fragmented and complex (fig 1).[8]

The communication process has traditionally supposed a sender–message–receiver framework (fig 2).[15] From a marketing communications standpoint, the source, otherwise known as the sender of a message, has normally been equated with the corporation or organisation, as well as the brand communications and advertising agencies hired. The receiver, meanwhile, is usually considered to be a potential customer that ideally closely matches the intended "target" of a given message. It is acknowledged that, within such a model, advert production does not occur within a closed system, with the "feedback" part of the communication process reflecting that consumer knowledge, attitudes and opinions are regularly researched by marketers through pretesting and post-testing efforts.[16] Nevertheless, Web 2.0 technologies present challenges to such a conceptualised communication process, with the consumer not always being the "receiver", but increasingly also becoming a source and contributor to brand messages and product design.

For those in tobacco control, trends in online communication require further attention, particularly when considering the potential reach of Web 2.0 technologies. Worldwide, 1 billion people are now estimated as users of the internet, and this figure is expected to grow as mobile devices, such as mobile phones, increasingly allow for internet connections to be made. The internet is truly a global medium, with the Asia-Pacific region having the highest proportion of users.[17] There is a need for the continued monitoring of tobacco brand communication and smoking portrayals apparent in digital media, which is initiated from the tobacco industry as well as independent sources, including social networking accounts. A study that examined the content of 500 publicly available MySpace (http://www.myspace.com) profiles of 18-year-old Americans from 2007, for example, found that 54% of their online profiles contained displays of

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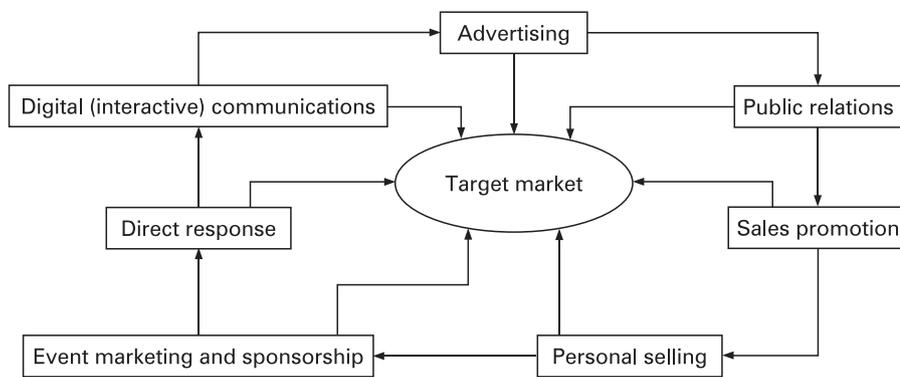
**Figure 1** The integrated marketing communications mix and various consumer touch-points. With consumer-generated content becoming more commonplace, it seems appropriate that arrows (albeit, less pronounced) also be depicted from the target market to the various mediums of communication (eg, advertising or digital communications). Source: Tuckwell.[8] Used with permission.

health risk behaviours, including references to substance use, sex, or violence.[18] Moreover, there is a considerable online presence of smoking pornography and fetish communities,[19] which seemingly serve to reflect or reinforce the widely known connotations of smoking and sexual imagery (eg, the "post-coital cigarette").

For future research that examines online communities and tobacco representation, "netnography" is a useful methodological approach. Netnography is defined as a qualitative, interpretive research methodology that adapts the principles and techniques of ethnography to the study of online communities.[20 21] Tobacco is a product particularly rich in meaning, and our understanding of tobacco consumption and its social meanings would be further enhanced through the application of netnographic techniques.

Web 2.0 technologies pose challenges to marketers (including social marketers) with regard to what extent messages are controlled. Second, the blurring of marketing communications and market research by the tobacco industry presents

regulatory considerations, and gratuitous online representations of smoking from independent, non-tobacco industry affiliated sources will undoubtedly prompt further debate concerning freedom of speech issues and the need for public policy interventions. Third, Web 2.0 technologies should be further utilised by public health practitioners and social marketers.[22] The US National Cancer Institute has identified the importance of online media for those in tobacco control, given that smokers are four times more likely to seek cessation advice and support online compared to dedicated telephone quit-lines. Anti-tobacco ads can obviously be posted on YouTube (http://www.youtube.com), and the American Legacy Foundation's "truth" campaign notably increased the number of visitors to its website after launching profile pages on popular social networking sites.[5] Finally, more research is needed, related to tobacco consumption apparent in social networking and online communities, that further builds upon the valuable contribution by Freeman and Chapman.
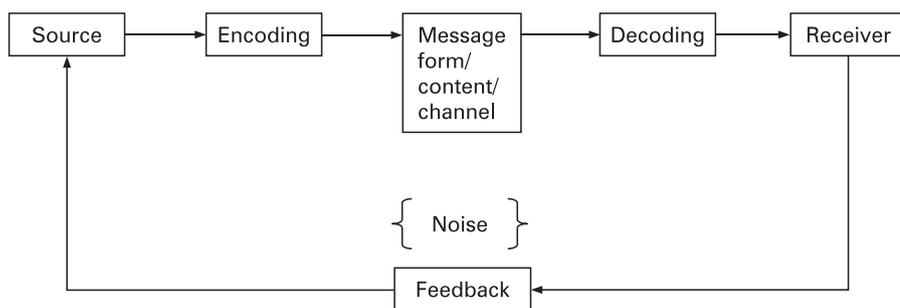


**Figure 2** The traditional communication process. "Open source" marketing or branding implies that the sender of a given message is largely unrestricted; in other words, virtually anyone can contribute as a source of communication (eg, an online newsgroup or consumption community). Obviously, the transparency of the source is an important ethical consideration.

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