Open source marketing: Camel cigarette brand marketing in the "Web 2.0" world

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ABSTRACT

Background: The international trend towards comprehensive bans on tobacco advertising has seen the tobacco industry become increasingly innovative in its approach to marketing. Further fuelling this innovation is the rapid evolution and accessibility of web-based technology. The internet, as a relatively unregulated marketing environment, provides many opportunities for tobacco companies to pursue their promotional ambitions.

Methods: In this paper, "open source marketing" is considered as a vehicle that has been appropriated by the tobacco industry, through a case study of efforts to design the packaging for the Camel Signature Blends range of cigarettes. Four sources are used to explore this case study including a marketing literature search, a web-based content search via the Google search engine, interviews with advertising trade informants and an analysis of the Camel brand website.

Results: RJ Reynolds (RJR) has proven to be particularly innovative in designing cigarette packaging. RJR engaged with thousands of consumers through their Camel brand website to design four new cigarette flavours and packages. While the Camel Signature Blends packaging designs were subsequently modified for the retail market due to problems arising with their cartoon-like imagery, important lessons arise on how the internet blurs the line between marketing and market research.

Conclusions: Open source marketing has the potential to exploit advertising ban loopholes and stretch legal definitions in order to generate positive word of mouth about tobacco products. There are also lessons in the open source marketing movement for more effective tobacco control measures including interactive social marketing campaigns and requiring plain packaging of tobacco products.

Tobacco advertising bans and technological innovations have prompted major changes to the ways in which tobacco companies approach the marketing and promotion of their brands. In a growing number of nations, orthodox "above the line" advertising options (essentially advertising in the mass media)[1] have been closed by tobacco advertising legislation. This same fate awaits tobacco advertising in 161 nations that have now ratified the World Health Organization (WHO) Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC).[2] Article 13 of the FCTC requires ratifying nations to undertake a complete ban on tobacco advertising and promotion, which is broadly defined as "any form of commercial communication, recommendation or action with the aim, effect or likely effect of promoting a tobacco product or tobacco use either directly or indirectly", unless prevented from doing so by their constitution.[3] The tobacco industry has developed innovative solutions to keep tobacco product brands in the front of consumers' minds.

These seismic changes have positioned the cigarette package as the cornerstone of tobacco company marketing plans.[4] While eye-catching packaging is an important element of advertising for many consumer goods, cigarette packages are unique in that they are continuously handled by smokers and often left out in public view on bar and restaurant tables.[5] Metallic finishes,[6] eye-catching colours,[7] novel shapes,[8] special editions,[9] split packs,[10] and collector tins[11] have all been used to attract consumers to tobacco products.

The 2008 US National Cancer Institute (NCI) monograph on the role of the media in promoting and preventing tobacco use highlights the lack of research in the area of internet-based tobacco advertising and promotion.[12] The internet, as a relatively unregulated marketing environment, provides many opportunities for tobacco companies to pursue their promotional ambitions and to exploit the unprecedented opportunities that interactive cyberspace provides to marketers.[13] The internet provides a continually evolving range of technologically innovative opportunities for tobacco companies to keep favourable associations with smoking and particular brands in consumers' minds. In this paper, we consider "open source marketing" as a vehicle that has been appropriated by the tobacco industry, through a case study of efforts to design the packaging for the Camel Signature Blends range of cigarettes. We use four sources to explore this case study including a marketing literature search, a web-based content search via the Google search engine (http://www.google.com), interviews with advertising trade informants and an analysis of the Camel brand website. While the Camel Signature Blends packaging designs were subsequently modified for the retail market due to problems arising with their cartoon-like imagery, important lessons arise on how the internet blurs the line between marketing and market research.

Open source marketing

The term "open source" originated in the field of computer software development where those developing software sought to make program designs transparent and to utilise the collective intelligence of other internet users to develop and refine the software.[14] The end product is a collaboration between the producer and the users of the software. The popular Firefox[15] web browser is an example of open source software that also utilised marketing volunteers to then publicise the

availability and merits of the program. No one was paid to develop nor market the product.[16] As the worldwide web has evolved beyond being simply a means to retrieve information provided by experts and interest groups, to become a fully interactive platform where users/consumers generate the bulk of the online content, "open source" has come to be more broadly applied.

This fundamental re-orientation to "Web 2.0", whereby the worldwide web is now a place to both find and contribute material,[17] has provided unprecedented opportunities for companies to engage with consumers in product and brand development. The key to understanding the importance of Web 2.0 in open source marketing is the ease with which consumers and marketers can share, cooperate and cocreate.[14] Utilising typical Web 2.0 tools, companies can implement a range of methods to increase engagement with consumers. Strategies may include hosting blogs where consumers can talk about the product, encouraging consumers to make their own advertisements and to post them on video sharing websites, or developing social forums where consumers can design their own packaging and compare and share their design with other consumers.[18] A social media expert explains, there are "potentially thousands or even millions of people who are willing to tell you what they think…It's not going to cost you anything, and what you get out of it will be tremendously valuable".[19]

Given advances in the accessibility of digital video production and sharing, consumers have been known to create their own advertising messages, regardless of whether a company formally engages in open source marketing. For example, in 2006 the credit card company MasterCard noticed that consumers were making their own versions of their international television advertisement "Priceless"[20] and sharing them through popular websites. MasterCard decided to capitalise on this free promotion and encouraged people to submit their versions of the advert through the MasterCard website. The company agreed to post the best examples on the official MasterCard website. No prizes or incentives of any kind were offered, and yet the company received more than 100 000 entries. Companies fully engaged in open source marketing can co-opt this free material to extend brand attributes.[21]

It may seem that open source marketing is little more than conducting large-scale focus groups over the internet. However, open source marketing puts more control in the hands of the consumer than traditional focus groups. For example, one market research company has developed an online survey tool that measures consumer preferences through a step-by-step approach to package design. Each survey participant builds a design based on their own preferences, as opposed to only giving feedback on a predetermined set of options developed by the marketing or design team.[22]

Companies can be reluctant to fully engage in open source marketing as the very real possibility exists that consumers will post overly negative and abusive comments about the product or satirise product attributes. This may be particularly true for tobacco products, given the success of tobacco industry denormalisation efforts and the often volatile emotions brought to the discussion of smoking.[23] However, marketers insist it is how a company responds to negative feedback, as opposed to the negative feedback itself, which matters. According to social media commentators, "the blogosphere is a very forgiving community. People will quickly let bygones be bygones".[19]

As part of their open source marketing plans, companies are encouraged to interact with their consumers' blogs and post their own comments and feedback on the consumer-generated content. The social media consortium, Every Dot Counts, has published a guide for companies on how to interact and effectively track bloggers, particularly those who have criticised a company.[24] A key piece of advice is to post the webpage link to the company website so other commentators can easily see the company side of the argument. Following this advice, Philip Morris (PM) could post a sympathetic comment on a smoker's blog who was discussing her dislike of the graphic health warnings on her cigarette package and how it was turning her off of smoking. The smoker could even be encouraged to visit the quit smoking section of the PM website as a sign of their corporate social responsibility.[25]

METHODS

Open source marketing case study: Camel and Camel Signature Blends

Marketers often maintain that the "brands that break through are the ones that engage consumers"[22] and that the internet has made it easier to engage consumers by allowing them to contribute directly to marketing campaigns and brand development. RJ Reynolds (RJR) has a history of engaging consumers in product design and encouraging them to spread positive word of mouth about their products.[13] RJR has embraced these concepts by opening up its marketing processes to brand the Camel and Camel Signature Blends cigarettes.[26]

Methodology

We employed a case study approach to better understand how and why RJR has used open source marketing techniques to promote Camel and Camel Signature Series cigarettes. Two related events led us to employ this approach. First, a 12 February 2008 Google blog alert for "package cigarette marketing" notified us that RJR was using open source techniques to redesign Camel cigarette packaging.[27] Google alerts are daily email updates of the latest relevant Google results (web, news, etc.) based on one's choice of query or topic.[28] Selections can be made from the following types of media: blogs, news, video, groups, web, or a comprehensive summary of all types. Typical uses of Google alerts include: monitoring a developing news story, keeping abreast of a competitor or industry, getting the latest information on a celebrity or event, or keeping tabs on a favourite sports team. However, alerts are useful tools to track newly-published research and public discourse on health issues. Second, two informants sent us a copy of a marketing presentation by a brand management company that had assisted RJR in developing their open source campaigns.

Case study approaches focus on research questions that primarily ask "how and why" and are best suited for studying current or recent events. It is also a useful approach when studying a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context, which in our paper means exploring the way users of the internet are engaging with a tobacco company. Case studies rely on direct observation of the events and often involve interviews with the subjects.[29] Interviewing the tobacco industry and their marketing partners for this particular case is impractical given it is not in the industry's best interest to fully cooperate with tobacco control researchers.[30]

Another unique aspect of case study design is the collection of multiple sources of evidence in order to triangulate data and build a fuller picture of the phenomenon being studied.[29 31] After we received the Google alert and the presentation from the informants, we formulated our data collection strategies, which included a literature search, interviews with the informants, an

online search using the popular international search engine Google and a content analysis of the Google search results and the Camel brand website. Our findings from the interviews were validated by each of the two informants

Finally, a case study provides researchers with the opportunity to reflect, review and consider what findings could mean.[32] Given the recentness of the events we have investigated, it is not possible to fully examine the impact of RJR's activities. While this case study is primarily an intrinsic investigation, our data analysis reflects on what the broader implications of RJR's plans could mean for future marketing initiatives and how they may impact future tobacco control measures.

RESULTS

RJR has proven to be particularly innovative in designing cigarette packaging. The RJR Camel brand has recently come under public scrutiny for the packaging of its sister product, Camel No 9.[33] With its sleek hot pink and black box, the packaging has obvious appeal to young fashion-conscious women.[34] During 2007, print advertising campaigns in popular US women's magazines featured the highly stylised packaging.

A 12 February 2008 Google blog alert for "package cigarette marketing" first notified us that RJR was using open source techniques to redesign Camel cigarette packaging.[27] The blog *Without Warning*[27] documented RJR's marketing scheme of mailing elaborately packaged empty Camel cigarette boxes to individuals the company claimed were adult smokers. The material emphasised that this cigarette is "all in a smooth-looking, new pack voted on by thousands of loyal adult smokers". This claim suggests the vital role that packaging plays in cigarette promotions, but also that RJR has engaged their consumer base to modernise the Camel brand. Modernising the brand is a key part of the Camel marketing strategy to attract new consumers and retain existing ones.[35]

A promotional video on the Camel website[36] confirms that the packaging change was the "first major pack change in 94 years" and that "5 million adult smokers were invited to offer their input". The video thanks smokers for their help in designing a "cleaner and more prominent" package and cheerfully concludes by telling viewers to "enjoy your smokes". Interestingly, consumer feedback on the way the new packaging redesign was promoted to smokers was overwhelmingly negative, due to the excessive use of paper and cardboard within the mailed package. For example, videos decrying the amount of packaging used can be viewed on YouTube.[37] RJR posted an apology to consumers on their website, which reads in part:

> "[Y]ou've told us that we could have used less paper communicating it to you. We're listening and are committed to exploring ways and opportunities on how we can become more environmentally friendly. Moving forward, we're going to make sure that our use of materials is better balanced to reduce waste".

A search of the health (through search engine PubMed) and marketing (through search engine Business Source Premier (BSP)) literature for the terms "camel and marketing" generated 35 papers (PubMed) and 123 papers (BSP). There were 2 articles that appeared in both searches from a total of 156 unique papers. Only one marketing trade publication item mentioned the open source techniques RJR was using to promote the Camel brand.[26]

The 2007 news item from the marketing trade journal *Brandweek* describes RJR's success in using open source to

market the Camel brand variant, Camel Signature Blends cigarettes. The author suggests the marketing habits of tobacco companies have changed as "the formerly secretive RJ Reynolds, for instance, has embraced [transparency] by opening up its marketing research process to net a new cigarette, Camel Signature".[26] Smokers were recruited to rate and propose pack designs and logos. The project, which was initially targeted to engage 6000 people, netted 30 000 participants and resulted in 4 new flavours with eye-catching package designs (fig 1) being introduced onto the market. These four flavour and package variants were dubbed Frost, Mellow, Robust and Infused. The cigarettes contain a small bead in the filter that delivers the unique flavours.

We were unable to independently verify, or analyse the profile characteristics, of the reported 30 000 participants in the open source campaign. Regular internet users, and in particular users who are most likely to generate their own unique content, tend to be younger in age.[38] A 2007 study on the personality profile of people who are likely to blog online found that bloggers have a high degree of "openness" and thus are likely to be creative, open to new experiences and have a diversity of interests.[39] It would seem a successful open source marketing campaign would attract young and creative internet users.

Open source marketing presentation by Passport Design

We met two informants, A and B, who had attended an open source marketing presentation in Sydney in March 2008 given by the brand design agency, Passport. (The website is currently undergoing a redesign and is limited in content to contact information and visuals of their client brands. http://www.passportdsn.com.au/index.html.) Both informants are sales and market analysts for a consumer good company. Passport has offices in Melbourne and Sydney, Australia and Connecticut, USA. One of the open source marketing accounts the Passport presenter described as managing was the successful package design for the RJR Camel and Camel Signature Blends cigarettes. The open source campaigns were targeted at the US market, but as Camel is an international brand, the new package design will be part of RJR's global marketing efforts. Following the presentation, the presentation slides were made available to participants through a secure website link, however the RJR content had been subsequently removed from the presentation. The informants provided us with an account of what they had seen at the presentation and a hard copy of the edited presentation slides.[40]

The presentation begins with key points on the direction and importance of open source marketing. (Copies of the presentation can be made available by an email request to the corresponding author.) Open source marketing is defined as the "co-collaboration[sic] of products and services between

Figure 1 Open source package designs for the Camel Signature Blends. From left to right: Frost, Infused, Robust and Mellow. Source: http://www.camelsite.com/signature/SignatureThanks.aspx.

consumers and brand owners''. The presenter confirms the importance of the internet in this new way of engaging with consumers: ''technology growth has ensured that one-way communication platforms are no longer satisfactory''. The presentation suggests that ''building brand awareness is no longer our biggest challenge…engagement is'' and that because ''consumers no longer trust brand owners or big organisations'' open source marketing will help companies to ''build trust by being completely transparent''. Of particular importance to tobacco control is the presenter's claim that ''packing is the only true connection a brand has with its consumers''.

The presentation then clarifies why collaboration is essential in brand development and provides examples of how a company can successfully collaborate with consumers. ''Providing our co-collaborators [sic] with high level direction is the first step to participation, as we then enjoy watching communities create and innovate in ways that enlarge and enrich the brand into the future''. Detailed examples in the presentation include Jones Soda, Bazooka Bubble Gum and the missing Camel Signature Blends. Also included is a general listing of other well known corporations that employ open source techniques: Coca-Cola, General Electric, Volkswagen, Mercedes Benz and Nike.

Informant A commented that the presenter said that the reason Camel was launching the Signature Blends was because they had ''lost a lot of market share, and they needed to reignite the brand and attract smokers – young adult females especially''. Given this desired target market, they thought the best way to market to them successfully was ''to engage with them using technology, the internet''. The project was described as a ''massive success – really resurrected the brand''. According to the RJR website, Camel is the third best-selling cigarette brand in the US and the ''largest and fastest-growing full-price brand and has a track record of consistent share growth and marketplace momentum''.[41] RJR also reported that during the first quarter of 2008, Camel gained 0.5 share points.[42] This success is attributed to updated packaging and brand extension innovations such as Camel No. 9 and Camel Signature Blends.

Both informants noted that the presenter emphasised that RJR allowed the design agency to have total control over the process of engaging with consumers through designated websites and blogs and that they agreed they were committed to being ''accountable'' to what the consumer wanted. Informant B quoted the presenter as stating that she ''really liked working with the tobacco companies because of the opportunity and need to be innovative – given the continuously changing legislation about what they [the tobacco industry] are allowed to do''.

The focus of the open source collaboration was primarily on the packaging design and flavours. Consumers were directed to the Camel brand website and blog, where they could discuss package design and vote on what they wanted to see as a final concept. When the final designs were chosen, participants were mailed samples of the cigarette boxes that included people's names on them. Informant B said that, ''if a design was chosen by say ''Jim from New Jersey'' they printed that right on the box – to personalise it and show that Camel had listened and chosen what actual real people had asked for''.

Online search for evidence of open source marketing and Camel Signature Blends

On 4 June 2008 the search term ''camel signature'' was entered on Google. The first 50 results are summarised in table 1. Of the first 50 webpage links, 19 contained content relating to Camel Signature Blends; 15 of the 19 links were product reviews or

other commentary about the cigarette. The first four search results were for product reviews. This is significant as the higher the results are in a search list the more likely they are to be clicked on by users and the more relevant they are deemed to be by the user.[43] Only two anti-smoking links were returned, despite current advocacy campaigns in the US to ban all flavoured cigarettes.[44][45] The remaining two relevant links were for Camel-branded items that were available for purchase.

One of the review links[46] included a video review of a young male smoker tasting the Robust flavour. He describes it is a ''thick and heavy'' taste and awarded it 1.5 thumbs up out of 2. In all, 28 others had commented on his review, agreeing with his review or recommending the three other Signature Blend flavours. Other review links[47] contain similar dialogue about the relative merits of the taste, the eye-catching packaging and the ''mystery'' of the flavour beads.

Another of the review links was related to a question on the *Yahoo! Answers* forum, which asked, ''Camel signature blend cigarettes? 4 new flavors frost, infused, robust, mellow. does anyone know what those mean for flavors, and when they come out thanks''. This question was answered by a user identified only as ''camelsmoker'' with the following response:

''Infused: Spiced up with a silky-smooth finish Frost: Crisp and bright with finest Asian mint providing a crisp clean taste Mellow: CAMEL's classic blend of Turkish tobacco is accented with toasted honey, giving it a sweet and velvety smooth finish with a hint of cedar Robust: Hearty and burly blended with delicate Turkish notes and a nutty, full finish They will hit stores near the end of April''.[48]

While it is not possible to verify who ''camelsmoker'' is, it is entirely possible that either an RJR or marketing agency employee who was monitoring blog activity of the Camel brand seized the opportunity to promote the products.

Unfortunately, we were not alerted to the open source marketing project until it had completed, so we are unable to provide a description of the Camel website during the actual collaboration process. The Camel website now reveals that despite the apparent success of the open source marketing efforts to design the new Signature cigarettes and packages, RJR are not ''able to continue with this program and will not be going to market with the artist generated pack designs for Signature Blends. The Signature Blends will still be available at retail stores''. No explanation is offered, but images of the open source designed packs still appear above the vague announcement. The probable explanation for this abrupt change in plans is that the US National Association of Attorneys General (NAAG) had identified the design of the Signature packs as being in potential violation of the Master Settlement Agreement in that the packages contain ''cartoon-like depictions''.[49] NAAG also highlights that the promotion is of ''further concern to the extent it entices individuals to RJR's interactive

Table 1 Summary of first 50 Google search results for ''camel signature''

Type of link	Product review or commentary	Anti-smoking message	Camel brand item	Not related to cigarette brand
Total no. of links	15	2	2	31
Position in list of 50	1–4, 6, 8–11, 13, 25, 26, 31, 48, 50	36, 40	39, 42	5–7, 12, 14–24, 27–30, 32–35, 37–38, 41, 43–47, 49

website, which invites visitors to vote for their favourite Signature Blends and to participate in other online games and promotions that would appear to appeal to youth and very young adults".[49]

While the NAAG appear to have successfully prevented the novel packaging, if the not the actual product, from continued distribution, the interactive website and open source marketing techniques are still being used on the website for Camel's latest product launch, the Camel Crush cigarette. The website describes the Camel Crush cigarette as "a unique tobacco technology, allowing adult tobacco consumers to smoke a non-menthol product and at any point, squeeze the filter to change the taste experience to menthol". The "Open Circle" forum on the Camel brand website features an interactive discussion board and question and answer forum.

DISCUSSION

Implications for tobacco control

> "Powerful things come from the street, from the people who use the product. The internet has thrown open the door to consumers seeking opportunities to show off heretofore hidden talents, whether that be as a citizen journalist/blogger, photographer or even marketer".[22]

Regulating online advertising

Against the broad definition of advertising and the comprehensiveness of the advertising ban required by FCTC signatories,[3] it is critical to ask whether open source marketing should be considered a "commercial" communication and therefore also be banned. In the case study we have described, consumers themselves have designed the marketing and packaging messages. The tobacco industry could argue that open source marketing is nothing more than legitimate market research being conducted through internet platforms rather than the traditional avenues of focus groups or telephone surveys. The industry has a track record of attempting to disguise marketing as market research through cigarette giveaways and sampling[50 51] and to skirt marketing laws at special industry invite-only events.[52] Open source marketing bears these same hallmarks of exploiting loopholes and stretching legal definitions in order to generate positive word of mouth about their products. When designing regulations to ban advertising of tobacco products, the marketing processes, in this case engaging with consumers on a massive scale to develop products, appear as important as the actual physical hallmarks of marketing, such as the package or an online advertisement.

RJR was careful to implement their consumer engagement through password-protected websites and blogs (although we readily obtained a password without ever having to prove our identity or age), where it could be easily monitored by the company and less readily by the tobacco control sector. Regulation that requires reporting on specific marketing activities and provides regulators with open access to these sites could assist in monitoring these initiatives.

When users register on the Camel website, they can elect to receive electronic newsletters and product offers. This enables RJR to grow a database of users that they can continue to communicate with and engage in open source marketing. In a March 2008 speech to investors, incoming Altria Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Michael Szymanczyk, revealed that Philip Morris USA also has an extensive consumer database that is being used "to create one-to-one relationships with adult tobacco consumers". He reported that this database contains the information of over 25 million adult cigarette smokers and will be used to "support expansion into other products that are appealing to adult tobacco consumers".[53] It appears that Altria is also well positioned to pursue open source marketing techniques.

Social marketing

There are also lessons in the open source marketing movement for more effective tobacco control social marketing campaigns. Social marketing expert, Gerard Hastings, is firm that the health sector must learn from and use the same marketing tools as industry: "the success of the tobacco, alcohol and food industries provides a rich stream of evidence that marketing works. If marketing can make us buy a Ferrari it can also encourage us to drive it safely".[54] Companies have encouraged an open two-way dialogue about their brand and made advertising campaign elements (video clips, music) available to consumers for their own manipulation. However, the same cannot be said for tobacco control. The California Department of Public Health has taken a step in this direction by holding a contest where members of the public made their own anti-smoking ads and the best one was aired on television (see the website: http://www.beareelhero.com/). If consumers are indeed "no longer interested in being told what to buy or what to think", social marketing campaigns must also respond in a way that enables greater audience involvement.

The successful Australian "Every Cigarette Is doing You Damage" campaign[55] exemplifies an ideal contender for greater consumer engagement. Most Australians are familiar with this campaign and have an opinion on the provocative content.[56] Consumers could be encouraged to propose and vote on which smoking illness should be featured next. A deeper level of engagement would see consumers producing their own forms of the ads and sharing the content with others. Moderating and mediating discussion boards and blogs could be shared among quit line counsellors and community health promoters. While fear of the ads being parodied or criticised heavily may concern the government agencies that fund these ads, the benefits of continued consumer engagement with the campaign could outstrip any negative commentary. In the future, tobacco control, just like the for-profit sector, will need to recognise that successful campaigns and brands are ones that consumers want to join.[57]

Plain packaging

The Camel Signature Blend case study provides further evidence for the primacy of packaging in branding and marketing and that the plain packaging of cigarette products must become a global tobacco control priority. Without stylised packaging, the key elements of open source marketing, including brand identity and brand engagement, would be profoundly limited.

What this paper adds

- ▶ This is the first tobacco control research paper to document the use of open source marketing in tobacco advertising. Open source marketing is a new phenomenon that links consumers, manufacturers and advertisers through web-based channels.
- ▶ Many tobacco advertising bans do not currently consider the role of consumers in generating and sharing marketing materials.

Without brand imagery manifest through packaging, consumers are left with very little, save the brand name, to identify and engage with.

This case study provides an example of how the internet and increased consumer engagement is being used to promote Camel cigarettes. Ongoing monitoring of this trend and investigation of other tobacco company online marketing techniques is necessary in order to ensure tobacco control policies remain effective.

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