

Contact me soon!!! Confidential, risk-free opportunity!

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We recently both independently received an email that offered us a chance to do good and earn money for next to no work. The proposition was somewhat unethical, but the sender promised us complete confidentiality. The email concluded by asking us for an expression of interest to obtain further information about the deal. Probably most of you have received emails such as this from various “widows”, “orphans”, “veterans” and crooked “bank employees” from around the world. This one was different. It was from a major university research institute, asking us to consult on a project funded by Philip Morris.

The project in question was an evaluation of Philip Morris’s “Quit Assist” website, and each of us (and quite a large number of other people with whom we have subsequently spoken) was asked to serve as a paid “consultant”. The message noted that “some scholars have decided not to take money from tobacco companies”. But the writer seemed to assume that even if we were willing to take the money, we would consider it shameful; the message quickly pointed out that the compensation would be nicely laundered by the university that had received the grant from Philip Morris. Thus, no embarrassing tobacco company checks with our names on them would show up in industry document repositories.

In case we were still worried about that, the email offered reassurance: “Your name would not be associated in any way with your commentary, and you would not be mentioned in any way in any correspondence or reports of findings from the study. Once you have been paid, your name would be removed from our records”. The pay? \$1000 for “at most, a day and a half of work”. We were not asked yet to provide our personal bank account details, but a response indicating willingness to take tobacco industry money would produce more information about what was required—perhaps

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including the offer of additional lucrative “consulting”.

In the new millennium, the industry abandoned its longstanding position of outright denial (of disease, of death, of addiction). Instead, tobacco companies now assert that their products are “dangerous” or “risky” and that “there is no such thing as a safe cigarette”. Philip Morris, for example, admits that its old ways were “out of step” with society’s “expectations”, and promises to do better. Philip Morris has turned its website into a virtual public health portal, including links to reputable health agencies and reports, and it claims in court and in public relations efforts that this indicates how thoroughly the company has reformed. The proposed evaluation of the “quality and completeness” of Philip Morris’s website will undoubtedly “prove” that the information it provides is as good as that on the selected “comparison” sites.

This strategy ought to be called what it is: deceptive transparency. Aimed at assuring the public and policymakers that the companies have come clean and are “part of the solution”, it attempts to dismiss the industry’s creation of a global epidemic of death and disease. But it is useless and hypocritical for a tobacco company to make such admissions and provide “information”² about quitting smoking while it continues aggressively to promote the most deadly consumer products ever made.

The emails we received, “phishing” for researchers, are another arm of this strategy. The messages reveal the tobacco industry funding (no more secrecy) and acknowledge the concerns researchers might have (no more denial). But the work itself is business as usual: Philip Morris funding research designed to serve Philip Morris. The dissimulation has simply been relocated: now, instead of publishing without acknowledging industry funding, consulting researchers are encouraged to take the money without revealing their names. Although this may seem less advantageous to Philip Morris than the old way was, it serves similar purposes: creating research that will serve its public relations purposes, buying the silence of researchers (that—

who knows?—may turn into active support after enough “consulting”) and driving a wedge into tobacco control by persuading some that the industry is trying to do good and making us all wonder about one another. The new way also makes the researcher the dissembling party, allowing Philip Morris to continue to tout its new honesty.

Most reputable researchers, having become aware of the ongoing and egregious patterns of manipulation that characterise tobacco industry scientific research programs, relationships with researchers, use of scientific findings and public relations scams, have long since decided against engaging in such relationships, however carefully constructed they may be. Many institutions also have policies against accepting tobacco industry funding for just these reasons, and many organisations will not provide funding to researchers and/or institutions that accept tobacco industry funding. The global Framework Convention on Tobacco Control guidelines point out the irreconcilable conflict between the interests of the tobacco industry and the interests of public health. The new Philip Morris is so eager to “partner” with public health because such links help obscure that fundamental conflict.

It is unfortunate that some researchers still allow their good names to advance tobacco industry public relations goals. But solicitations such as these can be persuasive. Like the more common scam emails, the ones we received prey upon weakness—in strategic sophistication, in funding, in knowledge about the tobacco industry’s relentless history of using research and researchers unscrupulously to advance its own ends. The message is intended to smooth over any anxieties among those who might be susceptible to such exploitation. But make no mistake: it is more tobacco industry exploitation, its seeming openness a new form of deception.

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