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

Ruth E Malone,1,2 Elizabeth A Smith2

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 from our names on them would show embarrassing tobacco company checks. But the writer seemed to assume that even if we were willing to take the money without revealing their names. The message concluded by asking us for a day and a half of work. We were not wondering 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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REFERENCES


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