Natural American Spirit launches ‘Sky’, the brand’s first commercial organic cigarette with a charcoal filter

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Natural American Spirit (NAS), a leading cigarette brand in the USA, markets its products using descriptors such as ‘organic’ and ‘tobacco & water’. Consumers believe that cigarettes with these and similar descriptors are more appealing, healthier and/or less harmful than cigarettes without these descriptors. Moreover, NAS advertising prominently features nature-related imagery, highlights the brand’s sustainable farming practices and exploits Native American symbolism, all of which may also misrepresent product risk. This combination of brand characteristics has yielded a consumer base that, compared with those who smoke other brands, is more likely to misunderstand the relative harm of NAS compared with other cigarettes. There is no evidence that smoking NAS cigarettes reduces disease risk, and emission studies find substantial variability in exposure to harmful constituents in NAS cigarettes depending on the NAS variety tested, the study’s methods and the compounds under investigation.

Federal regulators have recognised that NAS uses deceptive marketing tactics and have taken limited regulatory action against the brand, resulting in the addition of disclaimer statements on packs and advertisements about the relative harm of ‘natural’ or ‘organic’ commercial tobacco, and the removal of ‘additive-free’ and some instances of ‘natural’ from NAS labelling and marketing. The US Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA) Center for Tobacco Products has not publicly initiated regulatory action against the use of ‘organic’, perhaps because the descriptor’s use is allowed under the US Department of Agriculture’s National Organic Program. Santa Fe Natural Tobacco Company (SFNTC) is a defendant in at least one ongoing class-action lawsuit alleging that SFNTC’s marketing and sales practices falsely convey that their products are less harmful or safer than other cigarettes.

Despite regulatory and legal attention, NAS continues to use potentially misleading marketing and advertising tactics to position the brand as ‘different’ from other cigarette brands. In November 2020, NAS debuted two magazine ads introducing a new style of NAS cigarettes: ‘Sky’, a charcoal-filter cigarette made with organic tobacco (figure 1; https://bit.ly/3h9P0P2). Presented in a light blue pack, the name ‘Sky’ and the variety’s advertising featuring clear blue sky and green farmland align the brand with connotations of nature and naturalness. According to ad copy, Sky is the company’s ‘smoothest tasting and most innovative cigarette to date’, with ‘charcoal derived from coconut shells’ in the filter (figure 1; https://bit.ly/3h9P0P2). On the NAS website, Sky’s charcoal filter is described as mellowing the taste of their ‘whole-leaf tobacco, providing a smooth taste that is deliberately different’ (figure 2; www.americanスピリット.com). Although SFNTC makes two other cigarette varieties with charcoal filters (Celadon and Hunter), this is the first style with both a charcoal filter and organic tobacco, and the first time NAS has prominently featured a charcoal filter in print and direct-to-consumer advertising.

Popularly understood as a ‘detoxifier’, charcoal has many applications in medicine and consumer products. For example, activated charcoal is commonly used in unintentional poisonings to absorb and safely eliminate toxins from the gastrointestinal tract, and activated charcoal water filters from brands like Brita are popular for drinking water purification. More recently, charcoal’s purifying reputation has made it a trendy addition to wellness and beauty products, although its utility in these products is dubious and generally scientifically unsupported. Sky’s launch showcases this detoxifying agent in the cigarette ‘filter’, a term that itself connotes purification; the tobacco industry historically used filtered cigarettes to suggest risk reduction, raising concerns about Sky’s consumer appeal. Although several major US tobacco companies developed and launched charcoal filter cigarettes as early as the 1960s, only the Japanese and South Korean cigarette markets are dominated by charcoal filter brands today. Studies show that, in sufficient quantities, the so-called ‘whole-leaf’ tobacco contained in many NAS cigarettes may also misrepresent product risk. While charcoal filters could possibly reduce smokers’ exposure to...
products introduced after 15 February 2007. It is possible that SFNTC considers Sky to be a ‘grandfathered’ product and therefore not ‘new’, as charcoal-filter NAS cigarettes existed pre-2007. This would not necessarily require an application to FDA, but the brand’s recent marketing campaigns certainly characterise Sky as a new product and raise new questions about Sky’s public health impact. For example, Sky’s advertising ‘introduces’ (figure 1) Sky with claims that it has a ‘unique filter’ (figure 2) and is ‘our smoothest tasting and most innovative cigarette to date’ (figure 2). Whether and to what extent the addition of (1) a charcoal filter to an organic cigarette, and (2) use of the name ‘Sky’ exacerbate current and potential consumers’ misunderstanding of the relative harm of this new NAS cigarette variety is a clear next research step.

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Figure 1  Advertisement from November 2020 in Vanity Fair magazine for Natural American Spirit’s new variety, ‘Sky’. (Source: https://www.trinketsandtrash.org/detail.php?artifactid=15533&page=1)

Figure 2  Screen shot taken of the Natural American Spirit website on 4 April 2021 promoting the Sky launch. (Source: www.americanspirit.com)
Ad watch


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