

BRIEF REPORT

RJ Reynolds' "Camel Cash": another way to reach kids

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Abstract

Objective - The Camel Cash promotion is a programme marketed by the RJ Reynolds Tobacco Company in the United States, which rewards purchasers of Camel cigarettes with a coupon, called Camel Cash or "C-notes". The aim of this study was to determine the level of knowledge of and participation in the Camel Cash promotion among adolescents in 1992.

Design

 - School survey

Subjects - A total of 616 students (mean age = 15.5 years) in two high schools, one in New Mexico and one in Massachusetts.

Results - 241 students (39.1%) had heard of Camel Cash, and 53 (8.6%) had collected Camel Cash. The proportions who had heard of Camel Cash and who had collected Camel Cash were highest among current smokers, followed by experimenters and then students who had never smoked ($p < 0.001$). 32 students aged 17 or younger stated that they purchased Camel cigarettes specifically to get Camel Cash; 15.6% were 14 years old, 37.5% were 15, 25.0% were 16, and 18.7% were 17.

Conclusions - Whether or not it is RJ Reynolds' intention, some underage smokers are illegally purchasing Camel cigarettes specifically to collect Camel Cash.

(Tobacco Control 1995; 4: 258-260)

Keywords: cigarette promotion; children; adolescents

Introduction

Introduced in 1991, Camel Cash, or "C-notes", were designed to parody US currency and are attached to packs of Camel cigarettes. The C-notes can be redeemed for items that are, in themselves, Camel cigarette promotions. Camel Cash is a programme similar to that used successfully since the early 1950s by the manufacturer of Bazooka chewing gum. In this programme, Bazooka Joe cartoon coupons are attached to pieces of chewing gum and can be collected and exchanged for prizes.

Camel Cash redemptions are expensive. At a price of approximately \$2.25 for a pack of Camels, compared with 75 cents for a discounted (generic) brand, each C-note effectively costs the collector \$1.50. Using this C-note value, "Joe's Pub Dart Board" actually

costs \$375 and "Joe's Black Denim Jacket", modelled after a leather motorcycle jacket, costs \$675. One would have to purchase 2.5 packs of Camels per day (9000 cigarettes) during the six month promotion period to earn enough C-notes to purchase the jacket.

After several adolescent patients mentioned to us that they were collecting Camel Cash, we conducted a brief survey of students to determine their level of knowledge of, and participation in, the promotion.

Methods

Two high schools - one in Santa Fe, New Mexico and one in Leominster, Massachusetts - were chosen on the basis of the willingness of the schools' administrators to participate. The survey was conducted during the final two weeks of the 1991-92 school year, when the first Camel Cash programme was concluding (before publication of Camel Cash Catalog II).

A convenience sample of teachers in grades 9 to 12 (ages 14-18) who were willing to administer the survey in their regular classes was used. The teachers and students were blinded as to the purpose of the survey. Nearly all of the students present on the days of the survey returned the anonymous questionnaires.

Students were asked to complete a single page, 11 item questionnaire, which assessed their age, sex, smoking status, and knowledge of the Camel Cash promotion. If they collected Camel Cash, they were asked how much they had collected, which items they would purchase, and sources of their Camel Cash.

Students were classified by smoking status: (1) those who reported having smoked at least one cigarette in the preceding seven days (current smokers); (2) those who had tried cigarettes in the past but had not smoked within the preceding seven days (experimenters); (3) those who had never tried a single cigarette.

The χ^2 test was used to determine the statistical significance of associations.

Results

Of 626 questionnaires distributed, 616 (98.4%) were usable. Students ranged from 13 to 18 years of age (mean = 15.5), and 343 (55.7%) were female. Of the 616 respondents, 117 (19%) were current smokers, 240 (39%) were experimenters, and 259 (42%) had never smoked.

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Two hundred and forty one (39.1%) of the respondents had heard of Camel Cash. The proportion who had heard of the promotion was 69.2% for current smokers, 38.3% for experimenters, and 26.3% for students who had never smoked ($p \leq 0.001$).

Current smokers were more likely to have collected Camel Cash (24.8%) than experimenters (8.0%) or students who had never smoked (1.5%) ($p < 0.01$).

Thirty two (5.2%) of the students aged 17 or younger stated that they had purchased Camel cigarettes to get Camel Cash. Of these, five (15.6%) were 14 years old, 13 (37.5%) were 15 years old, eight (25.0%) were 16 years old, and six (18.7%) were 17 years old.

Discussion

How important are programmes like Camel Cash to RJ Reynolds? David Sanco, Senior Vice President of Marketing for the company, states that Camel's steady growth trend "has largely been the result of a promotional programme called 'Camel Cash'".¹ "Without promotions, Smokin' Joe's gains are likely to evaporate quickly", according to the *Wall Street Journal*.² However, according to data from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the overall market share of Camel was 3.9% in 1993, unchanged from 1989.³

Perhaps the boldest statement of Camel's success is the fact that after nearly 40 years of riding through Marlboro country, the cowboy is now being put out to pasture.⁴ Much of the Marlboro Man imagery is being replaced with the Marlboro Adventure Team, who, like GI Joe action figures, conquer the challenging terrains of America.⁵ The premium giveaways associated with the campaign are items appropriate for such adventures.⁶ More than 10 million people responded, ordering more than 14 million items, all bearing the Marlboro Adventure Team logo.

The original Camel Cash promotion performed so well that RJ Reynolds launched "The Catalog II", which "presents a veritable Disneyland of fantasy lifestyles, like Club Camel and Camel After Hours, all accompanied by appropriate Camel Tchotchkes."¹ Volume III "Tell 'em Joe sent you!", Volume IV "Joe's Place", and the "Camel Cash Lotto" followed. Volume VI was launched in late 1994, "Camel Classifieds" premiered in January of 1995, and the current promotion is The Camel Company.

Philip Morris (PM) has also launched its V-Wear fashions and accessories collection for Virginia Slims, which are described by the company as "retro-chic", replacing last year's "street-chic".⁷ Whelan pointed out that one would have to buy and submit proofs of purchase for the equivalent of five packs of cigarettes per day during the six month promotion in order to get the V-Wear fashion ensemble.⁸ Another PM brand, Parliament, offers "Parliament Lights Getaway Gear". Besides its Camel promotions, RJ Reynolds has given us Winston Weekends - "a 24-page calendar-cum-catalog, offering 48 merchan-

dise items and 7 sweepstakes" (®, and the Select Trading Company). All of these promotions share a common element - smokers are required to buy cigarettes to collect enough proofs of purchases for merchandise. Tobacco industry spending on these giveaways rocketed from \$190 million in 1988 to \$307 million in 1990 to an estimated \$750 million in 1993.⁴

Previous research has shown that Camel cigarettes are becoming increasingly popular among the young, and that the camel cartoon character is recognisable to a large percentage of children.^{3,13-15} Our study suggests that the increased popularity of Camel among young people may be due in part to the attractiveness of the Camel Cash programme to underage smokers, some 25% of whom were collecting Camel Cash.

Although one cannot generalise the findings from our study alone, which involved only two high schools, it is important to note that other studies have reported similar results. In one study, 30% of 127 underage smokers indicated that they had purchased a particular brand of cigarettes in order to obtain a free promotional item such as a T shirt or cigarette lighter; two thirds of these minors were responding to promotional items for the Camel brand.¹⁴ A 1992 Gallup survey found that 25% of non-smoking teenagers had received at least one merchandise item from a tobacco company.¹⁵

These findings raise many questions. The redemption forms request that customers indicate if they are a smoker 21 years of age or older, but there is no way of confirming that the answer is correct. There is no law prohibiting cigarette companies from distributing paraphernalia directly to children, and there is also no law prohibiting them from adding children's names to their aggressive marketing databases. Perhaps anticipating further regulation of the content of print advertising, their shift to direct response advertising should not be surprising. Al Secunda, a professor of marketing at Adelphi University, points out, "You can do things in direct response that you can never do in other areas, making claims that could not easily be substantiated. The government really doesn't understand what is going on."⁶

The need to collect the substantial number of Camel Cash dollars required to redeem prizes creates an incentive for young people to smoke more. This probably increases the likelihood that experimental smokers will progress to regular smokers, and regular smokers to addicted smokers. The popularity of promotional items among non-smoking children and teenagers raises the possibility that non-smokers might buy their first pack of cigarettes solely to obtain a promotional item.

RJ Reynolds is now reaping a windfall in profits from the illegal distribution of Camel cigarettes to underage smokers. It has been estimated that the sale of this product to underage smokers has increased to \$470 million per year.¹¹ If RJ Reynolds does not want children to smoke, as it claims in its advertisements and statements to the press, and if the company does not want children to smoke

Camel cigarettes in particular, it should immediately abandon the entire Joe Camel promotional campaign and donate its profits from illegal cigarette sales for use in smoking prevention programmes for children and teenagers.

In the absence of a total ban on tobacco promotion in all forms and in all media, new federal laws are needed to outlaw the distribution of tobacco promotional items and all tobacco advertising to children through the mail.

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