

COVER ESSAY

Duelling playing cards

Mickey Weedon

Playing cards are among the many promotional products used by tobacco companies. On the cover of this issue of Tobacco Control, playing cards for a number of cigarette brands are reproduced. In most cases the brand name and imagery are shown on the back of the cards, such as for Camel Wides, Marlboro, Benson & Hedges, and Skoal shown on the cover. In other cases brand names or imagery appear on the front of the cards, such as for Basic (cover) and Camel (cards featuring several versions of Joe Camel—not shown here). Playing cards for Virginia Slims show the brand name on the back of the cards and typical Virginia Slims imagery on the front face of the cards (King of Hearts shown on the cover, and figure 1). None of these cards displays the Surgeon General's warning required on cigarette advertisements.

Countering the tobacco industry's playing cards are Death playing cards, shown on the cover surrounding the enemy. Each of the 52 cards in the deck provides a different reason not to smoke. We asked their creator, Mickey Weedon, to tell the story of how and why he launched this product, and his account appears below. More information about the product and how to order it may be found on the product's web site <<http://www.thegrid.net/deathcards/cig.html>>.

The cigarette brand playing cards shown on the cover and in figure 1 were provided by Dr John Slade through his "Trinkets & Trash Services",

which loans tobacco promotions to tobacco control advocates for use in lectures, media events, meetings with policy makers, etc. For more information, contact: Trinkets & Trash Services, PO Box 153, Metuchen, New Jersey 08840, USA; tel: +1 732 603 9898; fax: +1 732 549 9056; email: bonk@superlink.net.—ED

Death playing cards are not designed for parents or teachers. This is a product specifically designed to get the attention of teenagers who love this type of macabre artwork, although many workers in adult substance abuse programmes buy the cards as well. To find the right combination of artwork that would be popular with the kids, yet not too satanic as to cause problems with parents, I travelled to more than 60 tattoo parlours from San Diego to San Francisco looking for the right artist. The information found on the Death cigarette playing cards was supplied by the American Cancer Society and the American Lung Association. The information found on the Death On Drugs playing cards was supplied by the National Council on Alcohol and Drug Abuse. You will notice the 1-800 (freephone) numbers listed on one of the Death on Drugs playing cards. These drug and alcohol programmes gave me permission to list their numbers for people to call for help. Note

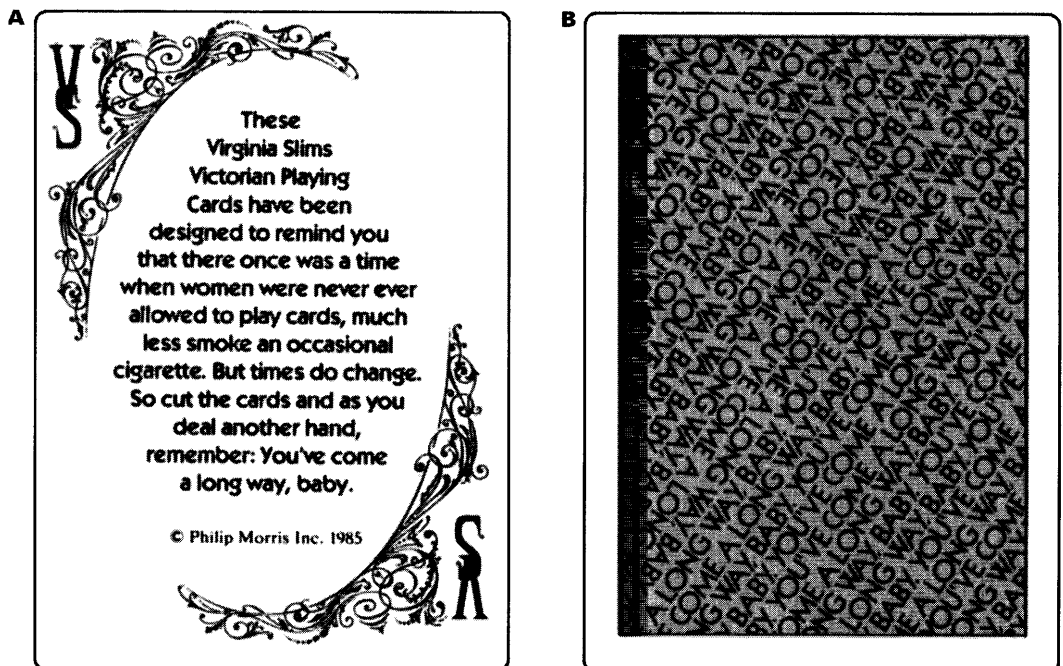


Figure 1 (A) The introductory card for the Virginia Slims deck of playing cards, and (B) the back of the cards, bearing the brand's familiar slogan. The front surface of one of the cards is shown on the cover (King of Hearts).



Figure 2 The smoking joker from the Death on Drugs playing cards.

that the Joker is a smoker in the Death On Drugs playing cards (figure 2) as tobacco is also a very addictive and dangerous drug, as are the other drugs addressed in this deck.

At this time more than 2000 tobacco, alcohol, and drug abuse agencies and health educators have bought Death playing cards for their substance abuse programmes. I have sold more than 400 000 decks to date. Death playing cards are being used by schools, hospitals, private clinics, and prisons, and are currently in more than 500 retail outlets and catalogues. My biggest customer is the California Tobacco Clearinghouse, which has bought tens of thousands of the Death cigarette playing cards with funds provided by the Proposition 99 cigarette tax initiative. Massachusetts is another state that has legislated for a similar cigarette tax and has bought thousands of decks.

I have received many letters and calls from health educators who have had much success with Death playing cards. One drug abuse counsellor working with the 1-800-COCAINE hotline said she had a person call in who was snorting cocaine with friends while playing poker with my Death on Drugs playing cards. His friends were laughing about the dangers of cocaine described on the cards. He hid the 1-800 information card in his pocket and called to get himself enrolled in a substance abuse education programme.

Here in California the junior and senior high schools (ages 12-18 years) offer tobacco education classes during and after breaks at school. I have had feedback on how the Death cigarette playing cards are helping with these classes. Three or four kids will show up for the class. They each receive a deck of the Death cigarette playing cards and are told that anyone who takes the tobacco education class will get a deck of these cards. Word gets around school and the next day the class is filled to capacity

with 50 or 60 kids who want a deck of Death cigarette playing cards.

The following is the story of how Death playing cards came to be. When I was 18 years old in 1971, a friend's father was short of breath and went in for a physical examination and a chest radiograph. The doctor told this man of 35 years that he would remove one of his lungs if he thought it would save his life, but both lungs had advanced cancer, and he was given less than a year to live. The brand of cigarettes he smoked was called LIFE-cigarettes. I believe their advertising slogan was, "Adds pleasure or adventure to your LIFE." I watched this man die the most horrendous death imaginable. He went from 200 lbs (91 kg) down to a coughing, wheezing skeleton of 90 lbs (41 kg) and died approximately one year after his initial visit with the doctor.

I could not get the name LIFE cigarettes out of my mind. I kept thinking that DEATH cigarettes would be a more appropriate name, with the slogan, "Don't smoke yourself to death". This thought stuck with me until I decided to trademark and copyright Death cigarettes in 1984. After doing so, I contacted RJ Reynolds Tobacco Company (RJR) and talked two executives into meeting with me to introduce a new packaging concept to them. I took a box of Marlboro and rigged it up with a skull and crossbones I obtained from a tattoo artist. I met the two RJR executives at a restaurant. When I took out my pack of Death cigarettes and threw it on the table, one of these guys spewed coffee all over his tie. They told me that if I was lucky to find a tobacco company crazy enough to make Death cigarettes for me, RJR and other tobacco companies would sue me. I told them that I was delighted to hear this, as I would get much free advertising through the media if a \$35 billion conglomerate went after me for telling the truth about cigarettes. I also shared with them my feelings about the LIFE brand cigarettes once available.

You can imagine the negative feedback I got trying to find a tobacco manufacturer that would produce Death cigarettes. After much effort looking in the United States, I finally found a company in Indonesia that would produce them. I took out a loan for \$10 000 and took on an investor. During this time clove cigarettes were getting some bad press because people's lung tissue was falling apart from toxins found in clove cigarettes. [See: US Centers for Disease Control. Illnesses possibly associated with smoking clove cigarettes. *MMWR* 1985;34:297-9.—ED]

When an Indonesian government official saw my Death cigarettes on the dock ready for shipment, he put a stop to them. Leaving the country, as this type of skull-and-crossbones packaging might hurt Indonesia's tobacco and clove cigarette industry. My Death cigarettes never left the country and I lost \$10 000!

I did not give up on my idea of trying to get the message across about the truth and dangers of tobacco. I came up with the concept for Death cigarette playing cards and trademarked this product in 1985. My investor did not work

out and I had 25 000 decks of Death cigarette playing cards sitting in a storage shed going nowhere. I proceeded to get on with my life and put this project on hold.

Six years later I saw a news story about Death cigarettes on CNN International News. CBS, NBC, FOX, and other media outlets ran similar stories about this product, which was marketed by a company called Death Tobacco. It was big news across the nation. (For example, see: A new cigarette you'll love to death. *Newsweek* 1991 May 13:51.) I contacted Charles Southwood, the head of Death Tobacco, to inform him that I had the trademark and copyright to Death cigarettes. His response was to challenge me to sue him. I learned that a trademark and copyright infringement lawsuit could take years, and all the attorneys I contacted wanted \$50 000 up front just to take on such a case—I did not have this kind of money. I told Southwood that one day he would be sorry for not dealing with me.

I took my 25 000 decks of Death cigarette playing cards out of mothballs and bought out my investor. I also designed Death on Drugs playing cards to get kids' attention about the dangers of drugs and alcohol. I began to distribute Death playing cards to retail stores and agencies throughout the United States with considerable success. We were able to get some free advertising for the playing cards through the news media.

Meanwhile in Europe, Thomas Lines was successful with his worldwide distribution of Black Death vodka, which sports a skull wearing a top hat. He and his attorney were trying to think of other products to put their Black Death skull on. They came up with Black Death cigarettes. These cigarettes did \$2 million in business during their first year in Europe, so Lines decided to try marketing this product in the United States. When he came to the United States he was surprised to find that Southwood was marketing Death cigarettes,

even though I had the trademark and copyright to the name, and was marketing Death playing cards. He also found that his Black Death vodka, Southwood's Death cigarettes, and my Death playing cards were being shrink-wrapped and sold together as one unit in many stores.

Lines decided to go ahead with his plans to sell his brand of Black Death cigarettes. When Southwood found the Lines brand of Black Death cigarettes on the market, he sued Lines even though I had all rights to the Death cigarette concept. Lines contacted me in November 1992. Because I no longer wanted anything to do with cigarettes, I signed over my rights to Death cigarettes to Lines with the agreement that he would help me with worldwide distribution of Death playing cards in several different languages. Lines and I joined forces and sued Southwood and had his product taken off the market.

As it turned out, Lines did not follow through with his promise to help me with Death playing cards. He obtained my rights to Death cigarettes and to this day has not lived up to our agreement. He has not sold one deck of Death playing cards. He did away with Southwood's Death cigarettes, obtained my rights to Death cigarettes, and stopped my distribution of Death playing cards until I filed a lawsuit against him in December 1994.

At this time I have not followed through with this lawsuit, as I do not have the resources to go after a millionaire like Thomas Lines. I have discovered that, since he obtained my rights to Death cigarettes, he has made over \$10 million on this product. As it is, I am happy that I am not involved with tobacco in any way. Death cigarette playing cards and Death on Drugs playing cards are products that I am very proud of, and I am confident that one day, Death playing cards will be available worldwide, playing a part in educating people about the dangers of tobacco, alcohol, and drug abuse.



An advertisement for Marlboro Texan poker cards. The cowboy on the far right is Wayne McLaren, who died of smoking-induced lung cancer. See the obituary for McLaren published in *Tobacco Control* 1992;1:304-6.