

AD WATCH

Tobacco advertising in Indonesia: “the defining characteristics for success”

Introduction: the growing market

Tobacco companies have enormous political and financial “clout” in Indonesia, being the government’s largest source of revenue after oil, gas, and timber,¹ and the nation’s second largest employer after the government.² As in all developing countries, Indonesia’s 200-million-plus population is skewed in favour of younger age groups. The local industry is fiercely competitive, with each company struggling to attract a greater proportion of Indonesia’s growing market. As a recent annual report from PT Gudang Garam—Indonesia’s largest tobacco company—eagerly noted, “Over 45% of Indonesians are under the age of 20”.³ Like their Western multinational counterparts, Indonesian tobacco companies are, without compunction, using advertising to encourage younger people to smoke. Unlike their Western counterparts, however, Indonesian tobacco companies are still operating in a largely unfettered, unrestricted regulatory environment. In Indonesia, not even token laws prohibit the sale of cigarettes to children, and cigarettes are commonly sold by the stick.⁴

Advertising and the smoking culture

Ethnic-Chinese Indonesian companies control approximately 85% of the market for cigarettes (see Industry Watch pages 89–91). This results in an enormous amount of indigenous advertising. Cigarette advertising visibly saturates Indonesia. Visiting the country in early 1997, I was appalled by the enormous amount of billboard and point-of-sale advertising,⁵ indigenous and multinational, so prolific it almost became a “natural” part of the Indonesian landscape—figure 1, for example, shows cigarette bunting on a mosque. This is



Figure 1 The sanctity of religion—cigarette bunting on a mosque. “Selamat menunaikan ibadah puasa” means “We wish you well” or “Best wishes in carrying out the act of worship”. Photograph by Maraid O’Gorman.

extraordinary considering the importance of Islam in Indonesia and the implications of its commodification. Tobacco has a long history in Indonesia and is rich with cultural symbolism and associations that existed before the advent of advertising.⁶ The degree and type of advertising in Indonesia is significant because indigenous Indonesian cigarette advertisements appeal to, and reflect, a fascinating collage of specifically Indonesian cultural values and desires. Indigenous advertising exploits and manipulates the traditional cultural associations of tobacco, and exacerbates the smoking “culture” by creating quite new cultural references and themes associated with smoking. Although some of these indigenous advertisements may seem superficially similar to Western multinational cigarette advertisements, such a reading misses the subtleties of Indonesian culture.

Cigarette advertisements, published *en masse*, can develop a “natural” link between certain “lifestyle attributes” and cigarettes in general, or particular brands.⁵ As the second largest Indonesian tobacco company, Sampoerna, stated: “The relevance to the consumer of a brand’s image and life style will be the defining characteristic for success in the years to come.”⁷

Advertising is having a very real impact in increasing the number of Indonesians who smoke—especially those in younger age groups who are still so focused on their identity formation and who are being targeted as key contributors to Indonesian tobacco companies’ future profits (see Industry Watch, pages 89–91). More significantly, because of the lack of health information and the Indonesian government’s explicit support for the tobacco industry, there is little alternative discourse about smoking. This might otherwise challenge the image fostered by tobacco companies, with their high levels of advertising, which promotes smoking so positively in the public eye.

Advertising is a deeply cultural process; the “lifestyle attributes” tobacco companies and cigarette advertisers attempt to associate with a brand do not simply appear out of thin air. Each brand’s image is meticulously designed and crafted to connect with the prevailing popular cultural values and desires of the day. As with many multinational advertising campaigns, strong images of masculinity and individuality are predominant themes in Indonesian cigarette advertisements. PT Gudang Garam’s favourite slogan (figure 2), “Kretekeknya lelaki”, means “The man’s cigarette”. Many Indonesian cigarette advertisements are similar, featuring stereotypical images of “real” men luxuriating in their



Figure 2 An advertisement for Gudang Garam: “Kreteknya lelaki” (“The man’s cigarette”).

masculinity and the dominance it brings them: “Smoking is almost entirely restricted to men, and is seen as a luxury item men pay for outside the household budget that is controlled by women. Smoking therefore celebrates both modernity and maleness”.⁶

It is not culturally acceptable for Indonesian women to smoke. Very few do,^{2, 8} except women classified as “bad”, wealthy women, and a few in Jakarta offices who seem to be taking it up as a symbol of their growing independence (personal communication with Stephen Drakeley, University of Western Sydney, 21 October 1997). Other studies have shown that “increases in the percentage of women smoking have closely reflected increases in sexual equality”, and “disapproval of female tobacco use is strongly focussed on cigarette smoking and is often ideologically justified with references to lax morals accompanying Westernisation and modernisation.”⁹



Figure 3 Indonesian economic restraint?

In addition to the themes of masculinity and individuality, Indonesian cigarette advertisements contain a multiplicity of other themes that overlap in strangely contradictory ways, reflecting many of the inner tensions and contradictions of the Indonesian state. Some of these cigarette advertisements are enormously sophisticated, and contain a surprising range of cultural, and even political and economic, comments and associations. Sampoerna’s recent advertisements are fascinating comments on Indonesia’s current political and socioeconomic circumstances, with images of attempts to break through brick walls, mice running through a maze, and restraining balls, weights, and chains (figure 3). The desire for freedom and the resilient wit expressed in these advertisements are poignant, especially given that they are meant to sell cigarettes.

Other interesting and often-used themes are those of modernity and tradition. The attractions of modernity and its associated affluence are obvious. Yet tradition is evoked just as often, in a way that is almost contradictory. Both themes are interconnected, not only because of the time link between them, but also because the call to tradition is usually more of a reappropriation, which does not focus on the huge diversity of Indonesia’s traditional cultures, but instead invokes an idealised, imaginary “traditional” way of life and social stability. As such, tradition in Indonesian cigarette advertisements is used as a model for “allegorical allusions to the present”,¹⁰ providing “solutions” to the increasing fragmentation and change to which Indonesian people are subject. An example of reappropriation of tradition is apparent in Sampoerna’s fabrication of a “coming of age ritual”, blatantly directed towards children and carrying patently obvious messages about what Indonesian masculinity “should” be: “[The brand] Dji Sam Soe . . . has a macho image that Sampoerna’s ads constantly reinforce. In a typical commercial, a young man shoots his first boar; his father congratulates him on becoming a man and offers him his first Dji Sam Soe.”¹¹

In this case, the traditional ritual importance of “coming of age” and masculinity is presented as the attainment of a goal; as strength—thus control over the “external” and “internal” worlds (a culturally desirable attribute¹²). Traditional values meld with modern existence, presenting an easily achievable heroic image of how to represent oneself in everyday life, where cigarettes become “sign vehicles”. By smoking, even teenagers and children can try to connect with the social codes and attributes that the cigarette brand symbolically represents.

Sampoerna has a number of other advertisements that appear to be directed towards a younger market. One of these features a set of mechanical “chattering teeth” (figure 4). In the original advertisement these teeth are set against ruled lines on a white page, evoking the ruled lines in a schoolbook. While the gadget and the ruled lines on the page are obviously meant to attract a younger market, the slogan accompanying this advertisement, “*Bukan basa basi*” (also featured in figure 3) is quite



Figure 4 A gadget designed to appeal to children, advertising A-Mild cigarettes. In the original advertisement, these chattering teeth were set against ruled lines on a page, similar to lines from a schoolbook.

cunning; during 1996 and 1997 it was used in most of Sampoerna's advertisements for their new, supposedly low-tar, A-Mild brand. Translated, "*Basa basi*" means "small talk", or "going through the motions for politeness sake". "*Basa basi*" is a clichéd approach, which is not genuine, and usually suggests a Javanese, rather than Indonesian, way of doing things. *Bukan* means no. "*Bukan basa basi*" translates as "no small talk", or "no going through the motions for politeness sake", "the real thing", or "straight to the point". "*Bukan basa basi*" specifically rejects any lack of authenticity and, given the Indonesian propensity and necessity for reading between the lines due to government censorship,¹⁰ can be interpreted as a subtle challenge, or rejection of Soeharto's then elite Javanese-style politics: "In a cultural framework which has long valued understatement, allusion, covert and indirect expression of all kinds, and finely pointed paradoxes, the ability to allude to and not directly state one's message has become an accepted convention and criterion of critical reception."¹⁰

The attraction of this slogan, especially among the younger generation, is particularly apparent given the abrupt collapse of Soeharto's regime in 1998. It is now clear that the political and economic corruption in Indonesia, although widespread, was not desired, and many Indonesians wanted a more honest or open system, with many feeling cynical about political rhetoric: "[M]any Indonesians now feel public language is hollow and meaningless."¹⁰

There are numerous other themes in Indonesian cigarette advertisements that relate uniquely to Indonesia's socioeconomic and political circumstances.¹⁵ As such, Indonesian advertising is fascinating—it inadvertently reveals much about Indonesian cultural desires, in contrast to other Indonesian media that were

heavily censored during Soeharto's regime. But regardless of how interesting the content of these advertisements might be, current government policy regarding tobacco advertising desperately needs to be changed. During Soeharto's regime even Indonesia's health minister stated that "the government had no intention of trying to regulate smoking through legislation".¹⁵ Restrictions that do exist—such as no-smoking signs—are few, and are not enforced.² As Sampoerna boasts, cigarette advertising in Indonesia currently comes in every conceivable form: "Indonesian companies have almost total freedom to advertise their products in any format and through almost any communications vehicle in the country."¹⁵

Soeharto's family and business associates control a significant proportion of the communications media in Indonesia, including billboards, television, and cinema. Tobacco sponsorship is so politically condoned that Sampoerna even managed to sponsor a high profile and official, government-endorsed Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) business summit in March 1997.

Billboard advertising

In 1996 revenue from outdoor billboard advertising comprised 6.9% of total advertising revenue, but this figure is misleading because its impact is disproportionate to its cost.¹⁶ It is difficult to obtain accurate information about business activities in Indonesia and almost impossible to get information about who owns what and how many billboards. Apparently Indonesia's largest outdoor advertising business is owned by Soeharto's youngest son, Tommy, through his company, Humpuss. Humpuss recently formed a joint venture with an Australian outdoor advertising company, NLD, and announced that they intend to expand even further into the Indonesian market.¹⁷ Until recently, Tommy Soeharto also headed the clove marketing board, BPPC.

Television and cinema advertising

Indonesian tobacco companies appear to be gearing up to take full advantage of cigarette advertising on television,⁷ which was unavailable to them until 1991 due to the government ban on all television advertising.¹⁸ Of the five Indonesian free-to-air television stations at least two are controlled by Soeharto's family; Soeharto's daughter Siti Hardijanti Rukmana (Tutut), owns Televisi Pendidikan Indonesia (TPI)¹⁹ through her Citra Group, a "diversified conglomerate of 47 companies".²¹ TPI, launched in 1991, is not publicly listed so company details and revenue are hazy. But in April 1998, before Soeharto's political demise, TPI was "continuing to spend big for high quality programs in a bid to attract viewers and advertisers".²¹ Now Soeharto is no longer in power, TPI has just lost a major investor, the state-owned satellite firm PT Indosat.²³

Soeharto's second son Bambang's company Bimantra Citra controls Rajawali Citra Televisi Indonesia (RCTI),¹⁹ "leaders in advertising revenue".²⁰ This station is one of the biggest revenue contributors to the Bimantra

conglomerate.²² In 1996 RCTI held a competition for the most popular advertisements with viewers. Five million votes were cast and the advertisements from Bentoel came second, followed by BAT Indonesia's Lucky Strike.²³ Bambang's Bimantra Citra also has interests in the subscription network Indovision,²⁰ which has been run by Rupert Murdoch's satellite station Star TV Indonesia since April 1996, reportedly at a huge loss to Murdoch.²⁴ Murdoch, a director of Philip Morris, and recently voted the fourth most powerful man in Asia by *Asiaweek*,²⁵ is now apparently considering starting a new deal with Bambang's RCTI.²⁴

As a final adjunct to this family business television network, all importation and distribution of international cinema is controlled by Soeharto's cousin, Sudwikatmono,²⁶ who is Rothmans' new Indonesian partner.²⁷

Sporting and cultural sponsorship

Sports sponsorship "provides an opportunity for "embedded advertising" that actively creates a "friendly familiarity" between tobacco and sports enthusiasts, many of whom are children and adolescents.²⁸ All major Indonesian tobacco companies sponsor sporting events. Djarum sponsors jazz concerts, badminton, and boxing matches.⁵ BAT Indonesia sponsors badminton championships, as well as car and motorbike racing.²⁹ Sampoerna sponsors basketball competitions and soccer competitions.⁷ Rothmans also sponsor soccer competitions.³⁰ Cultural events sponsored by tobacco companies include a Kool and the Gang concert sponsored by Sampoerna.⁷ Djarum also sponsored a variety of popular concerts.⁵

Policy reform

There are three main hindrances preventing a change to Indonesia's advertising regime. First, tobacco advertising ranked ninth on the list of greatest spenders by product category in 1996¹⁶ but since July 1997, free-to-air stations have seen their advertising revenue drop by 70%.³¹ Because the government wants to keep the television stations afloat, without resorting to foreign ownership, it is reluctant to jeopardise this revenue in any way. Second, owing to the lack of public awareness about the dangers of tobacco, there is currently no significant popular concern about tobacco advertising. This leads to the third hindrance which, in the context of the economic downturn, is the recent number of newspaper articles promoting the economic benefits of the tobacco industry. These articles have titles such as "Cigarette factories contribute to development efforts",³² "Hike in cigarette prices may cause massive layoffs",³³ and "Wonosobo residents rely heavily on tobacco farming".³⁴ Considering such articles, and multinational tobacco's infamous feting of the media, it is relevant to note that payoffs to journalists have "become so well entrenched in Indonesia that some journalists admit to almost doubling their income by accepting envelopes containing money from sources".³⁵

On a more positive note, whereas previously the tobacco barons seemed to operate

unchecked, abetted by Soeharto's system of crony capitalism, now Indonesia's new climate of political reform offers the possibility not only for democratic government, but also for regulatory change. This "growing market" presents a significant challenge for anti-tobacco activists in the years to come.

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