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Countering Tobacco Ads

Introduction

Counteradvertising *by Alan Blum*

Try this simple test: think of the last time you saw or heard an ad that discouraged you from buying cigarettes. Now think of the last time you saw an ad promoting cigarettes.

When asked this question, people quickly realize they can barely remember any ads against cigarettes, yet they encounter messages promoting smoking everywhere.

When considered numerically, the ratio of pro- to anti-tobacco advertising messages in the United States could be described as millions to one. Approximately \$3.3 billion is spent to promote cigarettes versus virtually nothing on media to counteract tobacco use and promotion.

One notable exception is the advertisements of Tony Schwartz (see page 3), which are directed at a specific short-term objective, such as passage of a clean indoor air law or divestment of tobacco company stocks by a university. Schwartz's background as a creator of political advertisements is well-suited to what he calls "this guerrilla media." However, few organizations have been willing to purchase Schwartz's time.

The necessity to purchase broadcast time to un-sell tobacco use and promotion is a far cry from 30 years ago when Tony Schwartz was creating the first anti-smoking public service announcements for the American Cancer Society. Such ads became

widely viewed between 1967 and 1970 as the result of a ruling by the Federal Communications Commission on a petition by John Banzhaf, III, to mandate the broadcasting of anti-smoking ads as an application of the Fairness Doctrine.

The counterads were so effective, in fact, that the tobacco companies couldn't take the competition. For the first time in this century, cigarette sales leveled off. By agreeing to withdraw cigarette ads from television in 1971, the tobacco companies knew this major weapon—counteradvertising—would no longer be a factor.

Even more disturbing is the fact that the tobacco companies never really left the airways, shifting instead to the sponsorship of countless nationally televised sporting and cultural events. The failure of the Justice Department for the past 20 years to enforce the law against cigarette promotions on television, coupled with the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine under the Reagan administration, means that paid advertising campaigns must be developed to undermine every aspect of youth-oriented tobacco marketing.

But why should we have to buy space to un-sell tobacco use and promotion? The sad and simple answer is that the print media are covetous of tobacco advertising revenue and the broadcast media are fearful of losing revenue from the advertising by food subsidiaries of tobacco companies. Even so, media corporations cannot maintain credibility by turning down

paid advertising aimed at countering the tobacco pandemic.

Such counteradvertising, large and small, can be amazingly effective. For example, the Canadian Nonsmokers Rights Association (NSRA) for more than a decade has been mobilizing public opinion against the tobacco industry by paid full-page ads in major daily newspapers.

Similar forceful paid counteradvertising efforts have been launched by the Anti-Cancer Council of Victoria and other Australian states. In the US, Doctors Ought to Care (DOC) has pioneered the concept of using paid counteradvertising to ridicule brand name tobacco advertising and promotion.

Counteradvertising should focus on two basic themes: to raise children in an environment free of tobacco smoke and to raise them in an environment free of tobacco advertising and promotion.

By shifting the focus away from the anger and guilt of the individual, and onto the cheapness and ridiculousness of the product, the advertiser creates an opportunity to win over consumers and to channel their anger toward the real authority figure, the tobacco industry.

We must now measure our success in the decline of the tobacco industry. It is essential to put our money where our mouth is. We should turn to mass media specialists such as Tony Schwartz, NSRA, and DOC, who have been ahead of the pack for the past generation.

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