

Tobacco Companies: Targeting The African American Community

The term "targeting" conjures up images of a bulls-eye. Certainly, the ways that Big Tobacco has African Americans over the years fit this metaphor perfectly. The tobacco companies – separately and collectively as an industry – have aimed directly at African Americans, unleashing their weapons of disease, disability and death. This targeting began more than 400 years ago, when Africans were enslaved and brought to this country to grow tobacco. The targeting has continued ever since. Currently, tobacco companies target African Americans in three major ways – through targeted advertising, targeted products and targeted philanthropy.

I. TARGETED ADVERTISING

There are two basic approaches that tobacco companies use to target advertising toward African Americans – by customizing media messages and by carefully selecting the media where the customized messages appear.

Media Message

Because African Americans are part of the general media market, media messages that go out to everyone also reach African Americans. However, African Americans receive a double dose of tobacco use messages because Blacks are also bombarded with targeted tobacco ads. These are ads that contain designs, images and/or words that are oriented specifically toward Black audiences. The tobacco companies hire advertising agencies to "colorize" existing advertising campaigns with Black faces and also to design culturally specific messages for cigarette ads featuring:

- 1 Black Celebrities – musicians, actors, models, sports figures
- 2 Images from African American history and culture
- 3 Jazz and other Black music motifs

Media Placement

To make sure that African Americans see their ads, tobacco companies have been placing their ads in Black-oriented mass media outlets since the 1940s. In fact, the tobacco companies were among the earliest U.S. corporations to see the value of using Black images in Black media as a way to reach African American audiences without antagonizing their White consumers. Over the years, revenues from tobacco advertising often have provided the difference between a Black publication remaining in business or going bankrupt. For African Americans, targeted media placement has included:

- 1 Excessive concentration of cigarette billboards in communities where African Americans were concentrated due to segregated housing patterns, with a focus on smaller 8-sheets (often illegal) on the sides of buildings.
- 2 Full-page color ads in Black magazines and weekly newspapers, which not only

communicated smoking messages but deterred host media from running articles on the dangers of tobacco use.

- 3 Transit ads on buses with routes through Black neighborhoods and in subway stations with large numbers of African American riders.
- 4 Advertising messages on Black radio.

Due in large part to community protests by African Americans in cities and towns across the United States over the past decade, many of the ways that the tobacco industry targeted African Americans through strategic media placement are now off-limits. Laws, policies and provisions of the tobacco settlement have eliminated tobacco ads advertisements on billboards, transit systems, and radio stations. However, targeted advertising continues in Black media and in stores located in Black communities.

II. TARGETED PRODUCTS

As we enter the 21st century, more than two-thirds of African Americans smokers purchase and smoke menthol tobacco brands in comparison to a quarter of White smokers. Among African American teenagers, some studies have menthol smoking rates as high as 90%. Researchers are now studying whether there is any link between menthol cigarettes and the high rates of tobacco-related diseases among Black smokers. Suspecting such a link, the National Association of African Americans for Positive Imagery (NAAAPI) went to federal court to ask for an end of the target marketing of menthol products but the case was dismissed on appeal.

Here are some of the cigarette brands that have been target-marketed to African Americans over the past 40 years. Information in recently released tobacco industry documents show the callous way that this product targeting has been accomplished.

Kool: Brown & Williamson made inroads into the African American community in the 1960s by marketing its menthol brand called "Kool," using a jazzy Black penguin named Willie that was quite popular with Black teens. For years, Kool was #1 among Black smokers.

Newport: Lorillard concentrated its marketing of Newport in the Northeast, capitalizing on the Black migration from the southern states. By the 1990s, Newport had become the most popular cigarette among Blacks -- replacing Kool in the top spot. Like Kool, Newport is a menthol brand. (A non-menthol version of Newport was recently released, but its sales reportedly are low.)

Uptown: In 1990, the RJ Reynolds Tobacco Company tried to introduce a cigarette just for Blacks called "Uptown." Public pressure made them withdraw it. Like Kool and Newport, Uptown only came in menthol.

X: This was a menthol cigarette that was marketed for a time in Boston. The brand came in the Afro-centric colors of red, black and green. Like Uptown, it was withdrawn following community pressure.

Camel: In the mid-1990s, Camel came out with a menthol version. Suddenly, ads appeared Camel menthols in Black magazines – even though Camels in the non-menthol formulation had not been advertised in Black media for more than 30 years! Overnight, Joe Camel became hip-hop.

Salem: This RJ Reynolds tobacco company is currently attempting to increase its share of African American smokers in the 1990s with images of hip Black musicians. Recently, the company began marketing a specialized Black label version of Salem in sections of the country with a high African American demographic.

All of the brands that have been targeted toward African Americans in have one important thing in common – they are all menthols!

III. TARGETED PHILANTHROPY

Tobacco companies have been long-time financial supporters of educational and cultural organizations within the African American community. When African Americans found the doors to mainstream society closed, the tobacco companies opened their doors wide -- offering substantial contributions of time and money to support positive programs in the African American community. Unfortunately, these corporate gifts have come with an extremely high price. The often unspoken agreement was that when the tobacco companies needed allies to fight against restrictive laws and policies or to argue against higher tobacco taxes, the African American groups they helped were expected to defend and support the tobacco industry.

Here are some of the major kinds of tobacco industry charitable gifts to African Americans:

Culture

Tobacco companies have been major underwriters of African American culture.

- 1 Black Dance & Theater
- 2 African American Historical Museums
- 3 Traveling Art Exhibitions
- 4 Jazz and Other Black Music

Education

Tobacco companies have been major funders of scholarships educational and intern programs.

- 1 United Negro College Fund (for private Historically Black Colleges and Universities)
- 2 Thurgood Marshall Scholarship Fund (for publicly-supported Black Colleges and Universities).

Civil Rights

Tobacco companies have been willing to provide funding to African Americans for voter education and registration, housing programs, literacy programs, youth programs, and affirmative action. Contributions to African American groups have included underwriting fund-raising events, displaying exhibits at national conference, donating

goods and services, and providing staff as direct-service volunteers and board members. Some of the major African American groups that have accepted charitable contributions from tobacco companies include:

- 1 Congressional Black Caucus Foundation
- 2 Joint Center for Political & Economic Studies
- 3 National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
- 4 National Urban League
- 5 National Newspaper Publishers Association (Black Press)

IV. SUMMARY

African Americans have been in the bulls-eye for far too long as a result of tobacco industry targeting. The death toll has been overwhelming. These multi-national corporations now are using similar tactics to target other ethnic, racial and cultural groups -- in the United States and around the world. The willingness of tobacco companies to target people who already are over-burdened with major health risks with a product that magnifies those risks overshadows any good that tobacco companies do.

That is why for the past decade, African American tobacco control advocates have been exposing the seamy underside of tobacco industry advertising, products and philanthropy in our communities. For the 21st century, we must continue to lead political, policy and grassroots campaigns that target African Americans for good health, rather than disease, disability and death due to tobacco.

REFERENCES

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Source: Charyn D. Sutton, The Onyx Group
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