

Business sector shuns tobacco companies

The World Health Organization's current estimate of the global number of deaths caused by tobacco use each year is 4.9 million. That's nearly four deaths a second, and about half of these people die before their working life ends. The great majority of these preventable, often wretched and painful early deaths occur among cigarette smokers. And the great majority of these smokers are the best, most loyal customers of multinational tobacco companies such as British American Tobacco (BAT) and Philip Morris.

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So imagine yourself as the chief executive of a company haemorrhaging customers in this way: BAT, with 15.4% of the global market share, loses 754 600 customers a year; Philip Morris, with 16.4%, contributes 803 600 dead customers. Acres of your embarrassing internal memos have caused you to give up decades of denial that your products cause all these deaths. You're not going to throw in the towel, so the only way forward is to use the device of informed consent—you sell risk. It's almost interesting. Could this approach even be spun as "corporate social responsibility"?

Last month the organisers of a Sydney "master class" on corporate social responsibility showed the door to BAT, originally one of the event's draw cards. The Ark Group had advertised a session featuring BAT, the law firm Minter Ellison, the ANZ Bank, and Vodafone. After successful advocacy initiatives in Hong Kong and Sydney in 2004, where tobacco companies had been withdrawn from similar conferences (*Tobacco Control* 2004;13:445-7), Action on Smoking and Health Australia wrote to the other companies on the programme, inviting them to reflect on whether they felt comfortable sharing the stage with a company whose products killed 50% of those who used them on a long term basis. Minter Ellison replied that they supported free speech. The others did not reply.

While all this was happening, a delegate sent me the brochure for another conference on corporate social responsibility, slated for March 2006 in Sydney and organised by the International Quality and Productivity Centre (IQPC). This time BAT

had gone to the top of the tree as the featured act, with its head corporate social responsibility official from London heading the bill in what the programme promised would "leverage corporate responsibility to guarantee business sustainability" (doubtless translated in the tobacco industry as how to exploit talk about corporate responsibility to keep people smoking).

Were the other featured companies comfortable with this? I contacted a former senior WHO official with impeccable business contacts. Within minutes this official went right to the top of two of these companies: Pfizer, one of the world's largest drug companies, which makes products to help people stop smoking, and McDonald's. I contacted two others listed on the programme: Beyondblue, a prominent lobby group that seeks action to help people with depression, and the head of community and environment at IAG, an insurance group that has taken the concept of corporate social responsibility seriously and as a result is near the top of the St James Ethics Centre's corporate responsibility index.

All four said they had not known that BAT was the headline act when they signed up to speak on the programme. All four rapidly withdrew. Fearing that its conference was going down the plughole, IQPC then withdrew BAT's invitation to speak. Ronald McDonald House, which withdrew, helps children with cancer. The person at Pfizer who was due to speak had worked at

the New South Wales Cancer Council for over 10 years. Was this all just bad luck for BAT? Or was it simply that nearly everyone these days has a friend or relative who has been affected by a tobacco related disease?

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Health groups were the first in Australia to shun the tobacco industry. Then a conga line quickly formed of sporting and cultural groups that refused tobacco sponsorship, before it was eventually banned in Australia in 1994. Most Australian universities do not want tobacco companies' money (<http://tobacco.health.usyd.edu.au/site/supersite/resources/pdfs/UnivTobPolicies.pdf>), and all political parties except the Liberal-National coalition now refuse donations from the tobacco industry. As far back as 1994, a spokesman for a leading executive recruitment agency, Bain and Company, said, "I don't think there's any doubt that it's harder to get enthusiasm for tobacco companies. If you have 10 qualified candidates and you tell them it's a tobacco company, five might say they don't want the job" (*Australian Financial Review* 2 Sep 1994:44).

David Davies, a senior executive at Philip Morris, told the Australian National Press Club in March this year without blinking that his company fully supported Australian government policy "to prevent the uptake of smoking and to encourage and assist as many smokers as possible to quit as soon as possible" (www.philipmorrisinternational.com/PMINTL/pages/eng/press/speeches/DDavies_20050323.asp). All tobacco companies repeatedly say they don't want children to smoke, but none have returned a cent of the estimated \$A18.7m (£8m; \$14m; €12m) in "unwanted profits" they earned in Australia this year from the children's market (*Aust N Z J Public Health* 2003; 27:360-1).

The business community is now dissociating itself from the tobacco industry. As the US health agency the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids put it in a 2002 poster: "No matter how often a snake sheds its skin, a snake is still a snake."

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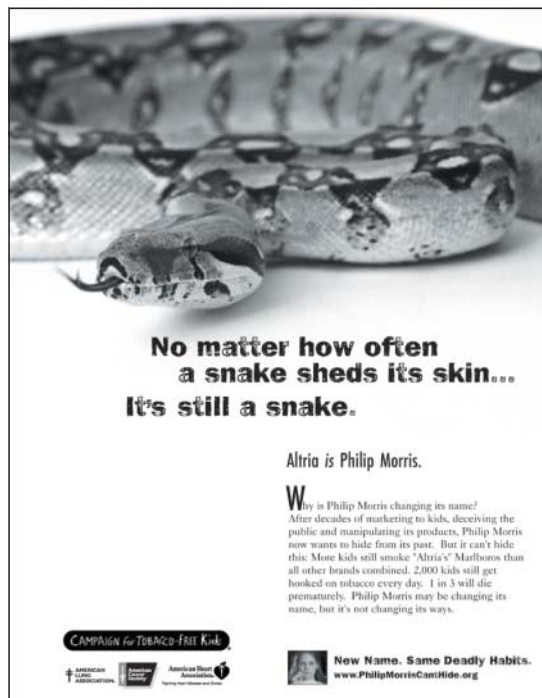


Image problem: are tobacco company tactics falling flat?