

814 words

The corporate world's equivalent to the plastic surgery gawp show, Extreme Makeover -- the Corporate Responsibility Index -- has recently been published for 2006. Coordinated in Australia by the St James Ethics Centre, it seems HIH, James Hardie and AWB (formerly the Australian Wheat Board) had a few "problems" in recent years which kept them out of the top ten. But remarkably, British American Tobacco ranks as the [8th most responsible company in Australia](#).

This is something of an achievement. BAT is the world's second largest transnational tobacco company, recently holding a 15.4% brand share of the international cigarette market. The World Health Organisation -- unchallenged -- puts the global annual death toll from tobacco today at 4.9 million, half whom die before age 65. That's 754,600 deaths a year attributable to BAT products or about 86 deaths an hour. Hundreds of thousands of BAT's best customers die each year because they use the company's products in exactly the way the manufacturer intends. BAT's fiduciary duty to its shareholders centres on getting as many people as possible to smoke as much as possible.

The company targets the world's poorest consumers in nations like [Bangladesh](#), trying to have them spend their bare survival incomes on expensive manufactured cigarettes. The more tobacco companies prosper, the more people suffer and die. For over 40 years, the industry has done all it can to stop, delay and destroy any effective policy designed to reduce tobacco use.

Like the mafia boss who ostentatiously deposits \$5000 in the church plate on Sunday, tobacco companies have the temerity to enter corporate responsibility contests. The world's biggest tobacco companies are today engaging in a massive global rebirthing exercise that seems to have suckered a few ethical referees. Their leading executives are trying to convince the corporate world, governments and the public that they are not at the helm of a pariah industry but, rather, are "ethical" and shouldn't be subject to regulatory controls that will reduce tobacco use.

Early this year, BAT wrote a [submission](#) to the NSW Parliament where it questioned the push to regulate reduced ignition propensity cigarettes (now mandatory in Canada, New York and California) which are designed to go out when not being inhaled, and reduce the hideous burns and deaths caused by discarded cigarettes that every hospital burns unit sees each year. Without blinking, it suggested that the NSW Cancer Institute should spend some of its tobacco control budget to "inform adults that they can continue to smoke in non-enclosed areas at NSW hotels."

In recent times, BAT has fought to weaken the WHO's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control treaty to curb the tobacco epidemic world-wide; funded a retailer campaign opposing more powerful health warnings on tobacco products; and [sponsored](#) the major opponent of smokefree workplaces laws in Australia, the Australian Hotels Association, to do its bidding.

BAT funds highly-publicised youth smoking prevention programs, yet globally, is content to keep the large amounts of revenue it derives from its market share of child smokers each year. In Australia, the industry take in 2002/03 was estimated to be [\\$18.7](#)

[million](#), about nine times more than the Federal government spends each year on tobacco control campaigns.

BAT knows exactly how these corporate responsibility exercises help the company. In 2000, a BAT executive briefed his board that ‘The process will not only help BAT achieve a position of recognized responsibility but also provide “air cover” from criticism while improvements are being made. Essentially it provides a degree of publicly endorsed amnesty.’

St James Ethics Centre has been highly embarrassed by all this – not least because it has always believed that no tobacco company could perform on the Index well while continuing to peddle its lethal products. It has pressed strongly for the international developers of the Index to amend the questionnaire in order to prevent the Corporate Responsibility Index from being subverted, by companies like BAT, as a classic “greenwash” exercise.

In 2004, the St James’ director, Simon Longstaff, along with many of the world’s leading ethicists, [signed a petition](#) which condemned a Hong Kong corporate responsibility conference’s involving BAT and Philip Morris. The petition stated “We, the undersigned ethicists and philosophers, condemn the cynical appropriation of “ethics” by tobacco companies. We call on all businesses genuinely committed to the promotion of more ethical corporate practices to dissociate themselves from all forums and conferences that give a stage from which the tobacco industry can continue its assault on society.”

An ethical tobacco company is an oxymoron. The Hong Kong conference promised to help companies 'profit' from CSR, but illness and death for millions are the sine qua non of the industry's 'business as usual'. Tobacco companies can only act responsibly by putting themselves on the road to financial ruin and discouraging consumption. That won't happen. It is time the corporate responsibility movement stopped devaluing its currency by schmoozing with the tobacco industry.

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