

second-hand smoke and the tobacco industry

Second-hand smoke is one of the most critical issues facing tobacco companies today. Increasing public knowledge about the health effects of second-hand smoke threatens tobacco companies' future profits and makes them accountable for the damage caused by tobacco products, not only in smokers, but also in people who are exposed to second-hand smoke.

Tobacco companies recognized the problem of second-hand smoke in the 1970s, well before the issue was even on the public agenda in most countries. "What the smoker does to himself may be his business, but what the smoker does to the non-smoker is quite a different matter," noted the Roper Organization in 1978, in a confidential study on public attitudes for the US Tobacco Institute, "...this we see as the most dangerous development to the viability of the tobacco industry that has yet occurred...the strategic and long run antidote to the passive smoking issue is, as we see it, developing and widely publicizing clear-cut, credible, medical evidence that passive smoking is not harmful to the non-smoker's health."¹,

Action to protect people from the dangers of second-hand smoke effects the bottom-line profits of tobacco companies, both directly and indirectly. Smoking restrictions, particularly in the workplace, reduce tobacco consumption and help some smokers to quit altogether. Widespread knowledge of the health damage of second-hand smoke also helps convince the public of the need for effective tobacco control policies. A 1993 proposal for a new "smokers' rights" group in the United States sums it up:

"Financial impact of smoking bans will be tremendous – Three to five fewer cigarettes per day will reduce annual manufacturer profits a billion dollars plus per year."²

Tobacco companies have huge resources—human, financial, and political—at their disposal to oppose policies that protect people from second-hand smoke. Among their techniques are:

distraction and diversion,

Tobacco companies distract the public from the issue of second-hand smoke by emphasizing the dangers of other pollutants, including carpet glue fumes and car exhaust. A broader discussion of indoor air quality, ventilation, and the "Sick Building Syndrome" (SBS) has served, in some cases, to drown out concerns about second-hand smoke. According to a 1990 Philip Morris publication for Europe, the range of pollutants found in offices which cause SBS include fumes and gases emitted from carpets, computer screens, photocopiers, etc., with the problem often augmented by bacteria, molds, and dusts from ventilation equipment.³ It has even been argued that tobacco smoke can be a useful visual marker of bad ventilation inside buildings.

Tobacco companies have also invested heavily in research on air quality issues. Substantial funds have been channeled to outside investigators through scientific organizations and companies focusing on indoor air research that were meant to appear independent and objective, but in fact were run by tobacco industry consultants.⁴

¹ Roper Organization, *A Study of Public Attitudes toward Cigarette Smoking and the Tobacco Industry in 1978*, Vol. 1. Available online at various locations, including the Philip Morris document site (<http://www.pmdocs.com>), for example at Bates numbers 2040499960-500264. Quote at 2040499989.

² "A Smokers' Alliance," 1 July 1993, on www.pmdocs.com at 2025771934-995. Quotes at 2025771937.

³ Philip Morris EEC, *Smoking in the Workplace*, available on www.pmdocs.com at Bates numbers 2501348521-536.

⁴ "Who's behind the building doctor?" by Myron Levin, *The Nation*, 9/16 August 1993.



attacking science.

Tobacco companies have vigorously attacked the science on the health effects of second-hand smoke exposure through elaborate public relations and disinformation campaigns. The scope of the attack on science has been far-reaching. They have spent millions on bogus studies and conferences, placed articles by paid surrogates in the media, subsidized "directed" research, and created third-party groups to publicly support their positions. These activities have been coordinated and mutually reinforcing.

Tobacco companies have also systematically worked to discredit major health and environmental authorities' findings on second-hand smoke issue. When the World Health Organization (WHO) began to actively draw attention to the health hazards of second-hand smoke, companies embarked on a major campaign to undermine the organization. This involved a sustained campaign that has been documented at length in a recent WHO inquiry, "Tobacco Industry Strategies to Undermine Tobacco Control Activities at the World Health Organization."⁵ In an attempt to discredit a report of the US Environmental Protection Agency, the Tobacco Institute and their lawyers paid 13 scientists more than \$156,000 to write letters to influential publications criticizing the report.⁶

"[G]roups of scientists should be able to produce research or stimulate controversy in such a way that public affairs people in relevant countries would be able to make use of, or market, the information," said a BAT executive in 1988.⁷ The ultimate goal was not to prove that second-hand smoke is harmless – an impossible task – but to keep the "controversy" alive as long as possible.

proposing false solutions.

Tobacco companies encourage "tolerance" between smokers and non-smokers and suggest that second-hand smoke is simply an annoyance rather than a public health issue. The reasoning behind "Courtesy of Choice" campaigns, sponsored by tobacco companies, in some bars and restaurants would suggest that carcinogenic substances have a lessened effect if exposure occurs in a courteous environment. Technical solutions such as better ventilation systems, air cleaners or spatial separation are also proposed. Although evidence shows that ventilation is not an effective solution, cigarette manufacturers continue to support this option, in order to prevent smoking restrictions.

⁵ See <http://www.who.int/genevahearings/inquiry.html> .

⁶ Hanners, D. *Scientists were paid to write letters: tobacco industry sought to discredit EPA report*, Pioneer Planet, August 1998.

⁷ Memo from Sharon Boyse, "Note on a special meeting of the UK Industry on Environmental Tobacco Smoke, London," 17 February 1988. On www.pmdocs.com at 2063791182-187.

