



## Tobacco Warning Labels & Packaging

Tobacco product packaging should be designed to maximize informed consent on the part of the consumer, not to maximize the appeal of the product. Strong and prominent health warning labels, limits on labels such as “slim” and “light,” package inserts containing detailed health and ingredient information, and standardized packaging formats are among the ways to accomplish this goal.

### Health Warning Labels

Health warning labels, both on cigarette packages and on all marketing materials, help create informed consent between tobacco companies and their customers and are an inexpensive and important first step in a national health education program. Unfortunately, warning labels tend to be weak in all but a few countries. More than 40 developing countries do not require any warning labels at all. Of those that do, 73% require weakly worded warnings on the side of the package and many of those are in English rather than local languages.<sup>1</sup>

Numerous studies have been done to determine which elements are most important in creating effective labels.<sup>2</sup> Findings include:

- To command attention, warning labels should occupy a minimum of 25% of the top of the front and back of the package. They should be in black and white or other sharply contrasting colors.

Type style and size also must be specified to avoid industry efforts to undermine the impact of the warning.

- Messages should be unequivocal, simple, and stark. They should convey both the nature and magnitude of the risks, since studies show smokers underestimate most risks associated with tobacco use. Pictorial warnings may also be appropriate, particularly in countries with low literacy rates or where research shows that smokers are ignoring standard warning labels. In Canada, pictorial warnings with colorful graphics and language are expected to be on all tobacco packages by the early part of 2001.
- Warning labels should include rotating messages on different packs, including such messages as: SMOKING KILLS; TOBACCO IS ADDICTIVE; SMOKING CAUSES HEART DISEASE; SMOKING CAUSES 85% OF ALL LUNG CANCER DEATHS; SMOKING HARMS YOUR BABY; QUITTING SMOKING NOW COULD SAVE YOUR LIFE; and TOBACCO SMOKE CAN HARM THOSE AROUND YOU.
- Warning labels should be applied to all tobacco products, not just cigarettes.

Several nations have implemented strong health warning label requirements. Examples include:

- Canada, whose health minister recently proposed enlarging the labels from 30% of the package face to 60%;
- Thailand, which has added the message “SMOKING CAUSES IMPOTENCE” to its list of required warnings; and
- Australia, which was the first nation to require that “how to quit” information be printed on every pack.
- South Africa, Singapore and Poland also require strong warning labels.

Package labels also should include information on how to quit smoking, and a phone number for smokers to call for more information. Tobacco products could also be required to include a package insert, just as other pharmaceutical products are required to do in most countries. The insert would provide more detailed information about the risks of tobacco use and the benefits of quitting.

### Other Labeling Issues

**Implied health claims:** Tobacco companies use words such as “light,” “ultralight,” “slim” and “superslim” in their brand names and in their marketing materials. Research suggests that these words are intended to make implicit health claims minimizing the harmfulness of the product, and may encourage



smokers motivated to quit to switch to a "light" brand. These words also appeal to smokers, primarily women, who believe they can use cigarettes to lose weight.

**"Tar" and nicotine labeling:** Several countries require that "tar" and nicotine yields be displayed on cigarette packages or in advertising. However, serious deficiencies in current measurement standards undermine the intent of this requirement. These measurements are now used primarily by tobacco companies to mislead consumers into thinking that smoking so-called "light" cigarettes is a safe alternative to quitting.<sup>3</sup>

### Plain Packaging: The Wave of the Future?

As other forms of tobacco marketing are restricted, the tobacco package itself has become an increasingly important part of the industry's marketing strategy. Tobacco companies design packages to make their products as alluring as possible. The packages – which can be seen throughout the day by potential smokers as well as would-be quit-

ters -- are carefully designed to appeal to the target audience. Cigarette packages are seen "every time they are purchased, pulled from someone's purse or pocket, left on a bar or restaurant table, or held by an actor in a movie."<sup>4</sup>

- British American Tobacco has begun to put its racing logo and the image of a Formula 1 car on packages of its State Express 555 brand in Asia.<sup>5</sup>
- In Thailand, Japan Tobacco introduced cigarette packs with pictures of Thai Buddhist shrines. Following protests at the Japanese Embassy, the photos quickly were withdrawn.<sup>6</sup>

Research suggests that glossy, attractive, unregulated packaging interferes with and undermines the health warning label on the package, and that requiring manufacturers to adhere to a uniform or "plain" packaging format would significantly decrease the appeal of tobacco products to young people.<sup>7</sup> Tobacco companies have strongly resisted plain packaging proposals in countries such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand.<sup>8</sup> The companies claim

that restricting packaging designs would infringe on their trademarks and violate international treaties. Independent legal scholars believe that a proposal to limit packaging design that is soundly based on public health data would withstand the tobacco industry's challenge, although no country has yet adopted a plain packaging law.<sup>9</sup>

### Resources on the World Wide Web

Macksood Aftab, Deborah Kolben, Peter Lurie and Sidney Wolfe, *Smokescreen: Double Standards of U.S. Tobacco Companies in International Cigarette Labeling*, Public Citizen's Health Research Group, 1998

<http://www.citizen.org/hrg/PUBLICATIONS/tobacco/tobacco.htm>

Proposed Canadian Health Warnings  
<http://www.smoke-free.ca/TobaccoorKids/tobaccoorkids2.htm>

International Union Against Cancer, "Towards Informed Consent: The Case for Plain Packaging of Tobacco Products," Fact Sheet #16, 1996  
[http://www.globalink.org/tobacco/fact\\_sheets/16fact.htm](http://www.globalink.org/tobacco/fact_sheets/16fact.htm)

<sup>1</sup>Public Citizen Health Research Group, *Smokescreen: Double Standards of U.S. Tobacco Companies in International Cigarette Labeling*; <http://www.citizen.org/hrg/PUBLICATIONS/tobacco/tobacco.htm>, 1998.

<sup>2</sup>See R. Borland, "Tobacco Health Warnings and Smoking-Related Cognitions and Behaviours," *Addiction*, Vol. 92, 1997; International Union Against Cancer Tobacco Control Fact Sheet No. 2, "Health Warnings/Messages on Tobacco Products," 1996; [http://www.globalink.org/tobacco/fact\\_sheets/02fact.htm](http://www.globalink.org/tobacco/fact_sheets/02fact.htm)

<sup>3</sup>M.V. Djordjevic et al., "Self-Regulation of Smoking Intensity," *Carcinogenesis*, Vol. 16, September 1995; Martin Jarvis and Clive Bates, "Why Low Tar Cigarettes Don't Work and How the Tobacco Industry Has Fooled the Smoking Public," 1999; <http://www.ash.org.uk/papers/big-one.html>

<sup>4</sup>National Clearinghouse on Tobacco and Health, "Youth and Tobacco: Promoting a Lethal Product," 1993; <http://www.cctc.ca/ncthd/docs/yt-lethal.htm>

<sup>5</sup>"Asia: BAT Emphasises its Links with Motorsport," Information Access Company, 14 May 1999.

<sup>6</sup>Glenn Frankel, "U.S. Aided Cigarette Firms in Conquests Across Asia," *Washington Post* 17 November 1996; <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/tobacco/stories/asia.htm>

<sup>7</sup>International Union Against Cancer Tobacco Control Fact Sheet No. 16, "Generic Packaging: Towards Informed Consent: The Case for Plain Packaging of Tobacco Products," 1996; [http://www.globalink.org/tobacco/fact\\_sheets/16fact.htm](http://www.globalink.org/tobacco/fact_sheets/16fact.htm)

<sup>8</sup>See for example Mark Kennedy, "Cigarette Firms Launched Secret Tactics to Fight Plain Packs, Documents Show," *Ottawa Citizen*, 17 January 2000; <http://lists.essential.org/pipermail/intl-tobacco/2000q1/000028.html>

<sup>9</sup>J.G. Castel, "Would Plain Packaging for Cigarettes Violate Canada's International Trade Obligations?" Opinion submitted to the Standing Committee on Health, Canada, May 1994.