



TOBACCO INDUSTRY TARGETING OF WOMEN AND GIRLS

The tobacco companies have long understood the importance of women and girls in the overall market for cigarettes and as a source of new customers. Tobacco companies have conducted extensive market research on the attitudes of women and girls to better understand how to target their products and their advertising. By focusing their research on how females view themselves, their aspirations and the social pressures they face, the cigarette companies have developed some of the most aggressive and sophisticated marketing campaigns in history for reaching and influencing women and girls. In addition, internal tobacco documents show the tobacco industry's deliberate strategy to target women and girls. For example, according to internal tobacco documents, Philip Morris strategically donated to women's organizations, participated in women's forums, and engaged with women they identified as 'active moms' in order to soften women's attitudes against the industry and, in some cases, ask them to support tobacco industry's issues.¹

The consequences of these campaigns are staggering. Smoking among girls and young women increased dramatically in the 1990s. Rates have since declined, but today, 1.5 percent of high school girls and 10.1 percent of adult women still smoke.²

The Early Years

Though the slogans have changed over time, the tobacco industry's targeted marketing of women can be traced back to the 1920s. While women were first depicted in cigarette ads as non-smoking admirers of smoking men, by 1927 advertisements with women smoking began to appear in women's magazines.³ One of the earliest and most famous cigarette advertising campaigns directed at women was Lucky Strike's "Reach for A Lucky Instead of A Sweet."

Despite the advent of targeted advertising, smoking among women did not really gain social acceptability until World War II. During that era, cigarette companies began to target women more directly, using the fashion, beauty, and sophistication themes that still continue today. The companies also used images of women in the military and the work place. For example, Camel's ad slogan during World War II was "First in the Service" and highlighted successful women in the military. While these new advertising campaigns focused on women's growing role in the American workplace, they still portrayed smoking as a stylish and feminine act. This theme of smoking as a way of achieving independence, while at the same time remaining stylish and attractive (especially to men), became less popular after the war ended but would later reappear.

The Advent of Women-Specific Brands in the 1970s

Cigarette advertising continued to target women throughout the 1950s and 1960s, but the companies did not make a full-scale effort to expand the number of their female customers until the late 1960s. Realizing the impact that the women's liberation movement was having on the role of women in America, the tobacco companies began to create specific brands of cigarettes for women.

With the introduction of Virginia Slims by Philip Morris in 1968, women became a major target of the tobacco industry. Cigarette ads for this brand depicted women as independent and successful with catchy tag lines such as the infamous "You've Come A Long Way Baby." Like early ads targeted at women, these marketing efforts continued to portray female smoking as a way to express one's independence, as well as a way to be particularly stylish and sexy. Six years after the introduction of Virginia Slims and other brands aimed at the female market, the smoking initiation rate of 12-year-old girls had increased by 110 percent. Increases among teenage girls of other ages were also substantial.⁴

Philip Morris continued to market Virginia Slims using images of empowered women paired with "You've Come A Long Way Baby" throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The copy on these ads usually focused on how women's lives had changed since the 1920s and 1930s, focusing on the new freedoms allowed to

women. In the early 1990s, Philip Morris revamped the image of Virginia Slims with the “It’s a Woman Thing” campaign. While these ad campaigns continued to suggest empowerment and attractiveness from smoking, the ad copy focused on how women are different than men.

From 1999 to 2000, Virginia Slims launched the lavish “Find Your Voice” ad campaign, which featured strikingly beautiful women from around the world and suggested that independence and allure could be found by smoking. Philip Morris’ chief executive in June 2000 agreed to remove the “Find Your Voice” slogan after being questioned in the landmark Florida smokers’ trial about whether it might be offensive to smokers with throat cancer.⁵

With the success of these marketing campaigns, the tobacco companies fully recognized the importance of women and girls as a key to their future success. For example, an internal R.J. Reynolds document stated that “Younger adult female smokers will continue to gain importance among [young adult] smokers due to their stronger incidence trend versus [young adult] male smokers.”⁶

In the 1990s, the tobacco industry started tying their print advertising campaigns to a variety of promotional campaigns. These campaigns reinforced the image of smoking as stylish and sexy by offering free merchandise like clothing and CDs. Studies have shown that there is a direct relationship between the awareness of and involvement with promotional items and smoking initiation by youth.⁷

Targeting Women with “Low Tar” and “Light” Cigarettes

In the 1970s, with a growing realization that many women were becoming concerned about the long-term health risks of smoking, the tobacco companies began promoting “low tar” or “light” cigarettes to women as a “softer” or even “safer” option. As a 1978 Philip Morris document stated, “Today women make up the majority of low tar smokers. Almost half of all women have switched to low tar.”⁸ An example of this marketing strategy can be seen in Lorillard’s True ad campaign from the 1970s. This campaign, which showed golfers and tennis players as well as young women, read, “All the fuss about smoking got me thinking I’d either quit or smoke True. I smoke True. The low tar low nicotine cigarette. Think about it.”

Almost a decade later, another Philip Morris document offered a more detailed analysis, stating that “because of women’s nurturing role in society, they are naturally more involved with low tar cigarettes than men (70% of low tar smokers are female). They do not want to stop smoking, yet they are guilt-ridden with concerns for their families if smoking should badly damage their own health. Thus they compromise by smoking low tar cigarettes.... This new product can fit this positioning exactly.”⁹

This public health fraud that tobacco companies perpetrated on American smokers through the marketing of “light” and “low tar” cigarettes affected women disproportionately. Rather than reducing harm to women, these products discouraged quitting, with a negative impact on women’s health. Studies show that women (62%) were much more likely than men (45%) to report smoking light, mild and ultra-light cigarettes.¹⁰ Women smokers of light and ultra-light cigarettes were also more likely (48% vs. 39%) than men who smoked those brands to say they switched to a low tar brand “just to reduce your health risk.” Smokers who switch brands are twice as likely as non-switchers to believe their brand is less hazardous than others. This may explain why some studies found that respondents who switched to low tar cigarettes were less likely to have quit than those who have never switched.¹¹ For example, a 2006 study published by the *American Journal of Public Health* found that smokers who switched to light cigarettes to reduce health risks were about 50 percent less likely to quit smoking than those who smoked non-light cigarettes.¹²

In August 2006, U.S. District Court Judge Gladys Kessler declared that tobacco companies could no longer use descriptive labels such as “low-tar” or “light” on their products or marketing materials because they are false and misleading, by implying a more healthful tobacco product.¹³ Cigarette companies appealed the ruling and, in the interim, continued to market cigarettes with these false and misleading health claims. The ruling was ultimately upheld, but not until after the passage of the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act (FSPTCA) in 2009, which banned cigarette companies from using descriptors such as “light,” “mild,” and “low” to characterize cigarettes or smokeless products on labels or in advertising, without prior permission from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.¹⁴

Cigarette Company Targeting of Women and Girls Today

Today, tobacco companies continue to target women using the same themes in their advertising as in past years. Images of tobacco use being tied to independence, stylishness, weight control, sophistication and power still are found in advertisements running in many popular women's magazines. There are now two main types of cigarettes marketed to women, female brands and dual sex brands. Female brands, like Virginia Slims, Capri, Misty and the Camel No. 9 brand by R.J. Reynolds, are marketed directly to women using feminine images. Dual sex brands, like Marlboro, are marketed to women with independent and fun-loving imagery.

Philip Morris has been especially successful in its efforts to attract women to its "dual sex" brands. For years now, more women, of all age groups, have smoked Marlboro than any other brand.¹⁵ As an R.J. Reynolds document recognized, "It is clear that the primary competitor for a new [young adult] female smoker is Marlboro."¹⁶ An undated R.J. Reynolds analysis of younger adult female smokers recognized the importance of this group to industry growth and also the potential in 'dual sex' brands like Marlboro and Camel: "Most younger adult females smoke a dual sex brand – not too masculine (e.g. Camel), but not strictly female (Virginia Slims). While specially targeted female brands will undoubtedly play a role in the future market, lifestyle trends suggest that commonalities between younger adult males/females are increasing over time, so that dual sex wants are likely to remain prevalent."¹⁷

Female-specific brands continue to play an important role in the cigarette companies' marketing strategies.¹⁸ In January 2007, R.J. Reynolds introduced Camel No. 9 cigarettes, aimed directly at women because women smokers "didn't feel that Camel had a brand for them." Spending between \$25 and \$50 million on the marketing and launch of this new brand, R.J. Reynolds pulled out all the stops, with "ladies' nights" and other bar events that created excitement and buzz around the sleek new product. Despite Judge Kessler's ruling banning use of the term "light," full-page advertisements running in women's magazines such as *Glamour*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Vogue* contain the statement, "light and luscious."

A 2010 study found that in the year after the Camel No. 9 campaign began, 44 percent of teen girls reported having a favorite cigarette ad – up from 34 percent before the Camel No. 9 campaign began. Moreover, almost half of the teen girls who had specified Camel as their favorite cigarette ad had not indicated any favorite ad previously. The authors state that, because it successfully led to brand identification and ultimately increased RJR's market share, the Camel No. 9 campaign targeted adolescent girls just as the Joe Camel campaign effectively targeted youth. The study also showed that having a favorite cigarette ad increases the risk smoking initiation by 50 percent.¹⁹

In another attempt to reach female consumers, Philip Morris USA in November 2008 released its new "purse packs" for Virginia Slims Superslims Lights. The small, narrow boxes looked like cosmetic cases and held 20 slender cigarettes.

From the Camel ads of the forties, with images of female pilots and copy lines like "They've Got What it Takes!," to the Virginia Slims campaign telling women to "Find Your Voice" and now the Camel No. 9 "light and luscious" campaign to "wow" women, the tobacco companies have continued to target women and girls with their deadly and addictive products.

Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, November 14, 2023 / Marela Minosa

Additional Tobacco Industry Quotes About Targeting Women and Girls

R.J. Reynolds, 2007. "Camel has traditionally been looked at as a male brand. So we saw a great business opportunity there to be able to communicate with adult, female smokers of competitive brands that this is a product they might enjoy."²⁰

R.J. Reynolds, 2007. "If a Camel light smoker sees No. 9 and she thinks it is even better for her than what's she smoking, that's a good thing for us because it's making a current franchise smoker feel even better about the brand."²¹

Brown and Williamson, 1995. "Role of Print: Reach - Misty target is a heavy magazine reader ... Image - Vast array of editorial formats (i.e.: service, beauty, fashion, entertainment) provide Misty advertising with numerous 'personalities' increasing relevancy and interest to broad scope of Misty target ... Beauty / Fashion: Allure, Bazaar, Elle, Glamour, Mademoiselle, Mirabella, Vogue. Strong composition of younger portion of Misty target, editorial focus appeals to the sociability of the Misty smoker, ideal format to showcase creative."²²

Brown and Williamson, 1995. "The recent BrandScape research identified key characteristics of Misty smokers. Summed up into two words, the Misty smoker is both "Savvy" and "Sassy"; Savvy - rational, practical, feminine, price conscious. Sassy - active, youthful attitude, confident. This type of information has allowed us to fine-tune Misty's magazine selection, going beyond traditional quantitative data (age, income) to include more qualitative insight into who the Misty focus audience is."²³

Philip Morris, 1993. "As it is often the case, being stylish implies to hold the weight down and to remain physically fit. Not surprisingly, the people to look up to as models are sexy and self-assured people and consists at least of socializing with sophisticated friends."²⁴

Philip Morris, 1993. "As a matter of fact, advertisements in magazines is the most efficient way to talk to these female smokers. We also know what values to outline based on what we just saw ... Actually, one of their main terminal values is to look attractive. In other words, a woman cannot be attractive if she is fat. Aerobics (gym) is therefore one of their major activities, when they do not try to meet the opposite sex in parties, bars or discotheques. This is their conception of having an exciting life for the time being. The feedback effect of such an exciting life and such as independence is that they claim it would be a long time before they settle down with someone. This boiling mixture of dreams, immediate experience of independence and intensive sexual encounters is satisfied in some ways by the brands they smoke."²⁵

American Tobacco Company (later purchased by Brown and Williamson) 1993. "There is significant opportunity to segment the female market on the basis of current values, age, lifestyles and preferred length and circumference of products. This assignment should consider a more contemporary and relevant lifestyle approach targeted toward young adult female smokers."²⁶

Philip Morris, 1992. "In an effort to gain relevancy among young adult female smokers, Virginia Slims is exploring a new advertising direction. While this new direction has not been specifically defined as of yet, its objective is to make Virginia Slims relevant to young adult female smokers through a proprietary attitude, in the context of female style ... To women smokers, Virginia Slims is the brand that best expresses their style and attitude about being a woman today. The Virginia Slims Fashion program should dimensionalize the style and attitude of today's young women smoker ... Event Objectives: generate trial and re-trial among target...provide YAFS with an opportunity to support a popular, relevant charitable cause."²⁷

Philip Morris, 1991. "VSLM Creative Strategy: To convince fashionable, modern, independent and self-confident women aged 20-34 that by smoking VSLM, they are making better/more complete expression of their independence."²⁸

Philip Morris, 1985. "However, this report does provide us with some useful information for Virginia Slims in a sense that a slim image cigarette has to be more of an appeal for the female smokers who are concerned about their weight. Although the survey indicated that only 52% of all female smokers 18-20 years old are concerned about their weight, I believe that this concern will be much higher amongst the over 20 year old female smokers, which is presumably the correct target for Virginia Slims."²⁹

R.J. Reynolds, 1984. "Designed to reinforce its appeal to fashion-conscious, younger adult women ... These product and packaging modifications will allow the consumer to make a bolder statement about her lifestyle and still enjoy the low tar benefits of MORE lights 100's."³⁰

R.J. Reynolds, 1983. "Premise: A brand that enhances/complements the young adult female smoker's image by standing for contemporary femininity."³¹

R.J. Reynolds, 1983. "There is greater agreement as to how and why women began smoking in the first place. Beyond the easily recognized pressure of peers, women seem to indicate passage into adulthood and as part of this transitional period, to exhibit anti-authoritarian behavior."³²

American Tobacco Company (later purchased by Brown and Williamson) 1983. "Only recently has Virginia Slims attempted to update their approach reflecting fun and lifestyle. Given the increasing number of women in the work force, their demanding life-styles and changing values, an opportunity exists to position a female brand in step with today's successful women's lifestyle and values."³³

R.J. Reynolds, 1982. "RJR has a corporate gap in the younger adult female smoker market. While this in itself does not represent a market opportunity, penetration of this smoker group does pose a strategic corporate opportunity ... younger adult smokers are strategically important to RJR's long-term growth ... Specifically, these young adult females agree that smoking is: attractive to the opposite sex, sophisticated/stylish, less intelligent, more aggressive, more mature, less feminine, smoke because friends do, feel more comfortable around others, feel that I'm rebelling."³⁴

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- ⁷ Pierce, J, et al., "Tobacco Industry Promotion of Cigarettes and Adolescent Smoking," *JAMA* 279(7):511-505, February 1998. [with erratum in *JAMA* 280(5):422, August 1998]; Altman, DG, et al., "Tobacco Promotion and Susceptibility to Tobacco Use Among Adolescents aged 12 through 17," *American Journal of Public Health* 86(11):1590-1593, November 1996.
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- ⁹ Philip Morris, *Project Magic*, June 1985, Bates No. 2501008130/8154.
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- ¹⁴ Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act, http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=111_cong_bills&docid=f:h1256enr.txt.pdf.
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