

OPEN LETTER

Re: “TOBACCO COMPANIES ARE FIGHTING UNDER-AGE SMOKING”

So the Canadian tobacco manufacturers believe they have an obligation to be “part of the solution” to the problem of underage smokers (“*Tobacco companies are fighting under-age smoking*”, letter, December 4th 2000). As usual, they omit to mention the fact that they are the very source of the problem. The tobacco industry has consistently proven that it will do anything to continue to recruit new young smokers — whether by opposing higher taxes, using youth-oriented lifestyle advertising to promote its brands (e.g. Extreme Sports) and wholeheartedly supporting anti-tobacco campaigns that do not work — and that often have the opposite effect. One of these campaigns is Operation I.D.

Helen Ouellet, National Director of Operation ID, states that her organization believes that education and training are two essentials to prevent sales to minors by retailers. That is plainly wrong. Telling merchants that selling tobacco to kids is illegal and providing them with signs simply isn't enough. Retailers already know it's illegal — it's been the law since 1994. Simply put, retailers are in business to make money. As long as there is no financial incentive *not* to sell to kids, they will continue to rake in the 8 millions \$ in yearly profits from tobacco sales to minors.

Indeed, Operation ID does not include any kind of inspections nor does it involve penalties for selling to minors. The published literature on these types of youth prevention strategies — retailer education, posters advocating ID cards, age related-warnings — suggest they are *always* ineffective. If compliance has gone up in the past few years, it is not, as Ms Ouellet suggests, because of Operation ID, it is because Health Canada has boosted its inspections and fined violators.

In fact, Operation ID, like other similar industry-backed campaigns around the world, is actually a sophisticated public relations strategy to improve the damaged reputation of the industry by purporting to oppose youth smoking and by aligning itself with business groups and other community organizations. The program is also designed to promote the notion in young minds that cigarettes are a forbidden fruit, one they'll have to “wait for” until they are adults. If you carefully look at Operation ID's brochures, posters, flyers and stickers, you will notice that the message is not that smoking in itself is bad, it's that smoking is not for kids. What better way to appeal to the rebellious nature of teenagers and their desire to act like adults?

So what does the tobacco industry say in private about this type of program? One internal Philip Morris document states that “*the ultimate means for determining the success of this program will be: 1) A reduction in legislation introduced and passed restricting or banning our sales and marketing activities; 2) Passage of legislation favourable to the industry; 3) greater support from business, parent, and teacher groups.*” Another one talks of its “*ability to advertise, promote and market our products*” via a “*juvenile initiative*”, defined as “*a series of programs and events to discourage juvenile smoking because smoking is an adult decision.*”

Indeed, the tobacco companies need young smokers to survive. It's an economic imperative: 90% of their customers start when they are kids. As long as the tobacco industry profits from selling cigarettes, it simply cannot be trusted to help in the fight against smoking. That is why the Quebec Coalition and many other health organizations are calling for a boycott of Operation ID. Tobacco companies' products kill 45 000 Canadians every year. How can anyone ever trust this industry to act in good faith?

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