

INSIDE TRACK

MARKETING

Defeating the good word on the bad habit

Public health officials fighting tobacco use are starting to realise that advertising can be as powerful a tool as legislation, writes John Thornhill

It is no small challenge: how to dissuade billions of people from killing themselves by consuming a lethal but addictive product that is firelessly promoted by some of the world's most powerful multinational marketing machines.

The dangers of tobacco use may be well-known - at least in the developed world - but the statistics regarding its health effects are still shocking. If current smoking patterns persist, some 500m people alive today will be killed by tobacco use, according to international health organisations. Smoking-related deaths are expected to increase to 10m a year within three decades, exceeding all fatalities caused by HIV infection, malaria and tuberculosis.

"If it was not for history, tobacco would not be legal now," says Mohammad Haroon, head of cancer prevention at the UK's department of health. He notes that recent medical research has suggested nicotine can be as addictive as heroin.

This week, government officials from the 191 member countries of the World Health Organisation are meeting in Switzerland to try to draw up an international framework convention to limit tobacco use. They are likely to recommend that national governments enact legislation, which will eventually ban all tobacco advertising and sponsorship, shift towards standard taxation rates and crack down on cross-border smuggling.

But public health officials are realising increasingly that the art of persuasion is quite as vital as the strictures of regulation in the attempt to curb smoking.

Mr Haroon says that almost three-quarters of smokers in the UK would like to quit and must be encouraged to do so by the most effective means possible. The department of health is promoting the use of nicotine replacement therapy as well as Ziban, an anti-depressant drug that has been shown to help reduce nicotine dependence. It is also broadening its network of "cessation clinics", where practical advice and support is provided to smokers who want to quit.

"[The UK has] seen the steepest decline in smoking anywhere in the world," he says. "But there is a theory that we have already had the easy hits and while we have seen some plateauing over the

1990s we are now getting to the harder groups of people who are smoking."

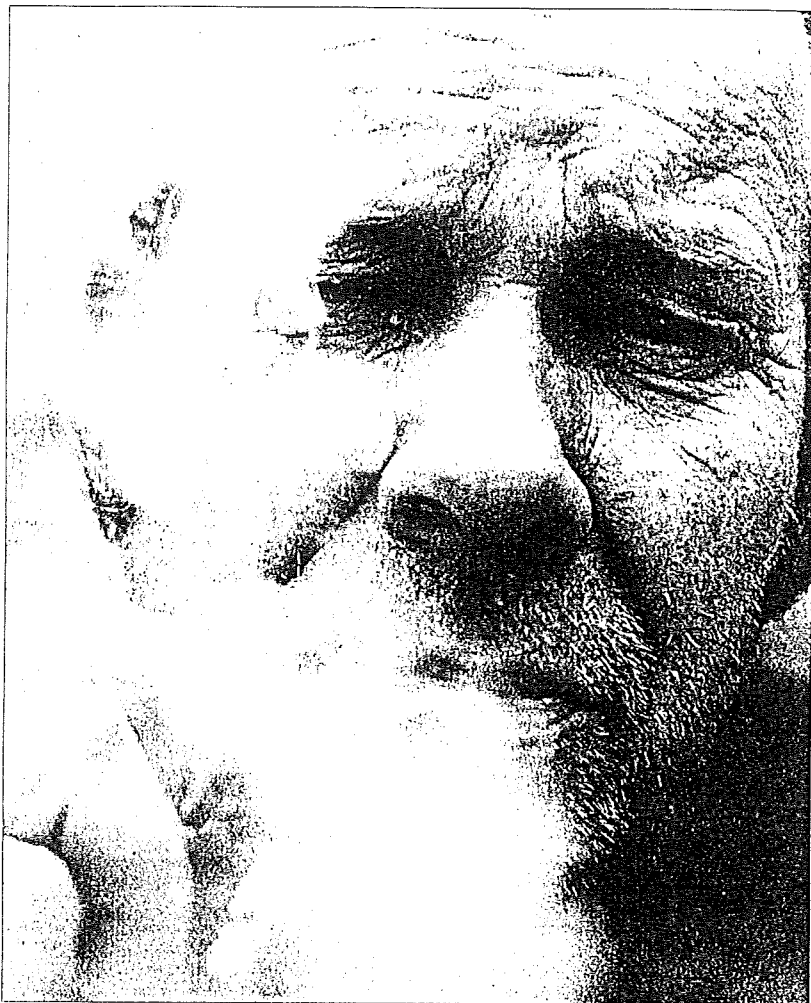
The department of health is working closely with Abbott Mead Vickers.BBDO, the advertising agency, to target low income and ethnic groups, who tend to smoke more. Their aim is to persuade 1.7m smokers to give up by 2010.

Last month, Abbott Mead Vickers.BBDO held a two-day symposium in London to swap notes with advertising agencies from the US, Canada and Australia. "We wanted to exchange best practice and proven successes and generate fresh ideas," says Cilla Snowball, managing director.

One of the chief lessons to be drawn from the discussion is that - like any other advertisements - anti-smoking campaigns must be closely correlated to local audiences and cultures. One Australian advertising agency has developed some gruesome, computer-generated shock advertisements of rotting lungs, which ram home the message that "every cigarette is doing you damage". A Canadian advertising agency has devised a more thoughtful campaign designed to stimulate public demand for government action.

But perhaps the most striking campaign has been run by Crispin Porter & Bogusky, a small Florida-based social-marketing agency. It has had great success in reducing youth smoking since 1997 by creating an anti-smoking brand called truth.

The campaign seeks to demonise the sleazy practices of the giant multinational tobacco companies, largely by means of black humour. One television advertisement is based on a spoof awards ceremony



Smoke alarm: almost three-quarters of smokers in the UK want to quit, according to the Department of Health

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in which Mr Tobacco wins the "mass-killer" prize over Mr Suicide, Mr Murder and Mr Illicit Drugs.

Jeff Hicks, a partner of Crispin Porter & Bogusky, says the whole thrust of its campaign has been to empower the young to make their own decisions, rather than to lecture them about the dangers of smoking.

"The reason kids use tobacco is not rational. It is emotional. There is 100 per cent awareness of the rational reasons not to use tobacco. They all knew that it will kill you," he says.

"But youths use tobacco for the same reason they dye their hair or pierce their ears. They do it for reasons of style and self-expression. Tobacco is the ultimate tool of youth rebellion."

Mr Hicks says that the tobacco industry was far quicker to pick up on this mood than the health authorities were. Indeed, he says that smoking's association with youth rebellion almost became a unique selling proposition for the tobacco companies, who introduced "death" colours like red and black on their packets. One start-up company even launched a brand called "Death". It was only by creating a rival social-marketing brand that the agency was able to counter the tobacco industry's message.

"We realised that we could not take away this tool of rebellion

from them without giving them back something else. So we focused on creating a rebellion against the tobacco industry. That is the strategy. You could say that Greenpeace is a social marketing brand. But we have created a new one in truth."

The campaign has helped reduce smoking prevalence among Florida schoolchildren aged 12 to 14, by 40 per cent - although the success rate was less than half that among the 15-17 age group. The programme is now being rolled out all across the US.

In the UK, Abbott Mead Vickers.BBDO is using a mixture of messages to appeal to smokers trying to quit. First, it attempts to demonstrate that it understands the scale of the task, by providing real stories of smokers' successes and failures.

Second, the campaign aims to hammer home the message: Don't give up giving up. On average it takes five to six attempts for smokers to quit, highlighting the fact that it is often a process rather than an event.

Third, the campaign stiffens sympathy by means of warnings, providing practical tips on how to stop smoking while emphasising the immediate dangers of continuing.

"We have been targeting 16 to 24-year-old women, highlighting the effect that smoking has on

their skin. When you are young it is hard to imagine that you may die, so we wanted to talk to them in ways which are immediately relevant to them and that includes their looks and appearance," says Ms Snowball.

Fourth, the campaign attempts to provide consumers with choices, providing information about how to contact anti-smoking helplines or where to obtain nicotine patches.

From the global perspective, however, the challenge will be to try to spread many of these ideas to the developing world, where the threat of tobacco is the greatest and where governments can struggle to implement legislation and to fund educational initiatives and health programmes. For example, a survey in China in 1996 found that 61 per cent of smokers still thought that tobacco did them "little or no harm".

Clive Bates, the director of ASH (Action on Smoking and Health), believes that spread of public awareness of the dangers of smoking and the use of the internet to share best health practices can do much to fight tobacco use.

"The globalisation of health is going on at a rapid pace," he says. "The tobacco companies cannot count on the developing countries doing what the developed countries did... Good things can globalise as well."

World death rates due to smoking

