

Amanda Amos

How women are targeted by the tobacco industry

If women in many parts of the world are smoking in greater numbers than ever before, it is probably no coincidence. Women represent a fresh and lucrative target group for the tobacco industry, which has learned to tailor its products and promotion to women's presumed tastes. The promotion images, themes and devices used are analysed in the following article, which also suggests some healthy ground rules for women's magazines to consider adopting.

In the last few years the tobacco industry has aimed both its products and its advertising increasingly at women. Tobacco companies have always been keen to develop the female market. Given the decline in smoking in many developed countries (especially among men) and the fact that tobacco kills off a quarter of its consumers, however, these companies are resorting more than ever before to the creation and expansion of new markets. Women are key target groups in both developed and Third World countries.

Items in the tobacco and advertising press are explicit about the importance attached to targeting women. Articles entitled "Suggesting that retailers should 'look to the ladies'" (1), "Women — a separate market" (2), and "Creating a female taste" (3) have appeared in the British journal *Tobacco*, as have similar articles in the United States press (4, 5). The international journal *Tobacco Reporter*, which has featured such articles as

"Targeting the female smoker" (6), concludes that "women are a prime target as far as any alert European marketing man is concerned" (7).

How are women targeted?

The overall objective of any campaign is to make smoking cigarettes in general, and one brand in particular, more appealing. This is achieved by tailoring the marketing mix to specific groups, which may involve altering the product, its price, its availability and its image through packaging and promotion. The particular marketing strategy used to target women will vary with factors such as: the tobacco company; the country — its culture, smoking patterns and trends, and its restrictions on advertising and promotion; and whether the campaign is aimed at a particular subgroup of women, defined by characteristics such as age, ethnicity and affluence.

In the USA and Europe several complementary strategies have been adopted, the most important being:

Dr Amos is Lecturer in Health Education, Department of Community Medicine, Usher Institute, University of Edinburgh Medical School, Teviot Place, Edinburgh EH8 9AG, Scotland.

- promoting images designed to appeal specifically to women;
- producing new brands for women only;
- using women's magazines to direct advertising at women.

Creating the right image

"The image is luxury and sophistication, confidence and style, as manufacturers pursue half of America's smokers: the women."

Tobacco Reporter (6)

Since the 1920s, when women first began to be targeted, various attractive images and themes have been used to encourage smoking, promote its social acceptability, and highlight the supposed desirable attributes of particular brands of cigarettes. A number of times smoking has been advertised as being glamorous, sophisticated, fun, romantic, sexually attractive, healthy, sporty, sociable, relaxing, calming, emancipated or liberated, rebellious and — last but definitely not least — an aid to slimming (8–10). These images and themes have been conveyed by a variety of means ranging from straightforward verbal and visual messages, for example, advertisements featuring young attractive women and slogans such as "You've come a long way, baby", to the more subtle visual imagery of luxury represented by silk or satin and by symbols of success or high style such as expensive and exotic locations.

The message that smoking helps you stay slim appeared very early in the USA with the infamous ad of the 1930s encouraging women to reach for a cigarette "instead of a sweet". This message continues to be promoted today, although more subtly, through the association of slender female models with slender cigarettes. For example, in a recent German advertisement that

depicted three people smoking different versions of the same brand of cigarette, it was the woman who was smoking the "slim line" cigarette.

Even in the United Kingdom and other countries that have more stringent restrictions on the content of tobacco advertisements, words such as long, slim and slender frequently appear in advertising copy. While they supposedly describe the merits of the cigarettes, clearly they also serve to associate the product with the aspirations of a large section of the target audience: women.

Cigarette manufacturers and advertisers argue that these messages and imagery merely encourage brand-switching or sustain brand loyalty among those who already smoke. However, there is increasing research evidence that such advertisements serve to encourage and reinforce smoking among the young (11–13). A recent report by the New Zealand Toxic Substances Board (13) has

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concluded that brand-switching accounts for only 7% of the economic return from maintaining tobacco advertising and sponsorship. In the developing world, enormous amounts of money are spent on tobacco ads directed at women — even in places such as Hong Kong, where only some 3% of women are smokers.

Women are targeted through a variety of other promotional activities as well. These have included special offers such as free silk stockings, contests, free cosmetics, and clothing carrying the brand logo. Another popular method is the sponsorship of women's sports (e.g., tennis) which receive

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widespread media coverage, and of women's events such as fashion shows. Again, the aim is to enhance the brand's image by associating it with socially valued activities.

For women only—women's brands

"Question—what have Kim, Benson and Hedges Longer Length, and More got in common? ... All three brands are calculated to appeal to the growing women's sector of the cigarette market."

Tobacco (1)

The targeting of women entered a new phase in the late 1960s with the launch in the USA of Kim, the first of a new wave of brands aimed solely at women. These "women only" brands use advertising and packaging which emphasize feminine characteristics and positive female images. For example, Eve—with its archetypal female name—has a filter tip decorated with a flower motif; Satin has a special luxury satin-like paper tip. Then there are the "designer" brands such as Ritz, which carries

the logo of Yves St. Laurent, and Cartier. As mentioned above, there has also been an explosion in the number of extra-long (over 100 mm) cigarettes, which are particularly popular among women. A recent arrival in Europe is Vogue, a new brand described by *Tobacco* as a "stylish type of cigarette with obvious feminine appeal, being slim and therefore highly distinctive" (14). This has been followed by Capri, the world's first "ultra-slim" cigarette, and Dakota, launched in the USA for "virile females" (15).

Women's magazines—readers' health or magazines' wealth?

"For a number of years women's magazines have been a favourite advertising medium for all the best selling uni-sex brands."

Tobacco (16)

In many countries, particularly where tobacco advertising is banned from television, the most popular medium for targeting women is women's magazines. Cigarette advertising in these magazines has grown substantially. In the USA eight of the twenty magazines receiving the most cigarette advertising are women's magazines (9). In the United Kingdom revenue from tobacco ads in women's magazines increased by 50% in real terms between 1977 and 1982 (17) and by 10% between 1984 and 1988 (18). In 1988 nearly £ 9.7 million was spent on cigarette advertisements compared with some £ 7.2 million in 1984. A recent survey of the top women's magazines in 14 European countries found that 72% of them accepted cigarette advertisements (19).

There are several reasons why women's magazines are so popular with tobacco advertisers.

- They have an enormous number of readers. In the United Kingdom around

Magazines in the European survey which did not accept cigarette advertisements, 1988

		Reason for non-acceptance		
		Total media ban	Partial media ban	Magazine's policy
Finland	<i>Gloria</i>	x		
	<i>Me Naiset</i>	x		
France	<i>Vogue</i>			x
Greece	<i>Domino</i>			x
	<i>Seventeen</i>			x
Ireland/ United Kingdom	<i>Company</i>		x	
	<i>Cosmopolitan</i>		x	
Kingdom	<i>Elle</i>		x	
	<i>Just</i>		x	
	<i>Seventeen</i>			
	<i>Marie Claire</i>		x	
	<i>Smash Hits</i>		x	
	<i>Vogue</i>		x	
Italy	<i>Vogue</i>	x		
Netherlands	<i>Yes</i>			x
Portugal	<i>Elle</i>	x		
	<i>Guia</i>	x		
	<i>Maria</i>	x		
	<i>Marie Claire</i>	x		
	<i>Maxima</i>	x		
	<i>Muhler</i>	x		
	<i>Moderna</i>			
Spain	<i>Greca</i>			x
Sweden	<i>Frida</i>		x	

Source: reference 19 and unpublished data.

half of all women are regular readers of women's magazines (17, 18).

- They are read by women of all ages and backgrounds. Hence, through the careful selection of magazines, specific groups such as young women or black women can be reached. A recent survey in the USA found more tobacco ads in women's and youth magazines than in magazines targeted at other population segments (20).
- Magazines can lend a spurious social acceptability or stylish image to smoking. In a British study the health editor of a high-fashion magazine said that publication of an ad in that magazine was "as good as a stamp of acceptability" (17).

- The presence of tobacco ads in a magazine may dilute the impact of articles on tobacco and health. Alternatively, they may induce magazine editors to downplay this issue or avoid covering it altogether. There are numerous examples of magazines in the USA which have allegedly lost tobacco advertising because they reported on the adverse health effects of smoking, or which have reportedly refused to cover this health issue or altered articles to de-emphasize its importance because they were worried about losing lucrative sources of advertising revenue (21). New evidence from the USA shows that women's magazines as a group are more sensitive to the presence of cigarette advertising than are other magazines (22).

Thus women's magazines represent a battleground between the competing interests of, on the one hand, the tobacco companies and advertisers wishing to target their massive female audience and the magazines wishing to maximize their own revenues, and, on the other, editors and journalists wishing to report the facts

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without bias and to protect the health of their readers. At present, the tobacco interests seem to be winning the battle.

Recent studies of women's magazines in the USA (23), the United Kingdom (18), and in Europe (19) have found that smoking, a major cause of ill-health and premature death among their readers, is receiving scant

coverage in the medium most trusted by women — women's magazines. Only 29% of British women's magazines had published a major article on smoking and health in the year preceding the survey (18). The preliminary findings of a survey of the top women's magazines in 14 countries in Europe showed that only half had recently

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covered this issue (19). Indeed, some of the editors said that they would never cover it or had stopped covering it. The coverage that was given was often brief and considerably less than that given to tobacco advertisements. In the top French magazines, for example, only 24 articles appeared in 1988, as compared with 123 pages of tobacco advertisements.

Magazines' attitudes to coverage of the health hazards of smoking varied considerably, both in the United Kingdom and in other European countries. One key factor was the personal interest and commitment of the editor with regard to smoking and health. Another factor, though many editors denied its importance, was the desire not to offend tobacco advertisers. The following candid comments came from the advertising department of one of the top-selling British women's magazines. "The difficulty is that we take money from these people. It does not matter how much we take from them, it's difficult for us to endorse anything that goes against the companies. Even editorially, they have to go carefully. The tobacco companies are very sensitive about their image" (17).

In the British and United States studies, the magazines that were most dependent on tobacco advertising gave least coverage to the health hazards of smoking. As remarked by a well-known editor who has come herself from the advertising world, "I think 'who needs somebody you're paying millions of dollars a year to come back and bite you on the ankle?'" (23).

Not only do many magazines avoid reporting on smoking and health while giving considerable space to tobacco ads. They also feature pictures of glamorous models smoking in their fashion pages. The European survey found that a third of the magazines had no policy on the editorial portrayal of positive images of smoking (19). Fewer than half said that they would not publish such pictures. Magazines in Denmark, France and Spain had the worst records. For example, in 1988 one major French fashion magazine published 20 fashion photos depicting models smoking, and another published 25. The double standards of many magazines was illustrated in one issue of a Spanish magazine, where an article on the health of Spanish women — which included a section on smoking — was sandwiched between cigarette advertisements and photos of fashion models smoking.

The way forward

Numerous expert national and international bodies that have looked at the issue of tobacco and health, including the WHO Expert Committee on Smoking Control (24) and the Royal College of Physicians in London (25), have all reached the same conclusion. Smoking and smoking-related disease will decline only if a comprehensive approach is taken to tackling the problem. This includes a ban on all tobacco advertising and promotion.

Many countries have already adopted such a ban and many more are considering it. In the meantime, action should be taken to reduce the tobacco industry's ability to target key groups such as young people and women. Just as many women's magazines now play a negative role by allowing companies to promote their lethal product, they can also play an important positive role by encouraging their younger readers not to start smoking and helping their older readers to kick the habit. Women's magazines throughout the world could take the lead in protecting and improving the health of their readers by adopting these ground rules.

- Follow the example of several magazines in Europe and refuse to accept cigarette advertisements (see table). Although most of the magazines listed in the table were not allowed to accept advertisements because of national laws or regulations, five had voluntarily decided to refuse tobacco advertisements. These were French *Vogue*, Greek *Domino* and *Seventeen*, Spanish *Greca*, and Netherlands *Yes*.
- Give regular coverage to aspects of smoking including health hazards, how to give up smoking, and non-smokers' rights.
- In the case of a teenage or youth magazine, make a special effort to increase awareness of the special risks that smoking poses to young women, such as smoking while being on the pill, and smoking and pregnancy.
- Avoid the use of glamorous pictures of people, including fashion models, smoking.

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If you know of any women's magazines that carry tobacco advertising you might like to bring this article to the attention of their Editors.