COUNTERING CORPORATE TACTICS FOR BETTER CANCER PREVENTION

By: Gauden Galea and Lea Castro

Summary: A range of behavioural and environmental factors lead to an increased incidence of cancer. Many of these are preventable, but corporate interests and actions have contributed to undermining public health efforts to tackle them. Examples of tactics include fear mongering about regulation, burnishing reputations with funds as corporate social responsibility, recruiting front groups, denying the impact of their products or deflecting attention from their harms, and attempting to shape the evidence base and divide the public health community. It is therefore crucial for practitioners and decision-makers to strengthen their own awareness of the typical tactics in the corporate playbook and plan for effective responses.

Keywords: Neoplasms Prevention and Control, Alcohol Industry, Tobacco Industry, Corporate Policy Influence, Public Policy

Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 30–50% of all cancer cases are preventable, with tobacco use the main preventable cause of cancer in Europe. Other major risk factors are alcohol consumption, overweight and obesity, a poor diet and insufficient physical activity. Exposure to the sun, to sources of radiation, and to other chemical carcinogens including from the beauty industry also increase the risk of developing various forms of cancer.

The increased use of many of these products is related to the commercial determinants of cancer, which share the three characteristics of:

1. a clear causal link with cancer;
2. a defined commercial interest as the main driver of their production and sale;
3. a transnational ecosystem of producers, retailers, marketers, politicians, banks, trade associations, think tanks, some scientists, and other entities devoted to the sale of these commodities, fitting the definition of what has been called the “corporate consumption complex”.

Although similar tactics are also used in other industries affecting cancer prevention, including the pharmaceutical, chemical and food industries, it is beyond the scope of this article to review the entire landscape of risk and industries. Rather this paper will focus on tobacco and alcohol, for the following reasons:

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• They are both legally sold addictive substances which have been proven Group 1 carcinogens, notably by the International Agency for Research on Cancer. They cause a significant proportion of cancer, and a lot of experience has been accumulated about their control;

• There are similarities in the playbook of the industries behind them, both acting to create policy environments that favour their trade, and averting the attention of policymakers and the population from their harms or from effective action to control their consumption;

• Studying their tactics provides some insight on the behaviour of other industries;

• In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, both industries are behaving in ways that attempt to rehabilitate their image or make them appear as allies in the global efforts to control the pandemic.


Figure 1: Channels and Tactics: Points of Intervention on the Commercial Determinants of Cancer Risk

Sources: Adapted and expanded from a model in Kickbusch et al.

Tactics in the corporate playbook include fear, funds, fronts, denialism, deflection, and division

The Core Determinants of cancer

Tobacco and alcohol each independently increase the risk of cancer at any level of consumption. Europe is one of the largest markets for alcohol sales and is the region with the highest proportion of disease and premature mortality due to alcohol. According to Eurostat, in 2019 households in the EU spent 4% of total expenditure on alcohol beverages and tobacco products. In Europe, approximately 20% of the adult population are tobacco users and one in five people aged 15 years and older report heavy drinking at least once a week in the European Union. The European Region has the highest average of current tobacco use among adolescents.

Actions by tobacco and alcohol industries may thus be regarded as a core set of commercial determinants of cancer. The evidence for their causal link with cancer is incontrovertible. This independent and synergistic carcinogenicity of these two substances, combined with the high burden of cancer attributable to them, and the availability of highly cost-effective interventions, make tobacco and alcohol control the litmus test for the credibility of any programme that purports to prevent cancer.

The Core Tactics

The classic definition of commercial determinants of health examines the drivers, channels, and outcomes of corporate power and influence, summarised in Figure 1. In defining points of intervention, public health practitioners have relatively little influence on the drivers, which tend to be market forces that often transcend national boundaries. Nor can they directly transform the outcomes, beyond using them as performance markers and indicators for monitoring, evaluation, and the subsequent proposal of corrective actions.

From the practitioners’ point of view, the points of intervention on commercial determinants of cancer include limiting or blocking the channels of power for corporations and countering the tactics that are typical of their playbook.

Public health action on the recommended policy actions that WHO has named “best buys” due to their cost-effectiveness (i.e. price, availability, and marketing), must include counter-tactics to the corporate playbook. Corporate interests will use their channels and tactics to resist these changes. The public health response needs to find ways to limit the use of the main channels of corporate influence if the ultimate policy goals are to be achieved, including:

• adopting comprehensive bans on advertisement, promotion and sponsorship,

• regulating lobbying,

• controlling supply chains, and

• setting boundaries on the exercise of corporate citizenship.

This article adds to the classical model and further suggests a focus on the main tactics in the corporate playbook as a foundation for planning counter-responses. Multiple sources were used in compiling this list, most prominently, the Tobacco Playbook, TobaccoTactics.org, and a systematic review of the alcohol industry response to marketing regulation. Tactics in the corporate playbook include fear, funds, fronts, denialism, deflection, and division (see Table 1).

Corporate Tactics in the COVID-19 Era

The pandemic has stressed the corporate sector in several ways and provided them with both opportunities and threats. It is useful to examine how the tactics of
Fear mongering by industry takes diverse forms. It includes lawsuits or threats of lawsuits on the grounds of infringing industry’s commercial rights including in intellectual property and economic freedom. It also includes generating fear that constraining the industry would have a disproportionate impact on the economy and on employment.

Industry funds are used to win over support to protect corporate interests from interference. These include direct support to political campaigns and politicians, corporate social responsibility efforts to whitewash or “greenwash” * their credentials, and, where allowed, using sponsorship and marketing budgets to gain allies in the media, sport, and cultural scenes.

Corporate power is exerted through front groups that claim to represent the interests of the public or of other industrial sectors. Curbs on public smoking or imposition of licensing hours, for instance, are often initially opposed by the tourism and hospitality industries as being detrimental to their viability, even though these industries are usually found to benefit commercially when the laws are enacted and enforced. Corporate interests also use front groups (such as “smoker’s rights” groups) to undermine the confidence of policymakers by belittling or denying the support of the public for effective public health measures.

It is a reflexive action of the corporate sector to deny the link between its products and health effects, by impugning the findings of health research or the researchers involved. Denialism was a strong feature of the tobacco industry response to the initial findings linking tobacco and cancer and has since become an established part of the playbook for other industries. This systematic deployment of doubt with the support of corporate interests has also, at times, acquired an ideological and political motive.

Industries deflect attention on them and their products using several tactics. They claim health benefits (e.g., “the benefits of red wine”). They fund alternative research directly or through foundations, such as the Foundation for a Smoke Free World to create confusion. They also deflect liability by running campaigns focused on individual responsibility, blaming the consumers rather than the industry itself, for instance, in the ubiquitous “drink responsibly” campaigns. Faced with the prospect of regulation, industry reverts to the trope that voluntary agreements, self-regulation, partial bans, or even public-private partnership are more democratic or market-friendly.

While the resolution of alternate hypotheses is inherent to the scientific method, corporate tactics have used it to delay effective action on curbing consumption of their products. The claims of protective effects of alcohol under certain conditions creates a language divide, constraining public health work to addressing the “harmful use of alcohol”, implying there is a beneficial use and obfuscating the fact that any level of alcohol consumption is carcinogenic.

Both industries have adapted to these challenges. The tobacco and alcohol industries have both capitalised on the pandemic. They have increased their access to senior policymakers through large donations to countries since the early months of the pandemic, especially so in countries home to large numbers of smokers. They deflected attention from the harm of tobacco by supporting access to personal protective equipment for health care workers. Economic stresses provided opportunities for industry lobbyists to work to delay introducing or implementing tobacco control measures.

Notably, while it is more feasible for high-income countries to reject donations from the industry to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, it is less so for low- and middle-income countries. Such donations help strengthen the relationships between governments and the industry and they are used as leverage. For example, during lockdowns, the tobacco industry has been successful at lobbying to keep their products on essential goods rosters and to continue cigarette production despite a ban on non-essential manufacturing.

During lockdowns in the United Kingdom and Australia, alcohol brands intensified their social media advertising and adapted their messaging, deflecting from the dangers of consumption, and exploiting the zeitgeist (“We’re in this together”) to encourage stockpiling of alcohol and virtual drinking events among friends. Donations towards pandemic prevention efforts allowed brands to further distract attention from the harm of their products, and provided a “COVID-washing” opportunity, allowing the industry to claim itself a partner in national efforts to control the transmission of infection while at the same time promoting consumption of their products. Nowhere is this more evident than in campaigns that provided alcoholic drinks as an incentive for getting vaccinated.

Addressing the Commercial Determinants of Cancer Risk

This article has provided a brief survey of two core determinants of cancer risk, extracting lessons on corporate tactics, and expanding on the classical model of commercial determinants from the perspective of health advocates and policymakers. Similar channels of influence and tactics are used by other industries with products potentially...
contributing to the cancer burden: the food industry, the beauty and tanning industries, radon and asbestos in the construction industry, and producers of potentially carcinogenic chemicals used in households and occupational settings.

In the pandemic era and beyond, the influence of these commercial determinants is likely to grow, as governments may find themselves in need of financial support during economic setbacks or become more reluctant to apply measures to control price, marketing, or availability of carcinogenic products such as tobacco and alcohol. It behoves public health advocates to make better use of the provisions of international agreements, such as the WHO FCTC or the WHO Global Strategy to Reduce the Harmful Use of Alcohol to limit the influence of the corporate sector as well as the evidence and guidance of decades of experience in core determinants of cancer to hem in harmful tactics.

**Public health action must include counter-tactics to the corporate playbook**

It needs to be emphasised that the control of tobacco and alcohol requires effective control of price, availability, and marketing, among other “best buys”. This should be the fundamental strategy for public health policymakers. To achieve these strategic aims, public health advocates need to adopt effective counter-tactics to those employed by industry:

1. limiting the channels of influence (marketing, lobbying, licit and illicit supply chains, and the rights and responsibilities of corporate entities) and
2. pre-empting, responding to and regulating the tactics used by companies to resist public health “best buys”.

The Guidelines for implementation of Article 5.3 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) provide specific recommendations for addressing tobacco industry interference in public health policies. These include establishing measures to limit interactions with the tobacco industry and ensuring the transparency of those interactions that occur, as well as rejecting partnerships and non-binding or non-enforceable agreements with the tobacco industry.

Industry will often claim to be part of the solution and not just part of the problem, proposing nebulous “win-win” solutions that never truly work. Before politicians are lured into spurious partnerships, they need to consider their legal obligations under the FCTC, and the European Directives and the conflicts of interest involved. This extends to other industries such as the “Big Food” transnational companies, not just to tobacco and alcohol.

The authors would like to acknowledge the contributions of Angela Ciobanu, Technical Officer Tobacco and Eric Carlin, Technical Advisor Alcohol, Office for Prevention and Control of NCDs, WHO Regional Office for Europe. Also, Carina Ferreira-Borges, Angela Ciobanu, and Eric Carlin for their insightful review and comments during the drafting of the paper.

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