

Tobacco, lies and children: a Fiji perspective

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Introduction

In 'Tobacco Control' Hastings commented recently that, *"using the best known product in the world Coca-Cola or Coke; has become the American way of life across vastly different cultures.....and provides mundane products with distinctive values and personalities"*¹.

Similarly, the "branding" of tobacco products and their subsequent marketing remains one of the mainstays of the Tobacco companies' strategy to promote their products.

In the Pacific Islands, as in many other parts of the rest of the world, *Benson and Hedges* and *Rothmans* are household names as a result of such strategic marketing.

This paper will examine the tactics used by the tobacco industry to achieve this and particularly how young people and children have been targeted in Fiji. In so doing the paper will reflect on recent local experiences of tobacco advocacy and suggest some ideas public health practitioners might find useful in developing their "tobacco or health" plans.

Advertising through sport

Young and old alike in Fiji value sporting activities; representative players of rugby and soccer especially, are universally popular and admired. A 1997 survey in Fiji showed young people, aged 15-25 years, identified rugby and soccer players as role models².

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Tobacco companies have extensively used sports as a medium to promote their product. They sponsor the annual provincial rugby championship, the '*Benson and Hedges Trophy*' and the annual soccer competition, the '*Rothmans Cup*'. Such sponsorship provides opportunities for both direct and indirect marketing of their brands, including the provision of "free" cigarettes to spectators, many of whom are young people.

This sports sponsorship along with significant marketing provide the "desired image" for these brands in Fiji.

Arnett and Terhanian have shown the advertising of a specific brand not only made smoking appealing but also influenced young people to want to smoke cigarettes of that brand; they comment that *'young smokers pay more attention to cigarette ads because they provide them with an important benefit: they make them feel better about their smoking'*³.

Moreover an attitudinal survey in Fiji in 1997 found that, based on its promotion through sports, young people perceived tobacco as nothing but healthy, stating in the survey that 'rugby and soccer players smoke anyway'. More generally in the survey young people stated they started smoking as a result of peer pressure, and saw no harm in the habit as their parents and other adult role models smoked⁴.

On the local front a submission to the smoking debate produced by the local tobacco manufacturing company titled 'The Right to Choose'⁵ states, *'There has been no surge in sales and no special targeting of Fiji consumers. In fact sales have remained virtually the same'*. Contrary to their claim, consumers have been specially targeted through their love of sports. The majority of rugby followers are ethnic Fijians, the prevalence of smoking in Fijian males is approximately 40%. Soccer followers are usually Indian males where the prevalence of smoking is similarly high at 44%⁶. In both codes young women are increasingly following the sports.

The above tobacco company submission also stated, *'We do not aim our advertising at children and our promotion*

In the urban centers, young people take up smoking as a result of heavy marketing and peer pressure. Tobacco companies know how the young and the old alike value sporting activities in the Pacific.

generally is not based on a "hard sell" to recruit new smokers'. This is directly at variance with the practices observed.

Loose cigarettes

Another aspect of 'effective marketing' arising from the 1997 survey relates to the consumption of loose cigarettes in Fiji. This has increased significantly in recent years, especially amongst young people. Therefore the argument put forward in the "Right to Choose" that 'promotion generally is not based on a "hard sell" to recruit new smokers' is again at variance with observed fact; retailers across the country ranking the sale of loose cigarettes as the most profitable tobacco product.

"You've got the Power"

Another strategy currently being used by tobacco companies to target urban youth in Fiji is the marketing of a promotional package in secondary schools entitled 'You've got the Power'. The program pretends to empower young people to make their own decisions. The 1997 survey found, not surprisingly, young people welcomed this idea, disliking authority and welcoming the implied sense of independence. Sadly the program omits any mention to the "problems" with conscious decision making in relation to addictive products. Nicotine still has "the power".

Culture and tradition

The urban methods of targeting youth mentioned above are also used in rural areas, where culture and tradition are particularly strong. In addition strategies are used which exploit traditional values such as social cohesiveness.

One particular aspect of this communal cohesiveness is the giving or exchanging of gifts between families wherever they may reside. Cigarettes have become amongst the most prestigious gifts expected by rural dwellers from their relatives from the towns and cities. Cigarette production during the month of December is doubled to accommodate the demand for gifts and also promotions or free giveaways during the festive seasons.

Kava and smoking

Another potent force influencing smoking habits is the consumption of kava, especially in the rural areas. Yaqona or Kava drinking is a Fijian drink consumed traditionally in ceremonial activities, but now increasingly at any gathering

or function, especially of men. It has therefore become a major cash crop for Fiji farmers.

The 1997 survey again found that 65% of rural men smoke, but the majority stated that they only smoke when they are drinking kava. Kava drinking in villages takes place almost every night. In the kava session cigarettes are smoked continuously until the session is completed, usually in the early hours of the morning. Depending on its duration, respondents have indicated smoking up to 40 cigarettes in one session.

Lessons learnt from the experience in Fiji

The first lesson is that tobacco companies actively influence young people through the use of sporting role models. However using similar tactics including social marketing methods, successful sports people and peers were recruited as spokespeople for the campaign 'Winners Don't

Smoke, Be Smart Don't Start'. These role models were athletes aged 15-25 who were winners at the annual athletics event. Winners of the relay race were identified as the most popular athletes. Attempts to use rugby and soccer players were unsuccessful because

of the tobacco sponsorship linkages.

Basic messages replied to comments from respondents in the focus group discussions. Thus, the messages stated 'smoking is not cool, is not sexy and there is nothing sophisticated about it', instead of 'smoking kills'. Subsequent evaluation of the campaign showed that the youth wished to know more about what smoking does to the body despite no direct references being made in the campaign to this.

In addition, there was an initiative where health workers were trained about smoking cessation strategies.

Another major initiative of the campaign was advocating for the 'Tobacco Bill', which was finally passed in October 1998. This bill includes measures to restrict the sales of cigarettes to minors (under 18 years old), ban the sale of loose cigarettes, restrict advertising and ban smoking in public places.

Another lesson is that the tobacco industry has been diligent in understanding the socio-cultural workings of Fijian society and using this knowledge to promote their product. The term 'social capital' illustrates Fijian communities well, in that it is easy to mobilize communities to do something for the communal good since 'social capital'

Youth interviewed during the prevalence survey also generally indicated they started smoking as a result of peer pressure, and saw no harm in the habit as their parents and other adult role models smoked.

actually exists and does not have to be artificially built. Yavusa or clans exist for this just this purpose.

The tobacco companies sponsored these in a major tourism initiative, so that when one travels along one of the major roads in Fiji one often sees major 'Benson & Hedges' and 'Rothmans' billboards with the name of the village underneath. This was as a result of an initiative by the tourism industry in Fiji to beautify the nation. The initiative was sponsored by the tobacco industry. This tourism initiative mobilized communities to beautify their villages. A clear link was therefore established between the brand name and a seemingly philanthropic gesture.

By contrast, a lesson on how social capital in Fiji can be used to contribute to improving quality of life can be learnt from the example in the Nabila village, located on the western coast of Viti Levu.

Nabila village has been smoke free since 1990⁷. The initiative began as a smoking cessation campaign run by a 'medical team' of American surfers. However this did not work at the individual level. Even after educational talks on the effects of smoking individuals did not give up smoking. It is only after the village elders were consulted and the community as a whole came to a consensus that they decided they should all give up smoking, did it actually happen.

Based on the fact that we are communal people, individualistic programs will not work for us but rather programs that have the consensus and concerted effort of people working within their traditional networks to support health initiatives.

These villagers, after convincing themselves of the problems with smoking, developed their own highly effective smoking cessation program. On the night of 28th of July 1990 they bought all the cigarettes they could and smoked to the point of nausea. This was followed by a ceremony in which the remaining cigarettes were destroyed. A long kava ceremony, which began at 6pm and lasted until 12 midnight, took place. It was reported that all the evil spirits of the cigarettes were allowed to enter the remaining kava and the kava was then thrown to the ground to stop all desire to smoke. The commitment set by the villagers was further put to the test after four of the villagers relapsed and suffered negative consequences. This proved to the villagers that this was a 'sau' or a curse instituted by the kava ceremony.

The Nabila village initiative has been implemented in communities in the United States with very little success. What is unique in the Fijian context is the 'social capital' or social trust already exists within communities. This makes it much easier to mobilize communities to positively change their behavior. This is potentially an important channel to influence changing behavior, specifically in rural communities.

Another important influence is the role of the church, since it is a sub-culture within the traditional culture. Alan Tippett (Fiji anthropologist) said, "Christianity is interwoven within the fabric of the Fijian culture". Working through these religious organisations adds more impetus to anti smoking campaigns.

Conclusion

In summary, the Fiji experience signifies the importance of looking closely at indigenous cultures, values and traditional networks and the strategies of the tobacco companies when considering the design and implementation of anti smoking initiatives .

Traditional values are key instruments in sustaining behavior change in indigenous populations. Identification of these instruments is important in terms of planning smoking cessation programs with these population groups.

Individualistic programs will not work in communal societies, rather programs that have the consensus and support of the society as a whole, and using traditional networks and methods to promote and support these initiatives.

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