

Tricks of the Trade: Strategies for Tobacco Advertising

Tobacco advertisers use many different methods to get consumers to buy their products. Often, what they try to sell is less the product itself, and more a lifestyle or image. Why do you think they do that?

Here are some tobacco advertising “tricks of the trade:”

The Cool Factor. By associating celebrities and “ideal” people with fun, excitement and attitude, tobacco advertisers work hard to convince consumers that if they don’t smoke, they’re not cool. (There’s even a brand of cigarette called “Kool”!)

Celebrity Smokers. Although tobacco companies can’t use celebrity spokespeople in their ads, researchers have noted an increase in smoking by characters in movies – especially movies with teen appeal. Magazine photos of musicians, models and actors smoking also promote the idea that smoking is glamorous.

Dreams and Insecurities. Tobacco advertisers use different strategies to attract males and females. Cigarette ads geared to young women play on the idea of being “liberated” and in control – while at the same time taking advantage of insecurities about body image. Brands geared towards women often have words like “slim” or “slender” in the product name, or use extremely thin models in their ads. Cigarette ads geared to young men use rugged, independent, masculine-looking models, such as the classic image of the Marlboro Man. These models are usually shown participating in sports or outdoor activities, or surrounded by beautiful women.

Friends, Fun and Excitement. Tobacco ads try to create the impression that everyone smokes – and has lots of fun while doing it. Images of happy smokers at parties, in restaurants and even in the great outdoors reinforce the connection between smoking and good times.

Humor. Tobacco ads often use humor to attract customers. Because smoking is becoming less acceptable in society, humor in tobacco ads frequently pokes fun at non-smokers, or at those who feel that smoking is unhealthy.

Ideal People. Models in tobacco ads appear to be perfect. They’re usually fit, attractive and cool-looking. Women in tobacco ads tend to be sexy and alluring, while the men are tough and masculine.

Individuality. Tobacco ads – especially those that try to attract young people – often portray smoking as a sign of independence, rebellion, and maturity. The Virginia Slims slogan “Find your own voice,” is an example of this strategy.

Omission. It’s no secret that tobacco advertisers don’t tell you the full story about cigarettes. Nobody ever sees a cancer patient, a wrinkled face, or a dead infant (a significant percentage of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome is caused by parents smoking) in a tobacco advertisement.

Positive Lifestyle Advertising. Cigarette firms have long used “pictures of health” in cigarette ads to foster smoking as an acceptable, healthy lifestyle. Ads like these want consumers to associate smoking with outdoor sport and recreational activities such as tennis, bicycling, sailing and horseback riding.

Product Placement. Cigarette ads can pop up in the most unusual places, such as video games. This is especially true of racing or driving games, where players drive by virtual “billboards” advertising cigarettes.

Retail Promotion. The tobacco industry pays stores to exhibit counter-top displays and promotional posters for tobacco products and events. Smaller convenience stores are most likely to promote tobacco products in this way. One study found convenience stores were more likely to carry tobacco displays and other promotions if they were located close to schools and malls.