

A day in the life of an advertising man: review of internal documents from the UK tobacco industry's principal advertising agencies

Gerard Hastings, Lynn MacFadyen

Centre for Tobacco Control Research, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow G4 0RQ
Gerard Hastings
director
Lynn MacFadyen
research officer

Correspondence to:
G Hastings
g.hastings@strath.ac.uk

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In July 1999 the Health Select Committee began an investigation into the British tobacco industry to determine what action it had taken and was taking in response to the known harmful effects of smoking and the addictive nature of tobacco. One of the committee's key achievements was to force the disclosure of a large quantity of internal company documents, including—for the first time—material from the UK tobacco industry's leading advertising agencies.

These documents cover all matters to do with tobacco promotion. They shed a unique light on the social research that has been done over the past 20 years to establish if and how tobacco promotion affects smoking behaviour. This research has been extensive but by necessity limited to studying observable outputs. The documents complete the picture by disclosing the inputs. In the process the documents corroborate the key findings of research and also yield much about the motivations and mindset of the UK tobacco industry.

Methods

The select committee identified five UK advertising agencies with clients in the tobacco industry, and using its statutory powers it requested internal documents covering tobacco related business in the previous five years. On our advice it requested particular types of document (box 1). Between them the agencies submitted 16 boxes containing several thousand pages of material. We have no way of knowing what proportion of the requested documents was actually sent, but given the select committee's standing and powers it is unlikely that many were withheld. It is possible that documents may have been lost or destroyed before the investigation.

In 1995 Silverman argued that the qualitative analysis of a large body of data is best conducted by using key themes.¹ In this case the obvious source of such themes was the literature on the processes and effects of tobacco marketing. A review of this literature showed four key recurring questions: Does tobacco advertising affect consumption as well as brand share? Does the industry target young people? What part does sponsorship play? What other forms of promotion are there and what part do they play? We analysed the documents on the basis of these questions. The extent to which the themes were addressed varied between the different types of document. For example, the contact reports were simply brief minutes of business decisions made, and much of the market research material was unremarkable statistical data about market trends. In contrast, the creative briefs and qualitative market research were extremely revealing, not so much in what they said but in what they assumed about the four questions.

Summary points

Tobacco advertising is intended to increase consumption as well as brand share and has a powerful effect on young people

Sponsorship and advertising work in exactly the same way and are only a small part of tobacco marketing

Tobacco advertisers are driven by a commercial imperative to increase sales, and they show no concern for the ethical or public health consequences of their actions

Voluntary agreements simply do not work and must be replaced by statutory measures

Key questions

Does tobacco advertising affect consumption as well as brand share?

The tobacco industry argues that its sole concern is to encourage "brand switching" among current adult smokers and not to increase consumption in itself. Studies that have focused on advertising have modelled fluctuations in advertising spend with changes in smoking prevalence,²⁻⁴ differences in smoking prevalence in countries with varying levels of advertising controls,^{5,6} and changes in smoking prevalence after the introduction of an advertising ban.^{7,8} A review of these studies undertaken by the Economics and Operational Research Division of the Department of Health concluded that advertising encourages consumption as well as brand switching among current smokers and may assist in recruiting young people to the habit.⁸

Does the industry target young people?

Around 80% of UK smokers begin smoking as a teenager, making children and young people vulnerable potential targets.⁹ Consumer research has shown that tobacco advertising is having a powerful effect on the smoking attitudes and behaviour of young people.¹⁰⁻¹³ Research has shown that the use of imagery and positive association in tobacco advertising has a notable impact on young people.¹⁴ Children are also brand conscious and, compared with adults, are much more likely to smoke the most popular and well advertised products.¹⁵⁻¹⁷

What part does sponsorship play?

Research has concluded that sponsorship works in a similar manner to advertising, by increasing brand

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References for the internal documents appear on the BMJ's website

awareness, promoting strong brand associations, and easing the decision to take up smoking.¹⁸⁻²⁰ For instance, research has concluded that a preference for Formula One motor racing sponsored by cigarette manufacturers was a significant independent variable in progression to regular smoking.²¹

What other forms of promotion are there, and what part do they play?

It is not just advertising and sponsorship that have come under scrutiny. Other forms of promotion, including cigarette coupons, brand stretching (non-tobacco products with tobacco brand names), product packaging, point of sale materials, free give aways, product placement, and even the use of the internet might have effects on behaviour and attitudes to smoking.²²⁻²³ For example, Pierce et al found that tobacco promotion, including free gifts bearing tobacco brands, were causally related to the uptake of smoking among adolescents.²⁴

Results

Does tobacco advertising affect consumption as well as brand share?

The internal documents revealed a desire to increase consumption as well as brand share. Attempts to expand the market (and slow its contraction) took three forms. Firstly, specific campaigns supporting the smoker and smoking were mooted and developed. One such effort aimed to promote the idea that “smoking can be a delight for everyone if it is done right.”²⁵ Other documents advocated “active support

Box 1: Documents sought from advertising agencies

Contact reports between client and agency

Minutes of meetings between the advertising agency (usually represented by a member of the client service team—for example, an account executive or an account director) and the advertiser

Client brief

Documents prepared by the advertiser to tell the agency about a proposed campaign

Creative brief

Details of the agency's response to the client brief, used to guide the creative team internally

Media brief

Used to guide the purchasing of media space and time, including channel selection and targeting strategy

Media schedule

Used to monitor implications of the media strategy; outlines when and where the advertising has been placed

Advertising budgets

Details of advertising budgets over time and across media

Market research reports

All modern advertising is subjected to rigorous consumer research throughout its development and use—for example, it guides the development of pretest campaigns before transmission and evaluates effectiveness afterwards. Documents include research reports, proposals, and presentations

Links to other forms of communication

Mass media advertising is only a part of the picture; careful links are drawn with other forms of communication such as point of sale, sales promotions, pack design, direct mail, loyalty schemes, and merchandise, to produce a synergistic effect

Links to the marketing strategy

Similarly, communications of all sorts have to fit with the rest of the marketing strategy, especially product formulation, pricing, and distribution

Box 2: Antigovernment advertising concepts taken into consumer research

(quoted from miscellaneous documents)²⁵

Restrictions on cigarettes is just the beginning

How soon will it be before the government starts to interfere in other areas of our lives?

Soon all foods that are potentially “dangerous” (like butter, coffee, and sugar) may be restricted in the same way as cigarettes are

Will restrictions on cigarettes be limited to marketing?

Although the government is only talking about restricting marketing on cigarettes at the moment, we may well see other restrictions soon

Are smokers going to be forced to buy cigarettes in plain packs, and hide them from view like criminals?

Smokers are being used as pawns in a political power struggle

Tessa Jowell believes that the tobacco issue is her ticket to the top. She knows that public support is her key to success

So far, in her quest for power, she has increased the harshness of any proposed marketing ban at every stage and presented a biased case

The Government is restricting our rights to freedom of speech

Any potential marketing ban imposed by the government is a denial of the right to free commercial speech

Even extreme political parties are given this basic liberty, which is going to be denied the tobacco industry

for smokers' rights²⁶ and confirmed that “as smokers become more and more persecuted, they look to advertising as a friend.”²⁷

Secondly, particular sectors of the market can be expanded. For example, a detailed report examined ways to bring about “the reinvigoration of the cigar market.”²⁸ The worry was then expressed that “without this reinvigoration we will continue to see a decline in the size of the cigar market, which will hurt all brands, but particularly Hamlet.”²⁹ The last comment also highlights the link between brand share and market size.

A third option was to undermine tobacco control policies. Ad campaigns directly attacking particular policies were planned and researched (box 2), campaigns were orchestrated to minimise the impact of budget increases, and options were considered for marketing after tobacco advertising is banned. As one of the agencies put it, “why should they stop marketing their products simply because advertising is banned?”³⁰

Tobacco consumption is also increased more directly by recruiting new smokers and discouraging existing ones from quitting. New recruits to smoking are seen as a crucial sector and success here is carefully monitored. For example, a decrease in their numbers is a serious problem for Silk Cut, whereas Lambert and Butler and Marlboro Lights are envied for their recruitment success (box 3).

Smoking cessation is, however, a threat, and low tar options backed by reassuring imagery can fend it off: “In conclusion, the ‘threat’ to the existing smoker base

Box 3: Importance of recruiting new smokers

“The only economy brand to feature significantly in the list of new starter brands is L&B [Lambert and Butler], which has improved its share of this group by over 2% (to 9.5%) since 1997. If this rate of growth persists, it can be expected that the proportion of new starters smoking an economy brand will show some growth in the future” (Rothmans (UK))⁶

“In 1996 Silk Cut KS was the biggest low tar brand among new entrants by a substantial margin. In 1996-7, the brand’s share of new entrants has fallen to almost half its 1996 level—6.0% from 11.2%.

Qualitative research has repeatedly identified Silk Cut KS as dated and with an increasingly unappealing image. The brands decline among new entrants can perhaps be explained by the heavy presence of young adults for whom image is an important consideration. The same rationale can be used to explain the continued strength of Marlboro Lights which is the main brand for 7.3% of new entrants compared with 3.1% of all smokers” (Rothmans (UK))⁶

“[Silk Cut] Ultra [Light] has yet to demonstrate a consistent ability to attract new smokers. The key question is “can we expect the brand to appeal to new entrants—or is there a positioning that we can adopt that makes the brand more attractive to entrants?” (Silk Cut)⁷

for the brand seems more likely to come from a desire to give up smoking (which is more strongly held by the SCUL [Silk Cut Ultra Light] smokers than the SCEM [Silk Cut Extra Mild] smokers), rather than from competitor brands.”⁸ “A minority saw low tar cigarettes as a stage on the way to quitting smoking However, more common was a sense that low tar was a way of making quitting less urgent or necessary.”⁹

Does the industry target young people?

The internal documents show that young people are a key group for tobacco marketers. The precise definition of “young” remains contentious: in many of the documents care is taken to use the phrase “young adult smokers”; however, at other times more general terms such as “young people” and the “youth market” are used. Furthermore, there is evidence of market research being done with people as young as 15. Box 4 shows a reanalysis by a consultancy agency of “TGI” data (a standard industry resource that is bought on a subscription basis by many advertising agencies) to provide a detailed picture of the values and aspirations of Silk Cut smokers. The sample includes 15 year olds.

Whether the industry is deliberately targeting under 16 year olds remains a matter for dispute. What the internal documents did, however, make clear was that smoking among young people was as much about image as it was about product attributes. The agencies recognise that smoking is a “rite of passage,” with young people looking for “reassurance” and “an identity” (box 5).

Successful brands exploit these emotional needs and insecurities. The success of Marlboro Lights, for example, “derives from its being the aspirational lifestyle brand ... The Diet Coke of cigarettes,”¹⁴ and “to be successful any Gallaher brand will have to tackle Marlboro’s coolness of image—smokers do smoke the image as well as the taste.”¹⁵ As one creative brief put it,

“we want to engage their aspirations and fantasies—I’d like to be there, do that, own that.”¹⁶

Detailed and typically qualitative market research is therefore conducted to guide the development of “image building campaigns”¹⁷ and provide “an infusion of style, coolness and aspiration ... that will boost B&H’s [Benson and Hedges] image with style conscious 18-24s.”¹⁶ This takes place despite clear rules in the voluntary agreement prohibiting the association of smoking with social success or any attempts to play on the susceptibilities of those who are emotionally or physically vulnerable, especially young people.²⁵

In addition, whether or not children are deliberately being targeted, no consideration is given to the danger that marketing aimed at adults may actually appeal to and reach those aged less than 16. This is perhaps most apparent when the documents discuss the issue of packs of 10 cigarettes. It is clearly recognised that these are bought predominantly by young adult smokers in independent outlets (corner shops) as a cheap means of acquiring premium cigarettes.

No concern is expressed that these packs, outlets, and brands may also appeal to children, although independent research has shown this to be the

Box 4: Market research with 15 year olds
(quoted from Synergy Consulting)¹⁰

A detailed reanalysis of TGI data, providing details of the values and aspirations of Silk Cut smokers. The sample included 15 year olds.

Silk cut—age splits*15-35 year olds*

- Younger Silk Cut smokers are much more like their peer group than all smokers:
- Slightly higher on societies core values—less Inner Directed

35-65+ year olds

- Again all 35+ year olds who smoke are very Sustenance Driven with a strong Outer Directed pull. This pull will be partly caused by the rejection of core society values embodied by the Belongers
- Silk Cut smokers over 35 are more Sustenance Drive, looking very like their peer group. Androgyny and excitement the only Inner Directed values perhaps link in with older values associated with cigarette smoking

Portrait of Silk Cut smokers*15-35 year olds*

- They are watching a whole host of TV, dipping into a wide variety of types of programmes.
 - 80% of them watch the news, with only the Conspicuous Consumers being under represented in this area
 - Sport (General and Specialist), films (recent and old) and detective series are watched by them all. The Sustenance Driven watching more films and drama than the rest
 - Soaps and sit coms are also watched, especially by the Conspicuous Consumers
 - Travel Programme
- As a group they particularly enjoy
 - Sport
 - Soaps
 - Sit coms and satirical comedy
 - Films

Box 5: Smoking satisfies emotional insecurities in the young

"To smoke Marlboro Lights represents having passed a rite of passage" (memo)^{w11}

"Young adult smokers are looking for reassurance that they are doing the right thing, and cigarettes are no exception. Any break with a brand's heritage must be carefully considered in order not to throw doubt into the minds of young adult smokers" (Rothmans)^{w2}

"Young adult smokers are also searching for an identity. Cigarettes have a key role to play as they are an ever-present statement of identity" (Rothmans)^{w2}

"Smoking for these people (young smokers) is still a badge. A sign of maturity, discernment and independence" (Collet Dickenson Pierce)^{w12}

"Younger smokers give more weight to imagery of cigarettes and pay more attention and are open to fashionable brands and up-to-date designs" (memo)^{w13}

case.^{16 17 26} They do, however, recognise that "new entrants" to the market are likely to approach it through these routes: "whilst this data is not completely reliable it does reinforce the picture from old *BJM* data in highlighting the role of the 10s pack amongst young adult smokers and potentially new entrants to the market."^{w18}

What part does sponsorship play?

The internal documents confirm the similarities between advertising and sponsorship. The prime purpose of both is to create and bolster brand image. Careful consumer research is conducted to examine the image of particular sports, and the most appropriate and influential ones are then selected. Perhaps the most notable example of this (and the most worrying one, given that sponsorship of it is due to remain until 2006) is Formula One racing. One research report shows that "more active sports, with potential to create a more dynamic, exciting brand image" include "Formula One, big boat sailing, basket ball, ice hockey."^{w5} The image of Formula One racing is then described in more detail as "international, glamorous, challenging, fast, furious, dangerous, living life to the full and living life on the edge."^{w5} The document concludes that Formula One racing can make the Benson and Hedges' brand more "dynamic," "macho," and "youthful."

A further report concludes, in similar vein, that sponsorship of Formula One racing makes the brand "very powerful" and lends "associations with young, fast, racy, adult, exciting, aspirational, but ultimately attainable environments."^{w19}

Other sponsorship deals are selected with equal care. Rugby league makes Silk Cut "an exciting dynamic and less pretentious brand"^{w20} and the Whitbread round the world yacht race makes it "masculine" and "adventurous."^{w21}

Sponsorship and advertising are also used in close combination: "sponsorship advertising" promoted the Silk Cut renaissance tour [of arts and raves], and publicity for the brand's Whitbread [sailing] sponsorship is maximised by placing "'announcement' ads in all national newspapers that run editorial on the race—to appear next to, or near, the editorial."^{w21}

Furthermore, the advertisers themselves find it difficult to disentangle the effects of their sponsorship from their advertising, one of them needing to conduct careful research "to identify separately the impact of Marlboro's sponsorship of the Ferrari team on the overall effectiveness of Marlboro advertising."^{w22}

This confusion arises because the criteria for success are identical: "as I'm sure you are aware there was excellent coverage of the new Jordan car last night on both the 9 O'Clock News and the News at Ten. The respective all men television ratings for the bulletins were 11.8 and 14.4. If we assume that the coverage equated to a 60" commercial on each station, I've estimated the equivalent advertising value to be £185 000. When the value of additional news slots on Channel 4, Channel 5 and Sky are added in, I expect the figure would exceed £250 000. Not bad to start off with!"^{w23}

The only significant difference between sponsorship and advertising that the internal documents acknowledge is that the sales pitch in sponsorship is more hidden, enabling covert or "subliminal" messages that can get round the defences of their "wary" and media literate young targets: "at each event the level of Silk Cut branding is intended to be subliminal, with no direct reference to Silk Cut cigarettes"^{w24} and "they are very advertising literate, and consequently very wary of big brands latching on to aspects of their lifestyle and exploiting them. To this end Silk Cut needs to compliment the Renaissance imagery in an intriguing and stylish way."^{w25}

What other forms of promotion are there, and what part do they play?

Even though the internal documents come from advertising agencies—and therefore would be expected to place particular emphasis on advertising—it is clear that all aspects of marketing play a crucial role in their efforts to increase sales. The documents reveal a textbook approach to the challenge. Firstly, the population as a whole is divided into smaller, more homogeneous groups. The viability of each group is then analysed to determine if they are suitable for targeting. Finally, customised marketing strategies are devised for those groups that hold most promise. Unlike textbook marketing, however, no reference is made anywhere to the ethics of targeting particular groups or of using particular strategies. This is of concern as the poor, women, and students all emerge as front runners. The poor can be reached by a combination of price offers, gift schemes, and reassuring branding to make inferior products seem better: "almost all would rather be smoking a premium brand, and all know (because it is obvious) that a cheaper product is an inferior product. Thus, anything which implies quality is gratefully received."^{w26} Women might be susceptible to their own brand: "opportunity possibly exists for overtly female targeted cigarettes (perhaps tapping into female cigar smoking trend?)."^{w27} Students appeal because they are image conscious, young, and readily accessed through student unions and college campuses.^{w5}

Having identified their target market, manufacturers use all forms of communication, not just advertising, to approach them. Point of sale promotions, databases (one company claims to have over seven million names^{w28}), and the internet are all mentioned.^{w29} But perhaps the most important

channel is the pack itself. Its value as both a communication tool and a “badge” is readily acknowledged and great care is taken to ensure that it continues to communicate the correct image (box 6).

Furthermore, efforts to meet the needs of the smoker and potential smoker do not stop at communication. Pricing, distribution, and, most fundamental of all, the product design itself all do their bit. Cheap products are offered to low income smokers, and the impact of price on brand perception is recognised.^{w26}

Effective distribution delivers convenience, and good relationships with retailers ensure that a company’s brands get maximum support: “young adult smokers find it much more important than the smoking population as a whole that things are easy to do, or buy. They want (and feel entitled to get) what they want, where they want it, when they want it”^{w22} and “the global objective of this research is to aid the optimisation of these communications, as a step towards maximising sell through the independent sector.”^{w33}

And development ideas for new products ensure that the product will evolve and so continue to provide appropriate aspirational and pharmacological benefits. Ideas include an “Expresso” cigarette to fit the new “café culture,” a “macho” cigarette (complete with “a scantily clad woman on the paper”), and Scottish and Welsh cigarettes to exploit devolution (box 7).

That some of these suggestions may not make it to market—or indeed may be technically impossible—is beside the point. The key issue is that product design, along with all the other marketing tactics mentioned in the internal documents, is just one more opportunity to increase sales.

Conclusion

This first significant glimpse inside UK tobacco advertising highlights three things. Firstly, it confirms the key conclusions of the past 20 years of tobacco control research. This has painstakingly established that tobacco advertising can increase consumption as well as brand share, that young people are a key potential target who are particularly susceptible to psychosocial appeals, that sponsorship works in exactly the same way as advertising (only with greater subtlety), and that advertising is only a small fragment of marketing.

The internal documents show that, despite public pronouncements to the contrary, the industry has clearly been working on the assumption that all these findings are correct. Furthermore, it is deliberately exploiting the opportunities that result: market growth is a goal, brand images secure the young, the

Box 6: Importance of the cigarette pack to the marketing of cigarettes

“The pack is pivotal to this—the pack, and in particular its bright yellow colour, is the distinguishing element of the new brand” (brief)^{w30}

“Remember this campaign has its origins in a very simple truth, the smokers of B&H [Benson and Hedges] when they put their pack on the pub table, will always have it noticed by their friends. It is their badge and all we are trying to do is celebrate it”^{w31}

“The easiest way to communicate with current smokers is through the pack.” (Collet Dickenson Pierce)^{w32}

Box 7: Ideas for new tobacco products

(quoted from Gallager)

Cigarettes to appeal to the café culture

“Expresso

- Pressure on smokers (allowable smoking areas, perceived antisociability of the ritual, etc) leads to need for concentrated “hit”—quick and unobtrusive cigarette
- Need for credible urban, urbane cigarette brand in tune with 90s smoking friendly arenas e.g. cafes, bars, street

- Express: concentrated quick hit (caffeine/nicotine) with young, streetwise imagery (full strength Marlboro Lights)^{w34}

Cigarettes aimed specifically at young men

“Opportunity exists, therefore, for a male targeted brand, perhaps co-branded with *Loaded* or with scantily clad women on the cigarette paper!”^{w27}

Cigarettes aimed at advocates of devolution

“Both Scotland (index 90 despite Kensitas) and Wales (87) are slightly weak areas for Gallager . . . Current movement towards devolution provokes strong nationalistic sentiment . . . Opportunity for nationalistic (but not jingoistic) cigarette seems to exist”^{w27}

subliminal qualities of sponsorship are welcomed, and the pack (a marketing tool largely overlooked by regulators) is exploited to the full. Secondly, and perhaps more worrying than these specific practices, is the overall picture that emerges of an industry that is doing everything it can to encourage smoking. The commercial imperative is all, and the enthusiasm and competitive drive to meet its demands are palpable. Ethical doubts are never even acknowledged, and health consequences barely get a mention.

Finally, both these phenomena show the complete unworkability of voluntary agreements. In a competitive market, UK tobacco companies will always do their utmost to survive and succeed. Arguably, they have no choice—the commercial pressures are an imperative. The problem is that this imperative runs directly contrary to public health. The only solution is statutory regulation, with the overt aim of removing all tobacco marketing. This regulation has to be powerful, comprehensive, and flexible. Powerful to ensure that, in a profitable market, transgression does not pay; comprehensive to ensure that all facets of marketing are controlled, and flexible to ensure that innovations are identified and stopped. The Tobacco Regulations Authority that is recommended in the select committee report would provide a good vehicle for proposing and policing these statutory controls.

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“Operation Berkshire”: the international tobacco companies' conspiracy

Neil Francey, Simon Chapman

Advocates of tobacco control worldwide have long suspected collusion among major international tobacco companies over their refusal to acknowledge that smoking causes lung cancer, heart disease, emphysema, and other serious diseases. Tobacco industry documents now available on the internet disclose the establishment of a conspiracy between Philip Morris, R J Reynolds, British-American Tobacco, Rothmans, Reemtsma, and UK tobacco companies Gallaher and Imperial, dating from 1977. The documents also disclose the objects of the conspiracy: basically, to protect the industry's commercial interests both by promoting controversy over smoking and disease and through strategies directed at reassuring smokers.

The documents also disclose the means of implementing the conspiracy by utilising national manufacturers' associations coordinated through the International Committee on Smoking Issues, later to become the International Tobacco Information Centre. We expose the formation of the conspiracy and its objectives and means of implementation over the ensuing decades.

Methods

After learning of a document referring to “Operation Berkshire,” we searched for documents on the website tobaccoarchives.com, and we collected and reviewed documents relevant to the conspiracy between the major tobacco companies and to its objectives and implementation.¹ The website provides access to document sites on which various tobacco companies have been required to post copies of documents as a result of the multiparty settlement of litigation by United States attorneys general.²

Summary points

For decades international tobacco companies have denied or disputed that smoking causes serious diseases, and advocates of tobacco control worldwide have long suspected collusion over this issue

Internal documents from the tobacco industry now available on the internet disclose that in 1977 seven of the world's major tobacco companies conspired to promote “controversy” over smoking and disease, in an exercise called Operation Berkshire

This conspiracy resulted in the International Committee on Smoking Issues (subsequently the International Tobacco Information Centre), which operated through an internationally coordinated network of national manufacturers' associations to retard measures for tobacco control

Thousands of documents now available on the internet evidence the implementation of the objectives of Operation Berkshire

An initial search of the Philip Morris site using the term “Berkshire” produced 157 documents of which the vast majority related to the conspiracy. Subsequent searches using the term “Shockerwick”, especially on the Philip Morris and R J Reynolds sites, filled in the gaps. Further searches using the terms “ICOSI” (Inter-

Wentworth Chambers, Sydney NSW 2000, Australia

Neil Francey
barrister at law

VicHealth Centre for Tobacco Control, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

Simon Chapman
associate professor

Correspondence to: S Chapman, Department of Public Health and Community Medicine, University of Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia
simonc@health.usyd.edu.au

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