

# Tobacco industry: decades of deception and duplicity

Tobacco companies “have marketed and sold their lethal product with zeal, with deception, with a single-minded focus on their financial success, and without regard for the human tragedy or social costs that success exacted”

– Judge Gladys Kessler, United States District Court, 2006

## Introduction

For decades, the tobacco industry has employed devious tactics to keep generations of men, women and children addicted to cigarettes. The industry’s success in undermining and defeating government efforts to control tobacco has led to an epidemic that continues to take 8 million lives each year. The only way to protect life-saving tobacco control measures is to expose the industry’s tactics and take action to prevent the same tactics being used again.

There is global consensus against the tobacco industry, caused in part by the nature and behaviour of the major tobacco companies themselves – Philip Morris, British American Tobacco, Imperial Tobacco and Japan Tobacco International. In numerous instances, these companies spread public disinformation to conceal the harms caused by smoking and from exposure to secondhand smoke. Even after global consensus on tobacco control was reached in 2004 through the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC), the tobacco industry has continued to undermine the effectiveness of tobacco control strategies.

## Public deception by the tobacco industry

The major instances of public deception by the tobacco industry from the 1950s to the present day are summarized below.

Decade	Tobacco industry lies
1950s and 1960s	<p><b>Smoking is not harmful</b></p> <p>The tobacco industry concealed evidence that cigarettes cause cancer, meanwhile marketing its products as safe.</p> <p><b>Smoking/nicotine is not addictive</b></p> <p>The tobacco industry suppressed evidence that cigarettes are highly addictive.</p>
1970s	<p><b>Smoking is not linked to cancer</b></p> <p>The tobacco industry spent enormous amounts on disinformation campaigns and propaganda to negate and deflect the science linking smoking to cancer.</p> <p><i>The tobacco industry gathered health ministers from all Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Philip Morris distributed briefing papers promoting that:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ there is inadequate scientific evidence that toxic components in smoke are harmful to the smoker;</li> <li>▪ advertising does not increase the size of the smoking population;</li> <li>▪ secondhand smoke is not proven to cause disease.</li> </ul> <p>The tobacco industry's policy objective was for health ministers to focus on doing further research and restricting sales to minors while postponing tax increases, advertising bans and health warnings.</p> <p>Smoking means "freedom", "style", "slender" and "escape"</p> <p>Tobacco was aggressively marketed to women by playing on their psychosocial needs, leading to substantial increases in smoking among women and young girls.</p>
1980s	<p><b>Secondhand smoke is not harmful</b></p> <p>The tobacco industry hired "independent" scientists to support industry studies and question smoke-free policies.</p> <p>The tobacco industry's plan for the Middle East<sup>1</sup> involved reversing popular and scientific opinion that secondhand smoke is harmful. It targeted scientific journals and recruited third-party scientists/toxicologists. The plan included "briefing government officials in foreign locations if in-country briefing is undesirable" and inserting itself into independent scientific gatherings.</p>

<sup>1</sup> Primarily the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates).

Decade	Tobacco industry lies
1990s	<p><b>Tobacco industry youth smoking prevention programmes are working</b></p> <p>The tobacco industry aimed youth smoking prevention programmes at harnessing “positive feelings” for tobacco companies. The programmes were intended to detract policy-makers from taking more effective control measures such as tax increases and advertising bans.</p> <p><i>In Lebanon and elsewhere in the Middle East, transnational tobacco companies promoted youth smoking prevention programmes on their websites and actively used this to play on health ministries’ concerns, intending to counter advertising bans.</i></p> <p><b>Nicotine is not addictive</b></p> <p>The tobacco industry publicly denied the addictiveness of nicotine (tobacco executives even swore under oath that nicotine is not addictive) while suppressing and concealing evidence of its addictiveness.</p> <p>In 1998, major tobacco companies<sup>1</sup> in the United States of America were made accountable for deceiving the public about the harms from cigarettes and their addictiveness. They were forced to settle a lawsuit on the recovery of health care costs through, among other measures, annual payments in perpetuity, paying US\$ 206 billion for the first 25 years, and making available online non-privileged documents disclosed during the discovery phase of the litigation.</p>

<sup>1</sup> Including the largest cigarette manufacturers in the United States: Philip Morris Incorporated (now known as Philip Morris USA Inc.), RJ Reynolds Tobacco Company, Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corporation and Lorillard Tobacco Company.

**Decade****Tobacco industry lies****2000s****Smoking “light”/“mild” cigarettes is safer**

The tobacco industry misled the public to believe that “light” or “mild” products are safer. Light/mild cigarettes were used to leverage on smokers’ health concerns and increase sales, and companies even designed new products that increased nicotine intake – meanwhile denying that nicotine levels were manipulated to increase smokers’ addiction.

*To appeal to the Islamic community, Brown & Williamson (a subsidiary of British American Tobacco) used the “Light Ramadan” campaign to encourage smokers to “switch to lights.” Meanwhile, Philip Morris insisted on the right to hold promotions during Ramadan as part of its effort to undermine the interpretation of smoking as “haram.”*

In 2006, multinational tobacco companies<sup>1</sup> were found guilty of defrauding the public about the safety of products and of marketing to children, under the United States Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act. Upon appeal, the decision was upheld by the United States Supreme Court in 2009. Tobacco companies were ordered to restrain from their efforts to deceive smokers and the American public by using descriptors like “light” and “low tar” that create a false impression that such cigarettes are less harmful to smokers.

**The tobacco industry is a partner in combating illicit trade**

The tobacco industry consistently claimed that smuggled cigarettes were counterfeits and offered their expertise in government anti-smuggling activities – even when found to be complicit in smuggling.

*In the Middle East, “Tobacco transnationals took advantage of weak and unstable governance, and continued to supply the contraband trade despite appeals by the government to cease undermining its revenues.”*

During 2004–2010, the European Union held four transnational tobacco companies<sup>2</sup> to account for illicit trade, including requiring the companies to pay a sum as annual compensation. The tobacco industry’s internal documents revealed the extent to which smuggling had been used to advance their drive to increase volume and market share, which resulted in “public investigations, court cases, and extremely negative publicity for the tobacco companies.” Recent data show that tobacco companies are “over-producing products in some markets and over-supplying to others, both in the knowledge that excess products will end up on the illicit market.”

<sup>1</sup> Including Philip Morris Inc., RJ Reynolds Tobacco Co., Brown and Williamson Tobacco Co., Lorillard Tobacco Company and The Liggett Group Inc..

<sup>2</sup> In 2004 with Philip Morris (which includes Philip Morris International); in 2007 with Japan Tobacco International; and in 2010 with British American Tobacco and Imperial Tobacco Limited.

**Decade****Tobacco industry lies****2010s****The tobacco industry supports the WHO FCTC**

The tobacco industry falsely claimed that it was supportive of the WHO FCTC; however, its internal documents called measures compliant with the WHO FCTC "extreme":

*Despite the tobacco companies' rhetoric, tobacco industry interference remains the greatest obstacle to WHO FCTC implementation. From 2010, Philip Morris and British American Tobacco launched litigation to challenge WHO FCTC-supported policies in Australia, Norway, United Kingdom and Uruguay, and backed the stalling of plain packaging policies at the World Trade Organization. In 2012, the industry-funded International Tobacco Growers Association was mobilized to protest the fourth session of the Conference of the Parties (COP) in Uruguay. In 2014, a tobacco industry-backed think-tank set up meetings with delegates to the sixth session of the COP in India, in an attempt to challenge strong positions taken on the Article 6 Guidelines.*

**The tobacco industry is promoting a "smoke-free world"**

The tobacco industry announced to the public that it had "transformed" and was now committed to "a smoke-free world", by allegedly encouraging smokers to quit by switching to ENDS and HTPs. Meanwhile, the industry continued to aggressively market cigarettes in ways attractive to children and to promote cigarette sales/profits.

*Philip Morris used a US\$ 960 million investment distributed over 12 years to establish the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World, "to put an end to smoking due to the harms and deaths caused." However, it also announced to investors that sales of cigarettes would remain its core business. In low- and middle-income countries, it is suing governments to challenge smoke-free policies and has ramped up the marketing of HTPs. British American Tobacco launched the "A Better Tomorrow" initiative to promote its vaping products, and revised its cigarette and sports marketing strategy through a sponsorship contract for global sports races (Formula One and MotoGP).*

The Philip Morris-funded Foundation for a Smoke-Free World was denounced by over 300 organizations and entities as well as by WHO and the WHO FCTC Secretariat, which called on governments not to partner with the Foundation. Activities linked with the Foundation have been cancelled due to lack of support. In the meantime, Philip Morris and British American Tobacco's "subtle"/"transformed" advertising at the Formula One was called out by the WHO FCTC Secretariat as "brand stretching", and was declared as "prohibited tobacco advertising" in Australia and France.

Sources: Tobacco industry corporate strategies: then and now. Bangkok: Global Center for Good Governance in Tobacco Control (GGTC), Stopping Tobacco Organizations and Products (STOP) project (forthcoming publication), and Concealing decades of smokescreens, Bangkok: GGTC, STOP project (forthcoming publication).

The same tobacco companies that have perpetuated these deceptions remain the most dominant players in the global cigarette market today and, through various acquisitions, they are poised to dominate the market for e-cigarettes/HTPs and other novel tobacco products (1). The industry is re-using these lies and deceptions to sell its new products (2) – this time with the help of social media and digital/internet transactions (3).

Novel tobacco products allow for addiction to be marketed by the tobacco companies, under the guise of selling safer products. The tobacco industry is using this angle to "re-enter research and policy debate" (1), aiming to further undermine the WHO FCTC and in particular Article 5.3, which obliges governments to protect public health policies from the commercial and vested interests of the tobacco industry.

## References

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