

PostScript

LETTERS

A guide to deciphering the internal codes used by the tobacco industry

Many tobacco control researchers and advocates are now aware of the value of the internal tobacco industry documents made public as a result of the state attorney generals' Master Settlement Agreement. A growing body of document based research provides dramatic insight into industry initiatives and strategies. These published studies also provide countless examples of the secret language commonly used by the tobacco industry internally. As observed in Philip Morris' *Dictionary of tobacco terminology*: "Every specialized field has its own language".¹ The language of the internal documents is frequently comprised of project names, acronyms, abbreviations, numerical identifiers, and other coded terms, presented without any clear indication of their definitions or meanings. These coded terms can make the task of document research very daunting: like trying to learn a foreign language without an instructor or reference dictionary.

Familiarity with the codes used internally by manufacturers is critical to successfully conducting document research and interpreting internal industry activities. Although individual efforts have described the codes relevant to particular topics of research, no single research group has sought to identify the full extent and types of code languages used by the industry or the patterns governing internal codes. Many tobacco companies do maintain internal lists of terms. For example, over a dozen Philip Morris documents are devoted solely to providing their personnel with guides to the company's extensive acronyms, abbreviations, codes, and terminology. Ultimately, however, the majority of terms and project names are not covered in internal lists, and understanding the meaning of internal codes necessitates both careful research as well as recognition of the common patterns and conventions employed throughout this terminology.

A critical role for tobacco control researchers is to develop and share information that can facilitate and expedite future research. A recent monograph, *A guide to deciphering the internal codes used by the tobacco industry*, available on the Harvard School of Public Health website (<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/php/pri/tcrtp/home.html>), identifies and describes a number of industry code lists and highlights different types of industry codes, both formal and informal, ranging from acronyms to "catchy" names, from numerical coding and letter patterning to signs of the zodiac and the names of world rivers. This monograph is part of a larger research project funded through a grant from the National Cancer Institute to list and define codes and project names used internally by the industry in areas related to product research, including product development, testing, and design. The ongoing list is housed online at <http://tobaccodocuments.org/profiles/>. We encourage other document researchers to expand this list by posting codes and

definitions that they have encountered. The public health community has benefited in extraordinary ways through the availability of the documents to all; now we need to work together to identify and expose the secrets hidden within these documents.

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Adult's perceptions about whether tobacco companies tell the truth in relation to issues about smoking

The tobacco industry has long denied or played down the risks of smoking, addiction, and passive smoking in Australia.¹⁻³ A survey commissioned by Phillip Morris in 1993 indicated that most Australian opinion leaders and the general public have an unfavourable opinion of the company, even less favourable than that of Americans.⁴ Faced by a rising tide of litigation, the tobacco industry has attempted to change their image over the past decade to one of a "socially responsible" corporate citizen.⁵

Unlike in the USA, where the tobacco industry have engaged in extensive corporate image advertising and campaigns directed at youth and parents, in Australia, tobacco companies have focused on more subtle approaches. For example, Phillip Morris attempted to administer a series of workshops for Australian schoolteachers on how to encourage children to "say no to illicit drugs, underage smoking, drinking alcohol and bullying".⁶ British American Tobacco (Australia) uses their website to boast of "substantial donations" to charities such as Lifeline and Mission Australia,⁷ while in 1999, Phillip Morris listed itself in a corporate

promotional brochure as sponsoring the Red Nose Day Foundation (supporting research on sudden infant death syndrome).⁸

During this period of "corporate re-imagining", the tobacco industry also appeared prominently in the Australian news media. The Rolah McCabe trial in 2002 generated a great deal of press coverage and debate⁹ about the liability of the tobacco industry for smoking related illnesses and about their conduct in light of the Victorian Supreme Court finding that British American Tobacco had subverted the discovery process by deliberately destroying thousands of documents.¹⁰ To gain insight into how adults in the Australian state of Victoria perceive the tobacco industry, data from representative population surveys were analysed.

Telephone interviews with Victorian adults were conducted during November and December 2002 (n = 1995), 2003 (n = 3001), and 2004 (n = 2997). Participants were asked: "In relation to issues about smoking, do you think tobacco companies...always tell the truth; mostly tell the truth; mostly do not tell the truth, or never tell the truth?"

Table 1 shows that, in 2004, less than 1% of Victorian adults reported they thought that tobacco companies always tell the truth. The majority of adults (79%) reported they thought tobacco companies either never or mostly do not tell the truth in relation to issues about smoking. Smokers (23%) were significantly more likely than former smokers (11%) and never smokers (16%) to believe that tobacco companies always or mostly tell the truth (p < 0.01). However, smokers were quite polarised in their views, with 32% of smokers also reporting that tobacco companies never tell the truth.

The percentage of adults who think tobacco companies mostly do not or never tell the truth has increased in a linear fashion from 2002 (75%) to 2003 (77%) to 2004 (79%) (p < 0.001). This level of distrust is comparable to South Australian adults' perceptions in 1998, when 80% of respondents and 74% of smokers thought tobacco companies mostly did not or never told the truth about smoking and health, children and smoking, and addictiveness of tobacco.¹¹ Although distrust was high in 2002, findings indicate that the Australian public is becoming increasingly wary of the tobacco industry and remain unmoved by industry attempts to paint themselves as model corporate citizens.

Table 1 Perceptions of truth telling by tobacco companies in 2004

	Total (n = 2997)	Smokers* (n = 638)	Former smokers† (n = 835)	Never smokers (n = 1524)
Never tell the truth	26.7	32.0	28.7	23.4
Mostly do not tell the truth	52.3	39.3	56.5	55.5
Mostly tell the truth	15.5	21.5	10.7	15.6
Always tell the truth	0.8	1.8	0.4	0.7
Don't know/can't say/refused	4.6	5.5	3.6	4.7

Data weighted by age and sex according to Australian Bureau of Statistics population Census data for 2001.

*Smokers include those who smoke daily, weekly or less than weekly.

†Former smokers include those who had smoked at least 100 cigarettes or an equivalent amount of tobacco in their lifetime.

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Selling or promotion?

In Australia, the Tobacco Advertising Prohibition Act (1992) bans most forms of tobacco advertising and promotion. In response to restrictions, the tobacco industry has resorted to "below the line" activities such as event promotions at music festivals, fashion parades, private parties, bars, and nightclubs.¹⁻⁷ At these events, tobacco products are promoted under the guise of "selling". It is important to expose these promotional activities as they may constitute breaches of the Act.

An audit of nine heavily advertised large youth music events in Perth found that the tobacco industry was actively promoting tobacco products at these events. At the single indoor event, cigarettes were sold via a vending machine and there were no promotional activities. At the eight outdoor events, cigarettes were sold in tents set up as "chill-out" areas in which chairs were provided for people to relax. The tents were staffed by young women selling tobacco products, ancillary products, and merchandise (for example, beer holders bearing the

Rizla cigarette paper logo). At two events "cigarette girls", dressed in Peter Stuyvesant brand colours, walked around the venues with trays of cigarettes for sale.

Approximately half of the events were not restricted to those aged 18 years and over, thus exposing patrons aged under 18 years to the promotional activities of the tobacco companies.

Not only do youth music events provide direct access to a primary target market for tobacco companies, but they also allow the marketers to build brand images by associating their brands with youth popular culture. Smoking becomes associated with the enjoyable experience of the music and fun atmosphere of the events, thus reinforcing the behaviour of current smokers and building more positive attitudes towards smoking among experimenters and non-smokers.

The state government of Western Australia recently introduced legislation which, if enacted, will assist in controlling the promotion of tobacco products at events. Specifically, the proposed Tobacco Products Control Bill 2005⁸ will ban the mobile selling of tobacco products (currently not considered to be promotion, and permitted as "selling"). It also contains provisions to prohibit the sale or supply of tobacco products via temporary premises at events that are expected to attract significant numbers of people aged under 18 years. This proposed new legislation will further restrict the marketing opportunities of tobacco companies.

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Response to E Yano and S Chapman

Professor Eiji Yano raises a number of issues in his letter¹ which responded to my commentary² on his article³ about the Japanese spousal study, as does Chapman

in his editorial.⁴ Here I reply to the main points raised.

Studies of environmental tobacco smoke (ETS) exposure and lung cancer commonly identify a group of self reported non-smoking women and then compare risk according to the smoking habits of the husband. If some true smokers are erroneously included among the female subjects, an apparent relationship of spousal smoking with lung cancer may be seen even when no true effect of ETS exists. This has been mathematically demonstrated (for example, Lee and Forey⁵), with attempts to correct for it made by major independent authoritative reviews of the evidence on passive smoking and lung cancer.⁶⁻⁸ The magnitude of the bias depends (among other things) on the extent to which women who smoke are misclassified as non-smokers. It can also be shown mathematically⁹ that a given rate of misclassification of smokers as non-smokers is a much more important cause of bias than is the same rate of the reverse misclassification, of non-smokers as smokers. Since such reverse misclassification is also implausible, adult women having little reason to claim erroneously to be smokers, the major reviews⁶⁻⁸ have all ignored its minor effects.

Given that in the Japanese spousal study (using a urinary cotinine/creatinine ratio (CCR) above 100 ng/mg as an index of true smoking) the reverse misclassification rate (8/298 = 2.7%) was much lower than the misclassification rate itself (28/98 = 28.6%), it becomes abundantly clear that reverse misclassification is not relevant to the passive smoking/lung cancer issue. It is difficult to understand why Yano places such emphasis on it.

Yano¹ states that I am "confused with the calculation formula" and that my "definition of misclassification was obtained by dividing those with > 100 ng/mg CCR (n = 28) by self reported non-smokers (n = 318)". It appears that Yano himself is confused. I had previously made it clear² that the denominator should not be 318, but 98, the number of women with a CCR value indicative of smoking (or perhaps 106, if one also includes those women who claimed to smoke but had a CCR < 100 ng/ml).

The misclassification rate calculation is clearly based on CCR > 100 ng/mg validly indicating smoking. Such an assumption is widely used,⁹ though may be subject to some error, and was the best technique available at the time. Most smokers admit to smoking, so that self report has some validity as an indicator of true smoking status, but this does not help us estimate the magnitude of the misclassification bias. The observed lack of correlation in the Japanese spousal study between CCR in non-smokers (with CCR < 100 ng/mg) and other indices of ETS exposure suggests that inaccuracy in CCR measurement at low levels may be important. However, such inaccuracy may not be relevant to the misclassification rate calculation, which merely attempts to use CCR to distinguish smokers from non-smokers. Over half the self reported non-smokers with values over 100 ng/mg actually had values of 1000 ng/mg, and it would be very surprising indeed if errors in CCR measurement were so huge that these women were really non-smokers.

Though I would be happy to see results of further studies using up to date, state of the art chemical methods to detect nicotine metabolites in self reported non-smokers, the conclusion I reached in 1995 that misclassification rates are much higher in Japanese than in