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“And they told two friends...and so on”: RJ Reynolds’ viral marketing of Eclipse and its potential to mislead the public

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Abstract

Objective—To explore viral marketing strategies for Eclipse cigarettes used by the RJ Reynolds Company (Winston-Salem, North Carolina, USA).

Methods—Analysis of previously secret tobacco industry documents and multimedia materials.

Results—The failure of RJ Reynolds’ (RJR) 1988 “smokeless” cigarette, Premier, was in part due to widespread bad word of mouth about the product’s flavour, quality and difficulty of use. In 1994 RJR introduced an updated version of Premier, the ostensibly “reduced risk” Eclipse cigarette. RJR developed viral marketing channels to promote Eclipse using (1) exploratory interviews to motivate consumers to spread the word about Eclipse prior to market release, (2) promotional videos featuring positive feedback from test group participants to portray majority consensus among triers, (3) “Tupperware”-like parties for Eclipse where participants received samples to pass around in their social circles and (4) the Eclipse website’s bulletin board as a forum for potential users to discuss the brand in their own words. These strategies targeted the brand’s likeliest adopters, recruited informal and credible representatives of the product unaffiliated with RJR, and controlled the information spread about the product.

Conclusions—Viral marketing techniques may be particularly useful to promote new tobacco products such as Eclipse that have limited appeal and need a highly motivated audience of early adopters and acceptors. Such techniques help evade the mass rejection that could follow mass promotion, circumvent marketing restrictions, and allow tobacco companies to benefit from health claims made by consumers. Cigarette manufacturers must be held accountable for perceived health benefits encouraged by all promotional activities including viral marketing.

Regulation of cigarette marketing is increasing globally, including efforts to prohibit misleading advertising. The World Health Organization (WHO) Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) prohibits all forms of tobacco promotion that are misleading or deceptive.¹ In 2003, the European Union (EU) ban on tobacco advertising went into effect,² and on August 16, 2006, a United States District Court ruling prohibited tobacco advertising or promotions that suggest health benefits.³ The tobacco industry, however, is quite adept at circumventing advertising and marketing restrictions to promote its products.⁴

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The tobacco industry has engaged in a number of indirect marketing activities such as bar nights and lifestyle promotions,^{5,6} and product placement in the movies.⁷ We found another covert form of marketing employed by RJ Reynolds Tobacco Company (RJR; Winston-Salem, North Carolina, USA) to spread its pro-tobacco message to potential consumers that has not been addressed by health researchers and legislators: viral marketing. RJR developed many viral marketing strategies in the promotion of a Potential Reduced Exposure Product (PREP), Eclipse.

The term “viral marketing” took hold in 1997 with Jurvetson and Draper’s internet article⁸ analysing the explosive growth in the number of Hotmail users using an invitation automatically attached to the end of every email a Hotmail user sent. This resulted in exponentially growing numbers of people signing up for Hotmail after receiving emails from family and friends. “Each new user becomes a company salesperson, and the message spreads organically”.⁸ Viral marketing strategies include word of mouth marketing, in which consumers talk about products to familiar others;⁹ buzz marketing, in which an outlandish or extraordinary stunt gets people and the news media talking about the company or the marketing event, such as when Richard Branson staged his “Full Monty” descent from a high rise into Times Square, New York to launch the Virgin Mobile USA phone service;¹⁰ and stealth or shill marketing, in which people paid to recommend products to others do not disclose their relationship with the company. Discussion of the ethics of these forms of marketing¹¹ has not yet addressed such strategies in the context of preventable public health calamities.

Here, we present viral marketing strategies developed by RJR for its PREP, Eclipse. Tobacco harm reduction concerning PREPs needs to address the toxicity of new products and how they are promoted. An early version of Eclipse was introduced in the late 1980s as Premier, a cigarette that “heats, rather than burns, tobacco” and was designed to produce substantially less second-hand smoke. When RJR introduced Premier to US test markets in 1988, consumers interpreted the “clean smoke” message of Premier advertising to mean “smokeless”,¹² which it was not. Consumers also disliked the product itself, citing its bad flavour and poor performance.¹² Premier was withdrawn in 1989, but RJR stated learning from Premier was incorporated into Eclipse.^{13,14} Although it is likely that RJR meant to imply substantive improvements in the Eclipse product, it is equally likely that RJR also learned more effective promotional strategies. Successfully avoiding negative word of mouth about Eclipse could encourage health-concerned smokers to adopt the brand rather than quit, and by being spread by friends and family, viral marketing messages would gain credibility and self-tailor themselves to the target audience. The viral marketing strategies developed for Eclipse demonstrate how stealthy marketing can build consumer perceptions of safer cigarettes.

METHODS

We searched the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) Legacy Tobacco Documents Library (LTDL; <http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu>) using established methods.^{15,16} Initial search terms included low tar, health, concerned, safer cigarette, marketing, creative, focus group, qualitative, exploration, promotion, advertising, Eclipse and Premier. We conducted additional snowball searches on names of individuals and agencies, places, dates, Bates numbers, project names (eg, “Project GTC” or “PRISM”), and terms associated with novel promotional strategies for Eclipse such as sneak previews, “Tupperware” parties, ambassadors and discovery groups. Documents related to the brainstorming, research, planning, execution and tracking of promotional activities for Eclipse were selected. Additionally, we examined copies of other promotional materials such as pamphlets, point of sale displays and direct mail materials available in the LTDL. This analysis is based upon

a final collection of approximately 900 planning documents, reports, emails, transcripts, presentations, video scripts, event schedules and training manuals.

Further, we searched the UCSF Tobacco Industry Videos Archive (<http://www.archive.org/details/tobaccoarchives>), a collection of audiovisual material produced by the tobacco industry and made public through litigation by placement in the Minnesota Tobacco Documents Depository. We found one promotional video made for Eclipse test markets,¹⁷ and one video recording of a focus group conducted for Eclipse market research.¹⁸ Videos were compared with focus group summaries, draft video scripts and other executive communiqués related to Eclipse focus group testing and audiovisual materials. Additionally, we examined the Eclipse promotional website (<http://eclipse.rjrt.com/>) between November 2005 and July 2006. We reviewed the overall website contents and features, including discussion board topics, to determine the presence of viral marketing strategies. This website was taken offline in late August 2006; as of July 2007 it had reappeared online offering the same information (plus a new “Share With a Friend” link) in a more navigable format, with access granted to registered users only. We wrote and reviewed research memos describing the documents, audiovisual materials and the website, noted messages evident in the materials, and identified common themes.

RESULTS

“Objective: To better educate consumers...on the unique characteristics of Premier”¹⁹

RJR stated it withdrew Premier from test market primarily “because smokers did not like it”,²⁰ but a 1989 assessment of the Premier experience by Penelope Cohen of the RJR Marketing Development Department also attributed the failure in part to other issues. According to Cohen, the news media labelled Premier a “smokeless” product, which led to unrealistic consumer expectations.²¹ Early consumer tests conducted by RJR had shown that “less smoke” and “smokeless” were the most popular reasons for consumer interest in Premier.^{22–24} Similarly, studies conducted for the Philip Morris and American Tobacco companies in 1988 found that many consumers thought that Premier was smokeless, and that this feature was linked to the benefit of social acceptability.^{25,26} Consumers also said Premier tasted and smelled bad and was hard to light, describing the flavour as “burnt brussels sprout”,²⁷ “burning plastic or an old tennis shoe”,²⁸ and “barn sweepings”.²⁹ They complained the product was hard to light and keep lit, and that it was difficult to know when the product, which does not burn down, was finished.^{30–32} These deficiencies imposed too great a change in the smoking “ritual” for consumer adoption of the product.³³

RJR attempted to retrain consumers to approve of the modified product while stating publicly that it developed Premier-like products in response to consumer demand.^{34,35} A 1994 report titled “Lessons”³⁶ enumerates plans to re-educate consumers about an ostensibly “reduced-smoke” and “reduced-risk” product, emphasising “[s]idestream reduction, not safety”³⁶ and hosting in-person sessions called “town hall” meetings to present the product.³⁶ The plan was multi-stage and multi-modal, including the distribution of promotional videos and in-person selling sessions. RJR planned to introduce Eclipse to different test markets with different strategies to determine how to best market the cigarette.³⁷

“12 000 smokers...have helped us develop Eclipse”³⁸

Early in the reworking of the failed Premier product into Eclipse, RJR market-tested many different versions of the product, eliciting consumer feedback on flavour, ease of use, and comprehension of the brand’s benefits.^{39–43} An 8 August 1995 “Update to the Board” stated that “[o]ver 12 000 smokers have been involved in the process, with about 8000 taking

home at least 2 packs to try”.⁴⁴ RJR used this extensive market testing as a selling point in its marketing. A July 1994 report on results of focus group sessions including “taped panel discussion on pros and cons of GTC [code name for Eclipse]” noted that “verification of the [reduced second-hand smoke] claim [is] an important issue – and not from a tobacco company”⁴⁵ (emphasis in original). Kevin Verner, RJR’s Director of New Business Development, repeated the 12 000 smokers figure in several speeches and press releases,^{46–50} suggesting a collaborative relationship between company and consumer. Advertisements citing the same figure presented testimonials of several of the market research participants.⁵¹

A 1996 brochure on Eclipse highlights the image of corporation in service of the consumer: “We talked to more than 12 000 people across America and designed Eclipse specifically to meet their desires”.⁵² This brochure includes consumer testimonials to personalise the marketing message and present the empowered smoker as having a voice. For instance, “Charles Quillan, Retired” says “Eclipse is a fantastic product. There’s nothing offensive about Eclipse, and a non-smoker should not be offended by it. It would make a big difference in my life”. The testimonial of “Christina Hunter, Homemaker” reads “The smell of the house changed, much less of a cigarette odor. My husband noticed too. You don’t have the stale odor when you walk in the house. It really made a big difference”. The 12 000 smoker message also helped to portray consumer consensus: “Over 90% of them think that Eclipse is a good idea”.⁵³

Consumer opinion was collected in various ways in the early and mid 1990s, including focus group testing. Unlike typical focus group testing, however, some of these focus groups appeared to pilot the training of participants to think about the product as the company wanted consumers to think, and assess participants’ willingness and preparation to pass along RJR’s marketing message.

For example, in a 9 February 1994 Atlanta all-female focus group, over the course of nearly 2 h participants were asked about their perceptions of risk and their experiences being smokers generally, and were told about a hypothetical new “cigarette that was less of a risk”.¹⁸ This focus group demonstrates potential strategies for consumer training and recruitment of informal word of mouth marketers. First, the facilitator read a statement describing the hypothetical product:

This cigarette nearly eliminates second-hand smoke and significantly reduces the amount of chemical compounds found in cigarette smoke versus the leading brands. This new cigarette heats rather than burns tobacco to reduce the second-hand smoke without sacrificing taste and represents a significant technological breakthrough.¹⁸

Participants in the discussion interpreted the statement to mean less danger for the smoker, even though these terms were not explicitly used in the statement:

[Participant A:] I was wondering, what you read said there’s not going to be second-hand smoke; but it didn’t say it would to be less dangerous for me.

[Participant B:] Yes, it did.

[Participant A:] It did? I wasn’t listening.

[Participant B:] It said it significantly reduces the risk.¹⁸

Next, an RJR representative, “Kevin”, then presented a pie chart depicting the high glycerin to tar ratio in the second-hand smoke:

...[I]n a regular cigarette...20% of [the] smoke that is generated is water and glycerin, a small amount, and 80% of it is tar and nicotine and other compounds

found in cigarette smoke. The cigarette that she was describing here is about 85–90% water and glycerin and about 10% tar and nicotine and other.¹⁸

When asked if they understood what the chart meant, participants answered in the affirmative, though it is clear from later discussion the participants assumed the chart signalled a safer product:

[Participant A]: About 90%, I mean, what percent would you say, less harmful, less harmful than...

[Participant B]: Does it harm your lungs?

[Participant C]: No, it says 80% over there.¹⁸

The tone of the group then shifted to obvious selling language, language that was later used in a promotional video sent to potential customers through direct mail (discussed below):

[Kevin] OK, now, because the smoke is different, watch when I exhale the smoke, because it's mostly water and glycerin, it disappears a lot like your breath does on a cold morning. [*exhales a cloud*] OK? Now, notice the end; see any smoke coming off of that?

[Participant A]: No.

...

[Kevin] You place it on a piece of paper...No more burned furniture! No more burned clothes! No more ashes all over the floor...¹⁸

The strongest demonstration of the power of personal selling in the focus group was enticing focus group participants to try the product, particularly at a time when most were probably experiencing nicotine withdrawal:

[Participant A:] You're not going to let us have one?

[Participant B:] Yeah, you're not going to let us have one, Kev?

[Kevin] I can't let you have one right now.

[Participants:] Whyyyyyyy???

[Kevin] Because we don't have enough of them.

[Participant C]: Look, I've been here an hour!¹⁸

Finally participants were allowed to test the cigarette, to their visible relief. After the participants had smoked their cigarettes, Kevin solicited comments on how participants would spread the word about Eclipse:

[Kevin] When you all go home and you talk to a smoker about this, how would you tell them to smoke this cigarette?...Tell me what you're going to tell a smoking friend at work or at home on how to smoke this cigarette.

[Participant A:] That it heats rather than burns, so you don't have a mess.¹⁸

Even in these early feedback-eliciting sessions, there appeared to be interest in participants' ability to retain and repeat the marketing language. This does not reflect typical focus group activity. It also shows how the "testimonials" from "12 000 smokers" may not have been entirely spontaneous but encouraged in focus groups or similar testing activities. Although the number of people reached through focus groups was probably a small fraction of the "12 000 smokers...[who] helped us develop Eclipse",³⁸ this focus group illustrates one possible genesis of the personal selling and viral marketing dynamics.

Advertising, point of sale and direct marketing

Advertising in the rollout of Eclipse was intended primarily to generate awareness and interest in the brand,⁵⁴ whereas actual product trial would be tightly controlled by personal selling and viral marketing. Early advertisements appeared in 1996 in Chattanooga, Tennessee, USA, the first Eclipse test market, as the “Imagine” campaign. As the June 1996 examples from the campaign in fig 1 shows, the campaign asked viewers to “Imagine cigarette smoke that smells like” purified water pouring from a bottle, or to “Imagine cigarette smoke that disappears like” the steam from a tea kettle.

According to Philip Morris’ analysis in June 1996, people trying Eclipse most often cited “the benefits to non-smokers, in particular the reduction of second-hand smoke”⁵⁵ as the reason for being interested in the brand. Like Premier, however, Eclipse’s taste and difficulty of use were cited as the main dislikes.^{55,56} Aware of this, RJR tried different strategies as it entered additional test markets “to determine the best way to expand the brand in 1998”,⁵⁷ using previous test market results to change messages. For instance, in Lincoln, Nebraska, USA, RJR used mass media, but with a different campaign from Chattanooga.⁵⁸ Since Chattanooga consumers prioritised social acceptability and second-hand smoke issues, the Lincoln advertising campaign introduced Eclipse on a social relationships platform (fig 2).

The advertisement print reads, “Be one of the first in Lincoln to discover what **80% less second-hand smoke** and **virtually no lingering odor** can mean to you” (emphasis in original). By contrast, in Atlanta advertising was used to “drive adult smokers to one trial location” where “personal selling” and “word of mouth programs”⁵⁷ served as the main promotional channels. This trial location was a “smokers’ lounge” inside a large indoor shopping mall (that restricted smoking in common areas) where visitors would be coached by RJR employees on how to smoke Eclipse; this would also be the only sales outlet in Atlanta.^{59,60}

Point of sale marketing offered opportunities for personal selling but also required RJR to give up some control over what information consumers received when interacting with individual retailers. In Chattanooga, “early high profile retail exposure encouraged curiosity trial”⁶¹ rather than the carefully controlled “informed” trial intended with the personal selling mechanisms. RJR responded by creating the “retail intercept program”⁶² in which RJR representatives trained retailers to educate consumers about Eclipse using personal selling mechanisms. The “Team Sell-In Approach [consisted of] sales and retail reps work[ing] together to merchandise/display and continue retailer education process”,⁶² including a “walk thru event” preview of Eclipse, personal selling training (complete with role play) and incentives for “retail ambassadors”.⁶³

RJR also introduced a new promotional video, the “Barbara” video,¹⁷ through direct marketing and other channels. The “Barbara” video was an approximately 14-min video of a spokesperson named “Barbara” (fig 3), described internally as a “Testimonial Presenter”,⁶⁴ who promoted and demonstrated how to light, smoke and dispose of Eclipse. The video begins with “Barbara” telling a smoker persecution story:

Take the other day. I was taking a smoke break at work, standing outside—*of course*—my office building. I was on the *street*...when, suddenly, out of nowhere, this...this man runs up to me and yells “No smoking near the building! Smoke there—out on the curb!” I was...shocked! I mean, there *was* 2 million cubic feet of air out there!⁶⁵ (emphasis in original).

This sympathetically portrays the smoker beleaguered by smoking prohibitions and belittles the empowerment people increasingly feel to speak up about second-hand smoke indoors and out. The video then discusses the benefits of smoking Eclipse, including:

[T]here's almost no smoke at the lit end...nearly 90% less secondhand smoke... That's a nice number, especially when you're sharing life's journey with a non-smoker, like my husband, Bill...Eclipse leaves your curtains, walls, windows, even your teeth a lot cleaner than other cigarettes...Who would think that a cigarette would let us cut down on second-hand smoke without cutting down on satisfaction? ...It's not just smokers like us who are crazy about Eclipse. People who don't smoke are raving about it too, like Bill.¹⁷

“Barbara” then shows a video within the video, one from “RJ Reynolds Tobacco Company, the folks who created Eclipse”.¹⁷ This video demonstrates Eclipse’s construction using animation and narration and bar chart graphics comparing tar and nicotine numbers among different brands and Eclipse, as well as the smoke chemistry pie chart shown in focus groups.

After a testimonials segment from others who appear to be average smokers, “Barbara” invites viewers to attend a “Sneak Preview...they’re all over town, and they’re fun... You’ll meet other adult smokers, and it’s short and entertaining”.¹⁷ RJR marketers felt Barbara “symbolizes the personality and attitude of the 12 000 smokers who developed Eclipse”.⁶⁶ The “Barbara” video acted as the major form of recruitment for the personal selling events, offering a free carton of Eclipse and encouraging participants to bring along “a friend who smokes”,¹⁷ to try the product for free and ask questions directly to RJR, thus gaining access to previously untapped potential customers via viral spread. RJR planned to capture potential consumers who did not receive the video through direct mail or view it at a Sneak Preview with the Retail Intercept Program, distributing videos at point of sale.⁶² It is unclear how many videos total were distributed, as the video underwent several revisions in 1994 and 1995.^{67,68}

Some people identified as the most likely adopters also received sample packs or cartons with the mailed video. For those who had already tried the brand, the video was expected to be “a Q&A or reinforcement device”.⁶⁹ Direct mail marketing was used to introduce the product, to invite consumers to Eclipse parties, and to encourage triers to keep using Eclipse,⁷⁰ but it did not generate as much market share as the personal selling efforts.^{71,72} By 1999, sustained “streamlined marketing” focused on printed materials, the Eclipse website, consumer relations and retail.⁷⁰

Tupperware-like parties: “Efforts to educate consumers via advertising...will have limited impact versus word of mouth”²¹

Consumer training sessions internally referred to as “Sneak Previews”, or “Discovery Groups”, were intended to “[b]uild detailed knowledge on all aspects of product via interactive relationship with smokers” and “[e]nsure critical mass of ‘informed’ consumers prior to retail launch”⁷³ (emphasis in original). The main emphases were: (1) the social benefits of ostensibly reduced second-hand smoke, (2) how to use the product correctly and (3) to minimise “uninformed trial”⁷⁴ (trial of the product without the “benefit” of RJR’s educational effort). Another major motivation was to “[m]aximize smoker knowledge and understanding of product benefits, *allowing them to become ambassadors for Eclipse prior to launch at retail*”⁷⁵ (emphasis added).

Several guidelines for holding Sneak Previews^{53,76–78} detailed the activities at these events, whose “[o]verall purpose [was] [t]o impart a large amount of information on Eclipse in an engaging, entertaining, participative manner, to generate informed trial among prime

prospect smokers”⁷⁹ (low-tar smokers who were concerned about the social, cosmetic and health effects of smoking). Warm and welcoming RJR facilitators asked about personal experiences of being a smoker, followed by a discussion of Eclipse, distribution of a brochure and a showing of the “Barbara” video. In some events facilitators lit an Eclipse cigarette during the video and later ask participants if anyone had noticed he or she was smoking. Participants tried Eclipse with careful instructions on how to light and smoke the product, and facilitators cut open the rod to show attendees the spent tobacco inside and offered more free Eclipse cigarettes to take home. Events ended with an elicitation of participants’ willingness to buy the product and spread the word about its benefits.

A 19 September 1996 memo described plans to provide Eclipse “ambassadors” with free cigarettes in exchange for “holding a [T]upperware-type party in their apartment”.⁸⁰ Similarly, Mike Kennedy, an RJR marketing executive, stated in a March 28, 1995 letter to fellow marketing executive Larry Sasso:

My vision is a group of qualified presenters, recruited from our database of long term users/acceptors, that are motivated by the features of our product along with the added incentive of aided income, spreading the message that there is finally an alternative method of enjoying smoking. These select people would provide their attendees with our proposition and the means would be supplied with our product.
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After the first quarter 1996 market tests in Chattanooga, RJR decided to give fewer free cartons at Sneak Previews because multiple carton samples made “uninformed trial” too easy.⁶¹

In 1995 Jack Bellis of the RJR team developing Eclipse reported “80–90% of all smokers are interested in trying Eclipse after seeing the concept via ads, video, or Discovery Groups...Smokers trying Eclipse after seeing Direct Marketing materials (including video) tell and average of 12 other people (7 smokers/5 non-smokers) about Eclipse”.⁸² An 18 April 1996 RJR presentation discussed how the “12 000 smokers” (including market research participants), Tupperware-like “Sneak Previews” and the direct marketing “Barbara” video worked together so “knowledgeable smokers convert other smokers who in turn talk to other smokers, and so on”.⁶⁶

Using the Eclipse website to sustain viral marketing

The “Sneak Preview” strategy was intended to generate a critical mass of adopters from which to launch the product nationally, then be replaced with sustained marketing efforts⁶² such as the Eclipse website.^{70,83}

The Eclipse website (<http://www.eclipse.rjrt.com>) contained promotional messages about Eclipse, a “Smokers’ Bulletin Board”, (where visitors could discuss the product, the experience of learning to use it and the experiences of being smokers in general; a portal for spreading positive word of mouth) and a Frequently Asked Questions page⁸⁴ with language similar to that used in focus groups, the “Barbara” video and the Sneak Preview guidelines. A marketing plan from March 27, 2003 indicated the intention of RJR’s “Communication Strategy [to] Drive to Website to Generate INFORMED TRIAL”, (fig 4).⁸⁵

RJR stated on the website usage policy that “RJRT assumes no responsibility for any misleading or inaccurate statements posted on the bulletin board”.⁸⁶ The Eclipse website, a considerably more cost-effective marketing tool than the personal selling mechanisms discussed above, offered the same information as the personal selling venues and similarly encouraged participants to spread word of mouth about the product being promoted.

DISCUSSION

The personalised field marketing strategy RJR employed to promote Eclipse allowed RJR to cultivate a targeted group of enthusiasts and avoid the mass rejection that followed the mass promotion of Premier. The Tupperware-like Sneak Preview parties for Eclipse were designed to convince smokers of its social, cosmetic and health “benefits” and to motivate them to deliver the message to others. By seeding word of mouth information about Eclipse, RJR could avoid liability for health claims smokers made to each other.

With US Federal Judge Gladys Kessler’s August 2006 ruling prohibiting indirectly implying a brand’s health benefits, the opportunity exists to hold cigarette companies accountable for health claims spread through viral marketing channels. Difficulty arises, however, in regulating misleading corporate speech that is not directly spoken by corporations. The standard of measurement needs to be consumer perception: if consumers perceive a cigarette brand to be “safer” than any other brand, then the marketing is misleading, including viral marketing that encourages people to believe the ideas they spread about the product are their own. Consumer perception could be assessed through consumer interviews, news items quoting consumers, weblogs and bulletin boards. With the latter two forms of media, however, it is difficult to determine the true identity of the authors.

The Internet is currently, and will probably increase in being, a major vehicle for promoting tobacco brands and tobacco-friendly lifestyles in ways that are currently very difficult to regulate. Freeman and Chapman⁸⁷ demonstrated the potential for anonymous user-initiated content websites such as You Tube to promote tobacco use in a “below the line” manner.

Consumer participation in Eclipse brand development was advertised to enhance brand acceptance. First, RJR determined through marketing research that there was consumer enthusiasm for the concept of a smokeless, odourless, ashless, less risky cigarette. The “12 000 smokers” advertising, however, communicated consumer demand specifically for Eclipse rather than for the hypothetical concept. The company appears to be in the service of the consumer and merely responding to consumer demand. We saw, however, that the elaborate marketing efforts for Eclipse were intended to re-educate consumers to adopt a product once rejected in market.

Second, advertising consumer involvement in the development of Eclipse could give smokers a sense of importance and make them feel heard and attended to. It should be noted that RJR’s 2007 Camel Signature project, in which consumers sampled and voted for their favourite flavour blends of Camel, now called Camel Signature Blends, employs the same consumer participation idea. Possibly reflecting the current efficiency of the website’s reach, Camel Signature advertising claims that “60 000 adult smokers like you” helped to develop the product.⁸⁸ RJR’s experience with viral marketing of Eclipse has been followed by consumer-centric, interactive, branded websites for other (potentially more popular) products such as the Camel Signature Blends and Camel Snus.

Third, a consumer participation approach also combats the denormalisation of tobacco companies. The company becomes a responsive collaborator, a humanised organisation that is not so different from the average smoker. An important element of viral marketing is the removal of the sense of being manipulated by corporations. Particularly in the face of growing negative public sentiment about the tobacco industry, tobacco companies stand to benefit from marketing that does not appear to originate with the tobacco industry or their highly-paid marketing firms. RJR employed the same strategy in 1994 to infiltrate a young adult market “to have the hipsters feel as though smoking Camel is their idea, that they started the trend”.⁸⁹

It is difficult to judge the success or failure of Eclipse, which is still in test market after more than a decade. Since other PREPs such as Philip Morris' Accord have already launched and failed, perhaps that Eclipse is still in test market points to its relative success. This experience has offered RJR a testing ground to determine the feasibility of below the line marketing strategies for new products that may mislead the public, discourage quitting and divide the tobacco control community. Regardless of the brand's financial success or failure, the intentional viral spread of company-initiated messages deserves attention.

Public health officials should be prepared to employ as much creativity in protecting the public from misleading tobacco marketing as the tobacco industry employs in disseminating these messages. New standards of measurement are needed, in this case the standard of consumer perception, in determining the legality of tobacco industry marketing. Viral marketing such as that described here encourages people to think marketing messages are their own idea. In facing these forms of marketing with an eye to effective legislation, focus needs to be not on specific elements (such as the term "light" which can easily be modified to subvert legislation) but rather on consumer perception. If consumers exposed to the marketing believe a falsity about a tobacco product, the marketing messages are deceptive. Tobacco companies are adept at circumventing marketing restrictions, and legislation dealing with specific marketing elements is inherently reactive. Proactive legislation would use consumer beliefs as the yardstick by which to measure the truth or falseness of marketing messages.

What this paper adds

- Although regulation of cigarette marketing is increasing globally, including efforts to prohibit misleading advertising, the tobacco industry is quite adept at circumventing advertising and marketing restrictions.
- This paper explores a covert form of marketing employed by RJ Reynolds Tobacco Company (RJR) to spread its pro-tobacco message to potential consumers that has not been addressed by health researchers and legislators—viral marketing—wherein marketing messages are spread through consumers' social networks via word of mouth.
- Viral marketing could help evade mass rejection of new ostensibly "harm-reduced" tobacco products, circumvent marketing restrictions and allow tobacco companies to benefit from health claims consumers make to each other.
- Tobacco harm reduction efforts need to address not only toxicity of new products but also how they are promoted.

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Figure 1.

The introductory “Imagine” campaign for Eclipse launched in Chattanooga, Tennessee, USA, asked consumers to “imagine the unimaginable”: that smoke from a brand of cigarettes could smell as clean as purified water or that it could evaporate as quickly as steam from a tea kettle. Second-hand smoke being a central issue for Eclipse’s target audience, these advertisements focused on cleanliness, purity and the “benefits” offered by reduced second-hand smoke. The campaign was intended to generate awareness of Eclipse and pave the way for the viral marketing strategies employed by RJ Reynolds (RJR) by getting people excited about a clean, pure, low-smoke cigarette (advertisement source: Pollay advertising archive, <http://www.tobacco.org/ads/>).



Figure 2. A later Eclipse advertising campaign from Lincoln, Nebraska, USA, which emphasised social relationships. According to RJ Reynolds (RJR) marketing tests, Eclipse’s target audience was particularly concerned about how second-hand smoke decreased the social acceptability of smoking, so RJR refined the Chattanooga campaign to emphasise social benefits of a “reduced smoke” product (advertisement source: Pollay advertising archive, <http://www.tobacco.org/ads/>).



Figure 3. Picture of “Barbara”, host of the instructional video promoting Eclipse, which included an invitation to a special event in which consumers and their friends could learn more about the brand, try it for themselves and receive free product. The video was distributed through direct marketing, retail outlets and “smokers’ lounges” staffed by RJ Reynolds (RJR) employees and placed in high-visibility public areas throughout the test market regions. It served as (1) a vehicle for the normalisation of Eclipse (and by association, RJR) by portraying apparent majority consensus among Eclipse triers, and (2) a way for potential brand users to deliver people in their social circles to RJR for in-person marketing.

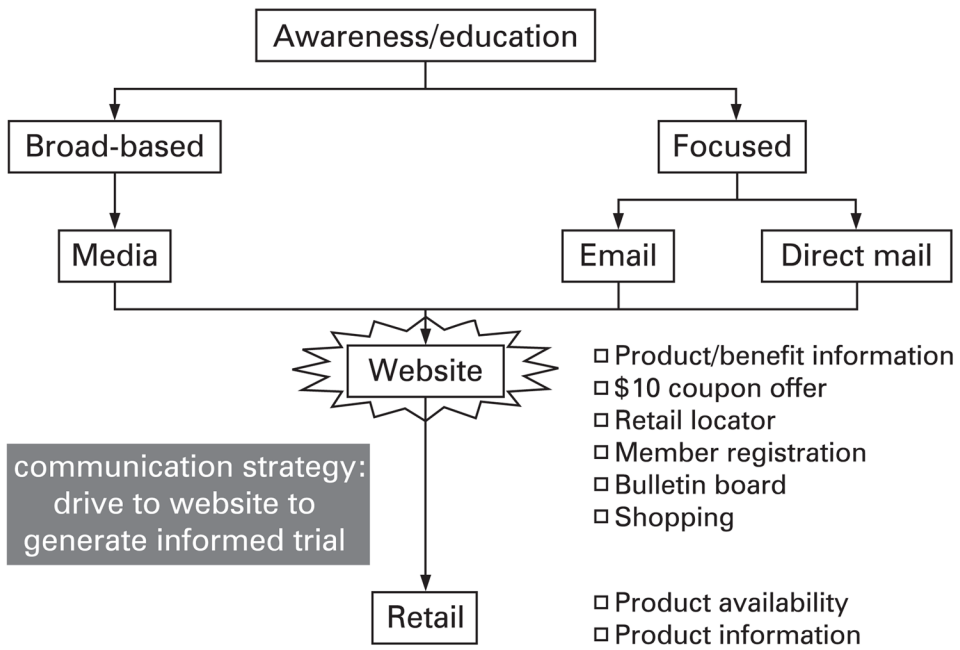


Figure 4. Illustrating the role of the Eclipse website, this figure summarises the Internet marketing strategy for Eclipse.⁸⁵ RJ Reynolds (RJR) believed that “informed trial” was necessary for consumers to learn to accept Eclipse. The company’s approach to achieving a critical mass of acceptors included the Eclipse website, designed to communicate the brand’s social, cosmetic and health “benefits”. The website acted as a portal for spreading positive word of mouth by means of the “Smokers’ Bulletin Board”, where website visitors could discuss the information they learned from the website and elsewhere. The consumer to consumer discussion of the information provided by RJR encouraged in the early focus groups and the Sneak Previews is continued here on the website’s discussion board.