

Smokers Are Suckers: Should Incongruous Metaphors Be Used in Public Health Prevention?

“It’s easy to quit smoking. I’ve done it hundreds of times”

—Mark Twain

There is no real need to question anymore why so many efforts are made in the war against tobacco. As most are now aware, smokers are not the only people endangered by tobacco use. The latest World Health Organization estimates reveal that in the United States alone, 50 000 people die each year from environmental tobacco smoke, constituting approximately 11% of all tobacco-related deaths; this number reaches almost 80 000 in Europe.¹ Many countries have made great strides in trying to reduce tobacco use within their borders, but in a few such places the tobacco epidemic rages on, particularly in emerging markets like China and India.² In light of these sobering facts, associations of nonsmokers worldwide have joined governments and nongovernmental organizations in creating various public awareness campaigns warning of the dangers of tobacco use.

Recently, measures to fight tobacco were taken to a whole new level in France thanks to—or because of, depending on one’s sensibilities—a campaign sponsored by an association called *Les Droits des Non Fumeurs* (Nonsmokers’ Rights) featuring the slogan “smoking makes you tobacco’s slave.” The strength of the campaign, however, lies in the pictorial, incongruous metaphor at the core of the strategy: the image shows an adolescent on his knees, facing a standing adult male in a posture that clearly evokes an

act of sexual submission.³ The image leaves little room for alternate interpretation as the adult holds the younger’s head with one hand while the adolescent holds a cigarette in his mouth.

HIT ME WITH YOUR BEST SHOT

Using the aforementioned campaign as an example, one can easily see a real paradigm shift in the strategies employed to prevent adolescents from smoking. After years of playing the fear card, including graphic depictions of the consequences of tobacco use, surprise is now the prevailing emotion. This new strategy and its nonverbal incongruous metaphor most easily described as “smokers are suckers” invokes such an emotion from the consumer by associating smoking with something even less acceptable: teenagers being forced by adults to perform sexual acts. The move is, to say the least, quite a gamble. There is indeed an obvious risk of cognitive interference between the message perceived by consumers and the one supposed to strike us: smoking is bad for others too.

At the scientific level, Lakoff and Johnson’s theory of conceptual metaphors in cognitive linguistics⁴ accounts for the strategy behind this disruptive campaign. Simply put, a metaphor is what makes us experience something in terms of something else by mapping from a source domain (suckers) to a target domain (smokers) that are generally distinct from one another.^{5,6}

FROM ARTFUL DEVIATION TO DISCREPANCY

Although the theory of conceptual metaphors allows us to grasp the logic behind the communication strategy, it cannot account entirely for the subsequent reactions it triggered. During an experiment aiming at transmitting attitudes through advertising, the effects of various metaphors have been measured.⁷ It appears that the effects of those rhetoric tricks rely mostly on their artful deviance.⁸ More precisely, for a metaphor to be efficient and to change consumers’ beliefs, it needs to be incongruous⁷ and, ipso facto, lead to surprise. In other words, nobody expected a nonverbal metaphor on smoking to take not only a sexual turn, but also an illegal one by depicting the tobacco industry as a sexual predator and to a certain extent evoke submission for capital gain. As a result, the metaphor therefore moves from artful deviation to discrepancy.

Metaphors are an efficient tool for impacting public opinion and reinforcing public policy, and their use for such purposes is nothing new. For instance, control or military metaphors are often used in public health prevention, including campaigns targeting tobacco use. This was the case in early 2003 when the deadly severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) spread in 37 countries. The metaphor employed in the UK’s media coverage was “SARS IS A KILLER.”⁹ Wallis and Nerlich accurately pointed the existence of “an overlap between the Killer metaphor and traditional militaristic metaphors: both rely

on an independent set of FORCE metaphors.^{9(p2634)}

The French case took a different tack from most public health prevention campaigns, however, with the move from the “tobacco is a killer” metaphor to “smokers are suckers”; in fact, they deviated largely from all marketing codes of conduct by associating smoking with moral rather than health consequences. And to a certain extent, the campaign worked. People were surprised, if not upset, because the image was interpreted by consumers in light of their past experiences, eliciting in many cases a surprising déjà vu. The fact that the image is not explicit makes the campaign an even more likely topic for discussion, as is evidenced by the public debate in France and worldwide.

DISRUPTIVE STRATEGIES: PREVENTION OR PROVOCATION?

If people manage to get past the obvious sexual reference and end up making the connection between the image and smoking, the “smokers are suckers” metaphor leaves no room at all for a positive interpretation. This intense negativity could be viewed as a positive from the perspective of fighting tobacco use. Although strong doubts exist as to the way the public opinion perceived the campaign, the tobacco industry seems to have received the message perfectly well: it is extremely unhappy to be pictured as a pedophile.¹⁰

The Nonsmokers’ Rights Association sees the matter differently, arguing that the campaign was merely a novel strategy that sought to garner the attention of young people on a major public health issue that concerns them deeply.¹¹ Time and the result of the political debate that unraveled in France

told us the organization did not make a smart move. So far, though, it is clear that the big winner of this controversy is the marketing agency that designed the campaign. This public discussion surrounding the campaign has certainly surpassed their wildest expectations, particularly given that only 15 000 campaign flyers have been printed and space in only two magazines has been purchased.

Besides, it seems that most of the young people, to whom the campaign was primarily directed, were not as shocked as many of the adults who saw the image. This may mean, then, that the campaign missed its mark because it did not have the desired effect on its target audience. Metaphors are only successful if their meaning is understood by the people they target.⁴ Lakoff and Johnson accurately remind us that “In allowing us to focus on one aspect of a concept . . . a metaphorical concept can keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor.”^{4(p10)} The “smokers are suckers” metaphor problem carries an ambiguity. From one point of view, it can support public policy by presenting smokers as victims and tobacco and its manufacturers as aggressors. The public opinion might have perceived this initiative as a strong support for victims.¹² However, by judging from reactions to this campaign—ranging from French government officials to journalists and bloggers worldwide—the word is almost exclusively down on the use of sexual submission in a public prevention campaign. The metaphor is so powerful it leaves no room for a constructive public policy debate between the involved stakeholders given that, for example, the criticism can expand to any government collecting taxes from tobacco sales,

making them guilty by association. Hence, not surprisingly, almost nothing is known regarding the concrete actions the Nonsmokers’ Rights Association might effectively be taking to fight smoking.

BRAINY STRATEGIES

As suggested by a governmental report recently published in France, an option to improve the efficiency of strategies in public health prevention could be a more systematic use of behavioral and brain sciences when designing them.¹³ Recent work in this field provides insights regarding how public service announcements about smoking should be tailored to encourage better consumer recall.¹⁴

The war against tobacco is certainly a tough one. But we’d rather fight with finely crafted strategies rather than poorly designed weapons of mass communication that can lead to collateral damages.

And this is not (just) a metaphor. ■

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