

Editorial

Smokes and cyberspace: a public health disaster in the making

Three articles in this month's journal raise serious concerns about the internet becoming the future marketplace for the sale of cigarettes.¹⁻³ One seller predicts that 20% of all cigarettes will be sold over the internet in 10 years. The warning is clear: if the tobacco industry embraces this new unregulated medium, many of the major public interventions that we have developed to curb real world lung cancer could go up in a puff of cyber smoke. Taxes, ad bans, and youth access laws are easily eroded online.

To test this premise, I took my own digital tour of the web starting first with Brown and Williamson's (B&W) and RJ Reynolds' (RJR) on line document depositories, and found megabyte plans for moving operations to the world wide web (www.tobaccoresolution.com). A juicy, 1997, RJR internal memo boasts of the new power of the web to get their brands warm and cozy with individual smokers. Camel would have its own home page with instant clicks to Camel Cash, chat rooms, a store, and, of course, the date of the next Camel Club Night nearest you; a virtual classroom for teaching nicotine addiction. Similarly, B & W has plans to use the web to market its brands. Not surprisingly, B&W successfully sued New York State when it banned internet sales in 2000. The judge unfortunately traded the health of lungs over the commercial interests of the tobacco industry.

My next visit was to www.discount-cigarettes.com, a portal for 50 plus online retailers. Most sites offered single cartons at half the price you pay at a bricks and mortar retail outlet. You only had to read the site's confidentiality policies not to share information with state tax officials to realise why the cigarettes were so cheap.

The federal Jenkins Act requires out of state vendors to report purchasers' names to in-state tax departments, but sites on native American land claim sovereignty from state authority, and sites from low tax states, such as Virginia, claim that by paying its 4 cent tax, their reporting is done. So much for taxes, price elasticities, and quitting. With all those cartons hanging around the house, smokers may even smoke more.

Cigarette advertising

The US Congress banned cigarette advertising on all electronic media in 1970 and the US Justice Department holds the opinion that the web meets the definition of such media. Tell that to Sante Fe Tobacco, the company that hosts www.nascigs.com. Upon entry, you listen to music and view digital animation, all of it to get you to smoke their American Spirit brand. A few clicks away, there's www.westonline.com from Germany that airs 30 second television commercials, verboten in the USA since 1971. RJR sells its Eclipse cigarette online (www.rjrdirect.com) and promotes its "safety" with 50 plus pages of questionable scientific information, information that you could never fit on to the walls of a convenience store. Swedish Match's www.myexalt.com promotes a new "safer" snuff as a temporary source of nicotine in places where you cannot smoke. Warning: don't spit on your keyboards.

Oh, and of course, there are the kids who each day are finding it harder and harder to buy cigarettes in the real world as states and communities crack down on illegal sales to minors. All a 15 year old needs to get around this hassle is a money order and a copy of an older brother's ID and youth access laws are history. Michigan's attorney general recently conducted a sting of internet sellers and 75 cartons were sold to minors. Conducting compliance checks could be costly and impractical for a state to do. Can you imagine staking out a 13 year old youth's house for three days waiting for the UPS truck to show up? Since many of the sites do not recognise a state's authority in the first place, a licence to sell or a fine for an illegal sale is practically impossible.

New smokers

And for the new smokers, there are links to really flashy pages that show you how to start. One link brought me to "Guide to cool smoking" that provided pictures and details on "French Inhaling", a trick remembered from the movie "Grease" (www.smokingsection.com). From there, I surfed to a "Smoking fetish" (www.smokesigs.com) page that featured nude models covered only in a gauzy haze of smoke.

So much for making old and proven measures history. How about the new, powerful applications that are hidden in cookies that build data bases about an individual's smoking behaviour every time they log on. What if you fail to make that weekly reorder or if you quit. Tailored emails could be sent to your home PC offering discounts or promotions. Or how about the email from the smoking fetish site with an attached gif file of an enticing smoking model with a simple message "Don't you miss us". Guaranteed instant relapse!

Well, that's my smoking cyber tour. Cigarette ads and sales over the web could do more damage than a global computer virus. In the real world, cigarettes cause lung cancer. The lung gets cut out and the smoker dies. Reformatting your hard drive to get rid of a virus is easy. Wisely, the Framework Convention for Tobacco Control calls for a ban on cigarette ads on the web. After my tour, I recommend that it be amended to ban cigarette sales entirely. Cigarettes just do not belong in cyberspace.

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- 2 Ribisl KM, Kim AE, Williams RS. Web sites selling cigarettes: how many are there in the USA and what are their sales practices? *Tobacco Control* 2001; 10:352-9.
- 3 Unger JB, Rohrbach LA, Ribisl KM. Are adolescents buying cigarettes on the internet. *Tobacco Control* 2001;10:360-3.