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The perimetric boycott: a tool for tobacco control advocacy

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Abstract

Objectives—To propose criteria to help advocates: (1) determine when tobacco related boycotts may be useful; (2) select appropriate targets; and (3) predict and measure boycott success.

Methods—Analysis of tobacco focused boycotts retrieved from internal tobacco industry documents websites and other scholarship on boycotts.

Results—Tobacco related boycotts may be characterised by boycott target and reason undertaken. Most boycotts targeted the industry itself and were called for political or economic reasons unrelated to tobacco disease, often resulting in settlements that gave the industry marketing and public relations advantages. Even a lengthy health focused boycott of tobacco industry food subsidiaries accomplished little, making demands the industry was unlikely to meet. In contrast, a perimetric boycott (targeting institutions at the perimeter of the core target) of an organisation that was taking tobacco money mobilised its constituency and convinced the organisation to end the practice.

Conclusions—Direct boycotts of the industry have rarely advanced tobacco control. Perimetric boycotts of industry allies offer advocates a promising tool for further marginalising the industry. Successful boycotts include a focus on the public health consequences of tobacco use; an accessible point of pressure; a mutual interest between the target and the boycotters; realistic goals; and clear and measurable demands.

Abbreviations

ACT-UP, AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power; APHA, American Public Health Association; BAT, British American Tobacco; B&W, Brown and Williamson; CLASH, Coalition of Lavender-Americans on Smoking and Health; GASP, Georgians Against Smoking Pollution; GLAAD, Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation; LGBT, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender; PM, Philip Morris; RJR, RJ Reynolds; STAT, Stop Teenage Addiction to Tobacco

Boycotts have played an important role in social change for centuries.¹ The term was coined in 1880 when Irish peasants successfully shunned Charles Boycott, a ruthless landlord's agent, by "cutting off all social and economic relations and communications with him".² Boycotts have been called by labour organisers, consumers, ethnic and other minority groups, religious communities, and environmental activists, among others, to redress a host of grievances.

While much has been written about boycotts,^{1–6} very little research has addressed boycotts relating to the tobacco industry.⁷ Yet in the last 50 years, more than a dozen boycotts have been directed against the industry for many reasons.^{8–14} We examined these and other actions against the tobacco industry to analyse what kinds of boycotts may be most effective for tobacco control advocacy.

We identified tobacco related boycotts by searching internal tobacco industry documents made available by the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement between the attorneys general of 46 US states and the major US tobacco companies.^{15 16} We also searched major publications (using the Lexis Nexis Academic Universe database and other sources), and conducted interviews with organisers of recent boycotts.^{17 18} We analysed these actions using Friedman’s taxonomy of boycotts³ and considered how their short and long term effects may have helped or hurt tobacco control efforts.

We identified a type of boycott, a variant of the secondary boycott, which we call *perimetric* because the selected target may be considered socially located at the perimeter of the “true” or core target. Such perimeter institutions, we suggest, may function as a form of insulation or social boundary protection for the core targeted institution (in this case, the tobacco industry) that a perimetric boycott can challenge or weaken. Based on these analyses, we argue that the perimetric boycott has promise as a tobacco control strategy. We propose criteria for selecting appropriate boycott targets, predicting likely outcomes, and measuring boycott success.

BACKGROUND

Types of boycotts

The consumer boycott is an attempt “to achieve certain objectives by urging individual consumers to refrain from making selected purchases in the marketplace”.³ Friedman’s taxonomy of boycotts distinguishes between primary and secondary boycotts.³ A primary boycott targets the offending party directly; a secondary boycott targets a secondary entity affiliated with the offending party when that party is hard to boycott directly—for example, a company that makes no products for the retail market. The assumption is that pressuring the secondary party will prompt it to urge the primary party to acquiesce to boycotters’ demands. Another strategy is to undertake a “buycott”, an action that *encourages* purchases to reward behaviour.³

Predicting and appraising success

Friedman suggests that many factors influence boycott success.³ For example, announcements should be made by prominent individuals or organisations and identify well known targets. The complaints should be perceived as legitimate and uncomplicated. Successful boycotts usually include: (1) widespread media coverage; (2) an image conscious target; (3) target responsiveness to outside pressures; and (4) realistic demands.³ A successful boycott is predicated on consumers’ ability to recall, identify, and decline to purchase or support targeted products, services, or organisations. Boycotts should be called when no competing boycotts on related issues are extant and acceptable substitutes for boycotted products are readily available.³

TOBACCO RELATED BOYCOTTS: EXAMPLES

Health focused

Infact—The most prominent and long lasting tobacco related boycott in recent years, instigated in 1984 by GASP (Georgians Against Smoking Pollution) and adopted in 1990 by STAT (Stop Teenage Addiction to Tobacco), was embraced in 1994 by Infact (now Corporate Accountability International). Aware of the difficulty of boycotting tobacco (a limited pool of potential, addicted boycotters), these organisations focused on the food subsidiaries of the tobacco giants,¹⁹ targeting Nabisco Foods, then of RJ Reynolds (RJR) and Kraft Foods of Philip Morris (PM), now Altria.²⁰ Infact demanded that PM and RJR “stop marketing that appeals to young people, stop spreading tobacco addiction internationally, stop influence over and interference in public policy on issues of tobacco and health, stop deceiving people about

the dangers of tobacco, and pay the high costs of health care associated with the tobacco epidemic".²¹ At its height, the boycott was endorsed by over 200 organisations²² and a 2000 survey found that "16% of respondents familiar with the company said they had boycotted its products in the past year".²³

Although PM viewed the boycott's damage to the company as "more perceptual than actual",²⁴ it closely monitored boycott activities.^{25–27} The boycott lasted until June of 2003, when Infact called off the action²⁸ in acknowledgment of the international Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.²⁹ Infact declared victory, saying that the boycott had helped force the tobacco industry to change its behaviour,¹⁷ although none of the demands were met. They were vague, unrealistic or difficult to measure and the list of "do not buy" products was lengthy, contrary to Friedman's identified predictors of boycott success. However, the boycott may have achieved other aims, such as calling public attention to tobacco industry practices and gaining recognition for Infact.

GLAAD—For several years, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), one of the leading national lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) organisations in the USA, hosted Brown & Williamson (B&W) sponsored Lucky Strike smoking lounges at its annual fundraising banquets. In 2001, the Coalition of Lavender-Americans on Smoking and Health (CLASH), an LGBT tobacco control group, organised opposition to the lounges.³⁰ (The first author is a founding member of both CLASH and GLAAD.) According to the then vice-president of CLASH, Bob Gordon, asking supporters of GLAAD to boycott the banquets was considered only after attempts to negotiate with GLAAD had failed. "The last thing we wanted to do was harm one of our own groups that does great work," Gordon said. "But it was important that GLAAD hear that many of its grass roots supporters were uncomfortable with the tobacco link."¹⁸

CLASH members demonstrated at the 2001 San Francisco banquet³⁰ and made a documentary about the smoking lounge which further publicised the issue.³¹ Nonetheless, the smoking lounges remained in 2002. Without calling for a full scale boycott, CLASH spearheaded an email protest in which supporters urged GLAAD to discontinue the lounges, and several long time GLAAD benefactors threatened to withhold support. In 2003, GLAAD eliminated the smoking lounges.¹⁸ The CLASH action, essentially the threat of a boycott, achieved its objective.

CLASH took advantage of the fact that GLAAD was dependent on its membership, not on the tobacco industry. This boycott sought to get GLAAD to eliminate the smoking lounges, thereby denying the tobacco company a point of access to the LGBT market and the public relations benefit it derived from that association as a "friend" of the community. Further, GLAAD's discontinuation of the lounges would emphasise community denormalisation of tobacco use. Unlike conventional secondary boycotts in which the target (GLAAD) is pressured to get the offending party (B&W) to change, advocates sought only to get GLAAD to change its own behaviour. This goal was within GLAAD's power to accomplish, since a beneficiary need not accept a donation.

Non-health focused

Most tobacco related boycotts have not focused on the health hazards of tobacco. However, an examination of their unintended consequences offers cautionary lessons.

White racists—In the mid 1950s, white racists in the American South conducted a boycott of PM for hiring African Americans, advertising in their press, and supporting their civil rights.³² The boycott apparently had a negligible effect on the company's bottom line,^{33 34} though the boycotters claimed otherwise.³⁵ Decades later, however, PM mined the episode for public

relations purposes. When a 1985 *New York State Journal of Medicine* article accused PM of trying to silence African Americans on the dangers of smoking by financially supporting their organisations,³⁶ PM's vice president of public affairs suggested responding with "the history of Philip Morris's involvement in the black community".³⁷ PM produced an ad that touted its support for civil rights, highlighting the fact that the company had previously been boycotted by racists.³⁸ Thus the supremacists lost their boycott on two counts: their objectives were not met, and PM later used the boycott to public relations advantage.

Jewish community boycott—British American Tobacco (BAT) similarly enhanced its public image following a 1956 boycott which was called after BAT agreed to Arab demands not to sell certain cigarette brands in Israel. To protest BAT's action, American Jews boycotted BAT's US subsidiary, B&W, until it capitulated in 1961.³⁹ Upon resolution of this boycott, B&W developed a plan to "build good will for the company and its products in the American Jewish community"⁴⁰ including advertising in the Jewish press, funding Jewish community projects, and soliciting awards for B&W from Jewish organisations.⁴¹ Reflecting later on its public relations successes, the company noted, "For B&W, the accrued benefits have gone beyond the Jewish community into other ethnic areas, principally the Negro and Italian-American communities."³⁹ This action is one of the few examples of a primary boycott of cigarettes that worked. However, it never addressed tobacco's dangers and it provided the company with marketing and public relations opportunities.

ACT-UP—In 1990, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP), a US based AIDS activist organisation, instigated a boycott of PM's Marlboro cigarettes and Miller beer to protest the company's financial support for US Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC), who was an outspoken opponent of funding for AIDS and LGBT civil rights.⁷ The boycotters demanded that PM stop funding Helms and fund AIDS related causes instead.⁴² Although it generated a great deal of publicity,^{43–45} the boycott apparently had insignificant financial impact.⁴⁶

The boycott ended when PM and ACT-UP brokered a controversial settlement.⁴⁷ ACT-UP's primary stated demand, for PM to withdraw support from Helms, was not met. Its secondary objective, securing money from PM for AIDS funding, was achieved. This was a more practical demand, and possibly ACT-UP's real aim from the outset. PM shortly thereafter began advertising and marketing to the gay community, which it had never done before.^{48–52}

Buycotts

The *buycott*, or "reverse boycott" as it is sometimes called, is an effort to reward rather than punish. While there are few examples of formally declared buycotts, there have been many ongoing efforts to use rewards to further tobacco control efforts which could be characterised as using reverse boycott tactics. For example, in 1992, San Francisco's Tobacco Free Project published a restaurant guide to promote those establishments that had voluntarily gone smoke-free.⁵³ In 1998, a campaign of the California Lavender Smokefree Project publicised a list of LGBT organisations with "no tobacco money" policies and used paid media to urge the community to support them. Another example of a reverse boycott is the November 2004 decision by the American Public Health Association (APHA) to hold future annual meetings only in smoke-free cities, which will have the effect of rewarding cities that enact strong smoke-free workplace policies.⁵⁴

DISCUSSION

Examination of these actions suggests that the boycott can be a useful tool for tobacco control advocates, but it may have unintended consequences. Therefore, tobacco control advocates considering sponsoring or joining a boycott need to carefully think through their strategies.

Target, goals, and potential outcomes must all be well defined. From the perspective of tobacco control, the most successful boycotts share certain interrelated characteristics, including: a focus on the public health consequences of tobacco use; an accessible point of pressure; a mutual interest between the target and the boycotters; realistic goals; and clear and measurable demands (table 1).

A boycott is part of a logical progression of actions that should only be undertaken when less confrontational measures have not worked. Sometimes, engaging the offending party in dialogue is enough to achieve the desired result, and should always be the starting point. For example, in early 2004, an outpouring of letters convinced the publisher of the *Utne Reader*, a US based culture and arts publication, to reverse her decision to accept tobacco ads for the first time.⁵⁵ She obviously cared about the opinions of her readership, and may have feared the possibility of a boycott had she been unresponsive.

Focus on health

Boycotts that focus on economic or political issues (such as those by ACT-UP and the Jewish community) are unlikely to advance public health. Because the demands of these boycotts can be met without addressing health concerns, any tobacco control organisation that supports such a boycott may find itself tied to a settlement antithetical to its long term goals.

Boycotts that focus on public health, in contrast, are consistent with the goals of tobacco control. It may be most effective to focus on one issue at a time, keeping the message as simple as possible. Advocates trying to stop the sale of cigarettes in pharmacies, persuade arts organisations to refuse tobacco funding, or eliminate the proliferation of smoking in movies, for example, could use a boycott, if an appropriate target can be identified.

Choosing an appropriate target

Boycotts of the tobacco industry itself are unlikely to be effective. The financial and political resources of the industry vastly outweigh those of tobacco control.⁵⁶ However, boycotting institutions whose survival depends less on tobacco than on the goodwill of members or customers may be effective. Examples include community organisations with tobacco ties (sponsorship, investment), retailers such as supermarkets or pharmacies that sell tobacco products, and community or special interest periodicals that accept tobacco advertising. Boycotting such targets can take the traditional form of declining to patronise (for example, supermarkets or periodicals) or the innovative tactic of declining to support (for example, community organisations). As the CLASH action demonstrates, even the threat of a boycott can be effective.

We call such actions *perimetric* boycotts. Like a secondary boycott, a perimetric boycott is aimed at an entity other than what seems to be the primary target—in this case, the tobacco industry. Unlike a secondary boycott, the perimetric boycott does not expect its target to pressure that primary, or core, target (figs 1 and 2). Rather, it only demands that the perimetric target disengage from the core, ultimately removing the core's protective armor of social acceptability.

The strategy of boycotting community institutions rather than multinational corporations has parallels to the strategy of achieving clean indoor air policies first at the local level, and only then focusing on the state. Advocates have more impact locally, and more control over the outcome.⁵⁷ The strategy is not limited to local action, however; it could be used on a statewide or even nationwide basis—for example, to get a national chain to stop selling cigarettes.

The *buycott* rewards companies, organisations, cities, and states that have adopted good tobacco control policies. Friedman referred to it as “a positive behavioral model for consumer

activism”.³ The boycott by San Francisco’s Tobacco Free Project, for example, supported individual restaurants, demonstrated that no-smoking policies were good for business, and paved the way for the citywide ordinance that eventually extended the policy to all eateries. The APHA action to schedule its meetings only in smoke-free cities contradicts industry claims that smoke-free laws are bad for business by rewarding those cities with lucrative convention contracts, thus providing an incentive for others to follow suit. Other possible targets for boycotts include periodicals that refuse tobacco advertising,⁵⁸ pharmacies that do not sell tobacco, and community organisations that refuse to accept tobacco industry gifts.

Mutual interest

Boycotts work best when activists and target have a mutual interest in maintaining a relationship. This is patently not the case between tobacco control organisations and the industry. However, perimeter boycotts target a company or organisation with which negotiation is possible. In the CLASH action, for example, advocates openly praised GLAAD’s mission, objecting only to its relationship with B&W. Successful tobacco related perimeter boycotts seek to change not the tobacco industry, but community institutions or organisations; the industry need not respond to achieve the boycott’s goal.

To understand why mutual interest is important, consider the example of the Infact boycott. Infact had no interest in the survival of the tobacco industry. Had its demands reflected its ideology, Infact might have called for the industry’s elimination. However, a boycott calls for concessions, not the end of business. By suggesting that meeting its conditions (which did not include ending tobacco sales) would settle the boycott, Infact implied the industry’s legitimacy, however unintentionally.

Clarity of aims and demands

The aims of a boycott reflect the internal agenda of its organisers and should be realistic. Aims may be specific, such as getting a community organisation to stop taking tobacco money, or general, such as attracting media attention to an objectionable practice. Aims may differ from demands.

The demands of the boycott are the terms that the target is asked to meet to settle the boycott. These should be clear (specific and easy to understand) and measurable (quantifiable). Infact’s five demands met neither of these criteria. For example, it would be daunting to determine when and if the industry stopped “influence over and interference in public policy on issues of tobacco and health”, since the industry influence is widespread and often clandestine. Infact did not specify the parameters of this demand (nor any other), rendering it vague and unmeasurable.

Sometimes organisers achieve their aims whether or not demands are met. When this happens, boycott leaders may offend supporters. For example, ACT-UP loudly demanded that PM stop supporting Helms and quietly pressed PM to fund AIDS causes. The Helms demand was consistently rebuked but the funding demand—which settled the boycott—was not. ACT-UP’s main aim may actually have been to leverage funding, and the Helms demand a tactic to get support for the action from a community that detested Helms. ACT-UP was criticised by some boycotters for settling without achieving its principal demand, although it may have achieved its primary aim. The Infact boycott, while failing to achieve its stated demands, may have met an organisational aim of drawing attention to issues of corporate accountability.

Consequences of success or failure

One final consideration is the potential consequences of the action. A boycott may end when all or some demands are met, when the tactic proves ineffective, or in some more complex

negotiation. Boycotters should be clear in advance about who decides when the boycott is over, what criteria are used to decide (absent achieving objectives), and how that decision is presented publicly.

Infact, for example, declared victory, implying that the industry had acquiesced to its demands. Could the industry later use this boycott settlement to suggest it had become socially responsible? Settlements can also change community industry relations, as in the case of the ACT-UP and Jewish community actions, where resolution helped PM and B&W cultivate new markets. Awareness of how the tobacco industry has benefited from previous boycotts may help activists anticipate such consequences.

Conclusion

This analysis of boycotts suggests that tobacco control advocates should be wary of boycotts that do not address tobacco related disease. Not intended to promote tobacco control, they may enable the industry to gain a foothold in new markets, curry favour with established ones, or enhance its philanthropic image. The tobacco industry is adept at turning actions against it to its own advantage. Resolving a boycott can involve negotiations that leave the industry in a stronger position than it was before the boycott was called.

Our review suggests that perimetric boycotts of tobacco industry associates, on the other hand, may be a powerful tool. Current tobacco control efforts involve isolating the industry from its allies, whether “natural” (such as cigarette retailers), or cultivated (such as community organisations). The perimetric boycott can effectively further this isolation. Allies of the industry, open to mutually productive negotiation, may be appropriate targets.

What this paper adds

Nearly 20 tobacco related boycotts have been documented in internal tobacco industry files and elsewhere. No previous research has examined these actions collectively to understand what factors may determine whether a boycott may be a useful or harmful tool for tobacco control.

We analysed these events and propose criteria to assist advocates in determining when and if to undertake a boycott. We identified a variant of the secondary boycott, which we call “perimetric” because the selected target may reside on the perimeter of the “true” or core target. Such perimeter institutions may provide social insulation for the core target (in this case, the tobacco industry). We suggest perimetric boycotts may be a productive tool for advocates, helping to peel away the protective covering of allies and to isolate the industry. It is more likely, for example, that a community organisation that cares about its reputation will agree to stop taking tobacco money than that the tobacco industry will agree to curtail its exports. Advocates should avoid boycotts that do not address the dangers of tobacco. The industry has often settled such boycotts with large financial gifts, gaining significant market and public relations advantage as a result.

A traditional secondary boycott seeks to get the proximal target to apply pressure to the ultimate target, but in a perimetric boycott, advocates need have no such expectation. The action is not directed against the tobacco industry; its power lies in shunning the industry, much as Charles Boycott was ostracised economically and socially. The goal of the perimetric boycott, then, is to sever industry alliances, thereby reducing industry influence. Rather than expecting a boycotted pharmacy, for example, to pressure the industry, advocates need only expect the pharmacy to stop selling cigarettes. However, if that boycott is successful, tobacco control advocates may then institute a “buycott” to reward the pharmacy for its public health leadership, gaining an ally for tobacco control.

A boycott is at its root an invitation to negotiate; the industry has recognised that and used it repeatedly to its advantage. Conflict between community groups and the industry is resolved to the detriment of public health when negotiations lead to alliances between former antagonists. The perimeter boycott, however, results in negotiations between tobacco control advocates and community institutions, shutting the industry out of the process. As these adversaries become allies, the industry may be socially, economically, and/or politically weakened. By using the perimeter boycott, tobacco control advocates can turn the negotiation process, potentially the biggest weakness of the boycott as a strategy, into its biggest strength.

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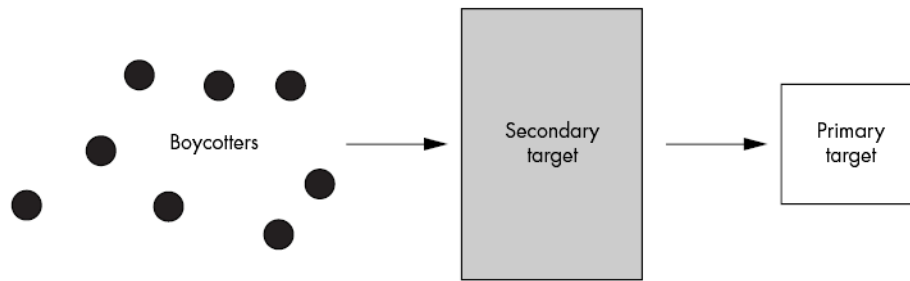


Figure 1. Secondary boycott. Boycotters choose the secondary target (for example, retailer) because the primary target is inaccessible (for example, wholesalers, growers). The goal is to urge the secondary target to pressure the primary target to accede to boycotters' demands.

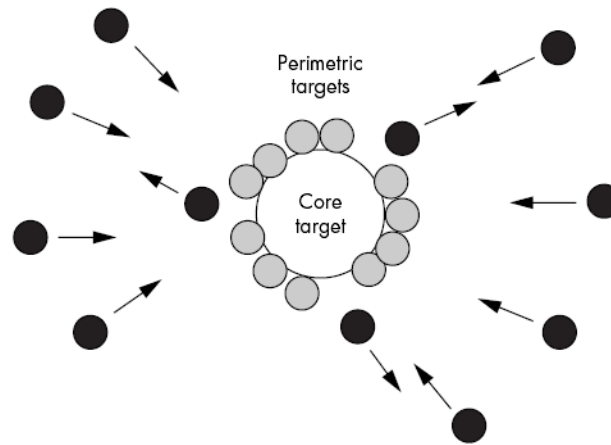


Figure 2. Perimetric boycott. Boycotters pressure a perimetric target (for example, retailer, donation recipient) to disengage it from the core target (tobacco industry), turning it into a boycotter. The goal is to peel off the protective cover of allies from the core. Boycotters do not demand anything of the core target, having already disengaged.

Table 1

Planning a tobacco control boycott

1	Focus on health
	a. Select single issue
	b. Keep it simple
2	Identify target that:
	a. shares mutual interest
	b. cares about its image
	c. is vulnerable to pressure
3	Choose realistic aims
4	4. Make clear and measurable demands that are perceived as legitimate
5	5. Plan exit strategy
	a. Be clear about:
	– who decides when the boycott is over
	– upon what criteria will the decision be based
	b. (b) Anticipate potential consequences based on history of industry responses to boycotts
