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Recruiting Women Smokers: The Engineering of Consent

ALLAN M. BRANDT, PhD

A range of social forces contributed to the effective recruitment of women to cigarette smoking in the crucial period between 1900 and 1940. Cigarette advertisers and public relations experts recognized the significance of women's changing roles and the rising culture of consumption, and worked to create specific meanings for the cigarette to make it appeal to women. The cigarette was a flexible symbol, with a remarkably elastic set of meanings; for women, it represented rebellious independence, glamour, seduction, and sexual allure, and served as a symbol for both feminists and flappers. The industry, with the help of advertisers and public relations experts, effectively engineered consent for women as smokers. The "engineering of consent" has a role to play in smoking cessation, since negative meanings for the cigarette can be engineered as well.

It is striking to consider that less than a century ago the cigarette was both an unusual and stigmatized product, especially for women. In the course of the 20th century the cigarette has become one of the most successful products in American consumer life. Its dramatic rise in popularity, however, also explains dramatic shifts in the burden of disease, from infectious disease to chronic diseases like cancer and heart disease. Only now are the full repercussions of the commercial success of recruiting women as smokers being seen in the steep rise of smoking-related morbidity and mortality.¹

This article briefly reviews the social forces that contributed to the effective recruitment of women to cigarette smoking in the crucial period between 1900

and 1940. Only by understanding the processes and mechanisms of engaging women as smokers—the rise of new conventions and behaviors—are we likely to understand potential strategies for the reduction of cigarette smoking. Deciphering the particular meanings of the cigarette offers opportunities for reducing consumption. To a remarkable degree, the appeals smoking had for women of the early 20th century persist today.²

Smoking Against Convention

Even as cigarette smoking became increasingly popular in the last years of the 19th century, especially among men, there was widespread opposition to the practice. Cigarette smoking was widely perceived to be a dirty "habit," characteristic of single, urban men, a disreputable form of tobacco consumption. Public campaigns against smoking often were directed at boys; the very notion that women and girls might be experimenting with the cigarette was rarely confronted publicly. The temperance movement, which grew in strength in the last years of the 19th century, often included anti-tobacco messages in its campaigns.³ Tobacco, like alcohol, was associated with idleness, immorality, and sin. These reformers typically elided both moral and health concerns; in this view, morality led to health and healthful living to morality.

Women, widely viewed as the guardians of all things moral, played a central role in this early battle to extinguish the cigarette. Lucy Page Gaston, a spirited member of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, founded the Chicago Anti-Cigarette League in 1899. Soon a national movement was underway: some cities banned the sale of cigarettes, and many states considered restrictions on sales and advertising. The National Council for Women urged legislation banning sales to women. Although more than a dozen states had passed anti-tobacco legislation by 1920, the national movement waned in the face of increased consumption, especially after World War

I, during which cigarettes had become a critical component of the doughboy's rations.⁴

Antitobacco rhetoric directed at women inevitably created certain appeals for smoking. No doubt, many American women began to experiment with the cigarette long before the glare of advertising would be turned directly upon them. As early as 1916, observers noted a significant rise in cigarette consumption among women. Use of cigarettes became an effective means of challenging social conventions, of deriding ideals of moral purity and the idea of women inhabiting a "separate sphere." Smoking represented a culturally contentious, if not radical behavior for women. These meanings generated considerable interest and appeal for the behavior. "For a woman it is the symbol of emancipation, the temporary substitute for the ballot," explained the *Atlantic Monthly* (April 16, 1916:574-575). "Women smoke with nervous alertness." A bill proposed in Congress in 1921 to ban women from smoking in the District of Columbia drew fire from recently enfranchised women. Such legislation created new interest in and support for the cigarette (*New York Times*, June 26, 1921:2-9).

It was principally women who contested these new patterns of behavior. Groups such as the International Anti-Tobacco League lobbied film makers not to portray women smoking, except as "the accompaniment of discreditable character." Their resolution explained that the growing habit of cigarette use "among women of respectability and among high school girls threatens the element of womanhood that must mother the American of tomorrow" (*New York Times*, March 1, 1922:5-6). Other women's groups, responding to reports of smoking among teenage girls, often encouraged young women to pledge abstinence from tobacco, as well as from jazz dancing and petting (*New York Times*, February 18, 1922:4-6).

Women who smoked reported a new-found sociability associated with the

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behavior. Encompassing among its meanings somewhat daring, irreverent qualities, the cigarette attracted new women smokers, eager to test the boundaries of public social convention. Women crowded powder rooms and restrooms, seeking fellow smokers. Dressing rooms on trains apparently filled with smoke, as new smokers clustered there. “The women smokers are bringing about a new democracy of the road,” wrote Marguerite E. Harrison in 1922. “There is growing demand for women’s smoking compartments. The feminine traveling public wants a place in which to lounge and smoke just as much as the male contingent” (*New York Times*, July 22, 1922:III2). Recognizing such demands, the Globe Theatre in New York City created a smoking lounge for women theatergoers in 1922.

Although much of the early consumption of cigarettes took place in such gender-specific situations, smoking among women increasingly occurred in heterodox contexts. It was often suggested that women did not understand how to smoke correctly. A hotel manager explained: “They don’t really know what to do with the smoke. Neither do they know how to hold their cigarettes properly. They make a mess of the whole performance” (*New York Times*, March 16, 1919:vii2). By the early 1920s the debate for the right to smoke among college women had become intense.⁵ Increasingly, social mores shifted to recognize that men and women—even if they smoked in particular ways—could now do so in mixed company.

By the early 20th century, the cigarette had come to represent a powerful clash in cultural values. Traditional morality configured the cigarette as a threat to the moral sanctity of women; at the same time, the cigarette marked the erosion of certain expectations of strict boundaries between the worlds of men and women. The cigarette became a symbol of new roles and expectations of women’s behavior. From an emphasis on discipline and self-restraint that had characterized late 19th century cultural values, individuals were now being encouraged to consume. If pleasure and indulgence were anathema to Victorian expectations of women, by the 1920s, pleasure and indulgence were critical components of what would come to be called the “consumer culture.”⁶

Creating demand for the cigarette epitomized this new ethic of consumption.

Creating Demand and the Engineering of Consent

The tobacco industry, which grew by leaps and bounds during the first two decades of the 20th century, clearly realized that women made up half its potential market. The tobacco industry was in no way given to gender exclusions in the creation of new patrons for its product. Nonetheless, in its efforts to target women, it entered into contested cultural terrain. Advertisers and marketers recognized that if smoking was to truly become a mass behavior they would need to shape this territory. These early debates about the meaning of smoking for women offered opportunities that they seized. That smoking had appeal and specific meanings for women before the onset of targeted advertising, however, does not reduce the significance of marketing mechanisms in the process of recruiting women smokers.⁷

Before the late 1920s, social conventions had restricted advertisers from explicitly pitching the cigarette to women. Nonetheless, many tobacco ads indirectly sought women smokers through images that emphasized the sociability and allure of the cigarette. Women frequently appeared in tobacco ads, often as accouterments to the attractive and powerful smoking male. By the last years of the 1920s, hesitations about convention and mores among tobacco advertisers had succumbed to a widespread recognition that increased numbers of women smoking presented a vast new market for the cigarette.

The proclivities of the consumer culture reified distinctions of gender, even as the barriers to women smoking came tumbling down. Now women were “fair” game for the solicitations of new and increasingly sophisticated marketers of cigarettes. The cigarette embodied a remarkably elastic set of meanings for men and women. For men, the cigarette evoked images of power, authority, and independence; for women, it represented rebellious independence, glamour, seduction, and sexual allure and acted as a flexible symbol for both feminists and flappers. The cigarette even managed to contain contradictory meanings; while smoking often symbolized rebellion

against social mores, at the same time it represented conformity to the mores of the rising culture of consumption. A wide array of approaches were enlisted to encourage women to enter the tobacco market: testimonials from famous women—opera stars, actresses, sports stars, and socialites—attested to the advantages of particular brands. Cigarettes promoted adventure and social success; ads depicted smoking in a wide array of social and public settings. These ads not only promoted cigarette use for women, they revised social conventions and meanings, establishing new norms of beauty, style, autonomy, and attraction for women.⁸

Tobacco promoters self-consciously worked to shape the cultural terrain in which women would become consumers of their product. In 1928, George Washington Hill, president of American Tobacco, turned his full attention to the problem of attracting women to the cigarette market. Hill brooked no dissent when it came to aggressive, competitive marketing of his premier product, Lucky Strikes. Soliciting the aid of noted public relations expert Edward Bernays to help plan his strategy, Hill recognized the need to fracture the traditional social and cultural prohibitions against women’s smoking. According to Bernays, “Hill became obsessed by the prospect of winning over the large potential female market for Luckies.”⁹ Hill reportedly explained, “It will be like opening a new gold mine right in our front yard.”

Advertising was but one crucial factor in what Bernays would call “the engineering of consent.” The effective manipulation of public opinion, interest, values, and beliefs would, in the 1920s, become a dominant characteristic in the emergence of the consumer culture. Having fixed on the slogan, “Reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet,” Hill and Bernays set out to implement the meaning and impact of this pitch. Recognizing that women’s fashions were moving in the 1920s to a new emphasis on slimness, Lucky Strike ads now proclaimed their product as a tool for beauty and physical attraction.

Bernays worked to influence the fashion industry, sending out hundreds of Parisian haute couture photos of slender models to fashion reporters and industry leaders. To strengthen his case, he soli-

cited medical writings on the deleterious impact of sugar on the human body. Results in hand, Bernays made effective use of the media to broadcast such findings. Blurring the line between advertising and the news was an important technique among the new strategies of marketing. Although the confectioners protested Lucky Strikes' claims, Hill and Bernays well understood the value of such controversy for galvanizing attention and delivering new consumers.

By 1929, Hill sought more aggressive interventions to change the meaning of women's smoking and to publicly attract this vast new market. As Bernays recounted, "Hill called me in. 'How can we get women to smoke on the street? They're smoking indoors. But damn it, if they spend half the time outdoors and we can get 'em to smoke outdoors, we'll damn near double our female market. Do something. Act!'"⁹ Bernays set out to identify and destroy the taboos associated with public smoking for women. Seeking to capitalize on the available scientific knowledge of human behavior, he enlisted the advice of noted psychiatrist A. A. Brill, who explained, "Some women regard cigarettes as symbols of freedom. Smoking is a sublimation of oral eroticism; holding a cigarette in the mouth excites the oral zone. It is perfectly normal for women to want to smoke cigarettes."⁹

A nephew of Freud, Bernays was sympathetic to the notion that such insight could be used to modify patterns of consumption and use of cigarettes. As Brill suggested, "Today the emancipation of women has suppressed many of their feminine desires. More women now do the same work as men do. Many women bear no children; those who do bear have fewer children. Feminine traits are masked. Cigarettes, which are equated with men, become torches of freedom."⁹ Bernays seized on this idea of "torches of freedom" as a practical symbol for immolating the traditional taboos against women smoking in public.

In a publicity stunt of genuine historical significance, Bernays recruited debutantes to march in the 1929 New York City Easter parade brandishing their "torches of freedom." The young women marched down Fifth Avenue puffing Lucky Strikes, effectively drawing together the symbol of the emanci-

pated flapper and the symbol of the committed feminist. Newspapers widely reported their exploit, touching off a national debate. Bernays had successfully reinvigorated the controversies of the previous decade, enlisting the cultural tensions over women's public smoking in his marketing campaigns. While women's clubs decried the fall of the proscription on public smoking, feminists hailed the change in social convention. Reports of women smoking "on the street" came from cities and towns across the nation. "Age-old customs, I learned," wrote Bernays, "could be broken down by a dramatic appeal, disseminated by the network of media."⁹

By the early 1930s, as tobacco manufacturers began to concertedly direct advertising to women, Bernays returned to psychiatrist Brill for professional advice. Evaluating a proposed ad depicting a woman offering a package of Luckies to two men, Brill offered yet another potential meaning for the symbol of the cigarette: "Two people should appear, one man and one woman. That is life . . . The cigarette is a phallic symbol, to be offered by a man to a woman. Every natural man or woman can identify with such a message."⁹

In 1934, Bernays intervened once again in the ongoing efforts to promote smoking among women. Concerned that women shunned Luckies because of the green package that clashed with current fashions, Hill urged Bernays to change the fashion. "That was the beginning of a fascinating six-month activity for me—to make green *the* fashionable color."⁹ Bernays developed an eclectic and far-reaching strategy that centered on making green the color of the day: he sponsored fundraising balls in which invitees agreed to wear green gowns and a "Green Fashion Fall" luncheon to promote the color green within the fashion industry, at which experts discussed the significance of the artistic and psychological meaning of green. Bernays later explained, "I had wondered at the alacrity with which scientists, academicians and professional men participated in events of this kind. I learned they welcomed the opportunity to discuss their favorite subject and enjoyed the resultant publicity. In an age of communication their own effectiveness often depended on public visibility."⁹

To suggest that Hill and Bernays were

powerful conspirators in an insidious campaign to make women smokers would be to misrepresent the history of the era. Given the range of economic and social forces eroding prohibitions on female smoking, as well as the remarkable rise of cigarette consumption in the first decades of the 20th century, women were no doubt marked as an important and inadequately tapped constituency for the product. Hill and Bernays do demonstrate, however, how the tobacco industry came to employ a set of powerful cultural conventions and practices to shape the meanings of the cigarette and the mores of its use (*Printers Ink*, November 17, 1938:11-13). Through their advertising and public relations efforts, based in part on the new professionalism of public relations and on psychoanalysis as a scientific way to understand human behavior, Hill and Bernays shaped and promoted the cigarette's status as the symbol of the independent feminist and the bold, glamorous flapper. The cigarette revealed the importance of new techniques geared to motivate consumption. It was this ability to recognize—and exploit—cultural change that lay at the heart of successful consumer "engineering."

Advertising psychologists and marketing experts frequently noted—and celebrated—their newly achieved ability to manipulate consumer desire and behavior. Applying new psychological theories, statistics, and surveys, advertisers expressed confidence in their abilities to invoke new behaviors. If women were perceived to be the principal arbiters of the moral in late 19th century American culture, now they were understood to be the principal force in the ethos of consumption.^{6,8} As one advertising psychologist explained: "The advertiser, especially the one using large space consistently, has within his power not only to affect temporarily, but to mold permanently, the thought and attitude he wants his particular public to have with reference to the relative importance of style and beauty and such other factors as he may choose to play up by means of advertising."¹⁰ Cigarette ads targeted to women made explicit appeals to both style and beauty. Not only was the cigarette an accoutrement of beauty, it became a powerful symbol of style as well, a symbol deeply embedded in the particular socio-

politics of gender in the 1920s and 1930s.

In this crucial phase of successful “recruitment,” smoking for women became part and parcel of the “good life” configured in the American consumer culture. The cigarette’s symbolic meanings—of glamour, beauty, autonomy, and equality—were inscribed through the powerful images of the advertisements. The effectiveness of these campaigns was heightened and reinforced by public relations campaigns geared to create a positive environment for these new images. Cigarettes—a nonessential and undifferentiated product—came to embody the essential characteristics of the consumer culture, driven by creation of demand.

Conclusion

The success of the engineering of consent has had enormous implications for women’s health in the 20th century. Tobacco marketers developed strategies and techniques that revealed how comprehensive and aggressive their program for seeking sales would be. This is especially clear in the explicit efforts to bring the cigarette market to women. A wide array of social and political symbols were

employed to give the cigarette a particular set of meanings; these meanings, in turn, made the cigarette both culturally viable and desirable.

Understanding the precise cultural meanings of cigarette smoking at any particular historical moment may offer opportunities to understand not just the process of recruitment, but also the process of reducing cigarette consumption. Further, a recognition that cultural mores may be shifted by design offers the possibility of creating contexts that encourage smoking cessation; negative meanings for the cigarette may be “engineered” as well. Edward Bernays, who died at the age of 103 in 1995, had by the end of his life become active in the antismoking movement. Asked by a reporter if he considered himself responsible for the epidemic of diseases now attributable to cigarettes, Bernays reportedly responded by explaining that the risks of smoking were poorly understood at the time he had promoted their use. He suggested, however, that if advertising and public relations had “made” the cigarette, they certainly could be enlisted in its destruction. ■

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