Pertinent Research and Impertinent Opinion: On Our Contributions to the Cigarette Advertising Public Policy Debates

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Guest Editorial: Cigarette Advertising
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Boddewyn’s (1993) argument that advertising academics are made irrelevant by the “bad research” of others is examined in detail and found unconvincing. Since our relevance is more likely determined by the quality of our own research, this is needed far more than baleful bombast, particularly research disclosing the reality of industrial practices and their effects. Research questions which could be especially well addressed by those with access to their corporate clients’ documents are suggested.

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All of us who are members of the American Academy of Advertising, its leadership and editorial board, are exhorted to consider ourselves injured and insulted (Boddewyn 1993). The injury results from alleged “bad research” on cigarette advertising’s effects being published in journals other than those dedicated to advertising and closely related topics. The insult stems from the enviable publicity that some of these publications have obtained. It is claimed that these events, not the topics and quality of our own contributions, render us irrelevant with respect to the cigarette advertising policy debate.

Regardless of any provoked controversy about the quality of evidence on cigarette advertising’s effects upon children, there is no ambiguity about the industry’s strategic interest in youth. My own review of corporate documents has noted the industry’s research on the behavior of 11-, 12- and 13-year olds, their recognition of the product’s addictiveness, their explicit targeting of 15-year olds, their preference for models who appear young, their use of “pictures of health” to promote social acceptance, and their use of images of independence to appeal to the needs of youth for autonomy and self-reliance (Pollay and Lavack 1992). Other studies based on the advertising and tobacco trade press, content analyses and more corporate records have documented the low level of information in cigarette advertising (Pollay 1989; 1990a), the uses of “pictures of health” (Pollay 1991); the public relations creation of controversy and scattering of “seeds of doubt” (Pollay 1990b), the discriminatory practices against ethnic minorities (Pollay, Lee and Carter-Whitney 1992), the failure of cigarette self-regulation (Pollay 1993), and other historical aspects too numerous to list. I have shared some of my knowledge on the history of cigarette advertising with juries in American liability trials, and reported on contemporary corporate documents in the constitutional challenge to Canada’s effort to curtail the industry’s inducements. The more I have learned from my own research and trial evidence, the more certain I am that cigarette advertising is far from innocuous in either intent or effect. The more I have learned, the less credible and ethical I find the speculations and rationalizations making it seem so. I believe that low professional standards for sufficiency of evidence for boldly asserted and unqualified opinions have reduced our own credibility in the
policy debates, not the "bad research" of others. If advertising, marketing and consumer behavior scholars are indeed marginalized in the policy debate about cigarette marketing practices and consequences, there are many reasons to be concerned. Ill-conceived public policy could potentially affect the still substantial profitability of the cigarette firms, and the enormous incomes of their advertising agencies, media, sponsored events, and organizations used to promote cigarettes. In addition to the private stakeholders, we should not forget the public interest, such as the welfare of the thousands of adolescents who start smoking every day, and the health suffering and costs ultimately to be incurred by many of them, their friends, families, employers and insurers.

Since so much is at stake, let us consider the logic and evidence of Boddewyn's (1993) exhortation carefully. The quality of some of our own contributions will also be discussed as this bears directly on both parts of his position, the relative "badness" of the research by others and the reasons for our marginalization. In response to the question of what can be done, a research agenda is described that includes many questions that could be easily addressed by those with corporate clients and the associated abilities to source corporate documents and data.

The Argument

The foundation of Boddewyn's (1993) argument is the premise that (1) "bad research (of others) is driving out good research (of ours)," citing, as examples, three *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* articles on the Joe "Smooth Character" Camel cartoon campaign. It is also asserted or suggested (2) that this "bad research" receives excessive publicity; (3) that "undue haste ascribable to friendly treatment ... insufficient review and revision, if not pre-ordained acceptance" likely characterized the editorial processes of *JAMA*; (4) that authors, editors and reviewers in medical and public health journals are not well-versed in advertising and consumer behavior theory and fail to cite advertising journals and textbooks; and (5) that they have a simplistic stimulus and response model of how advertising works. Additional assertions embedded within the argument include: (6) that authors publishing elsewhere use "important qualifiers" in their articles but not in their "simplified abstracts or press releases;" (7) that the Surgeon General obtains more credibility than deserved when addressing the issue of advertising; and (8) that political correctness is corrupting the science of the analysis of advertising effects. We also learn of personal grievances including: (9) having submissions rejected for being "not sufficiently balanced;" and (10) having an accepted paper in a health journal "flanked by a couple of commissioned critiques." In conclusion, we are asked to (11) discuss what can be done.

Discussion

(1) On "Bad Research." Neither evidence nor argument is presented in support of the presumption that the three *JAMA* articles are each examples of "bad research." No citations indicate the "good" research that allegedly got displaced as the result though one can safely assume that Boddewyn would include the International Advertising Association's (IAA) pamphlet on why juveniles start smoking (Boddewyn 1987). Professional pride may tempt us to believe that the articles appearing in this and other advertising and marketing journals employ scientific methods of uniformly high quality, but not the belief that what appears in medical and public health journals is unscientiﬁc. Pride also cannot justify any such comparative conclusion without evidence and careful analysis of both.

Fischer et al. (1991) measured product logo recognition of 3- to 6-year olds, finding that over 90% of the 6-year olds correctly matched Old Joe (the cartoon Camel) with cigarettes. Pierce et al. (1991) reported data from a random-dialing dialing telephone survey, finding that Camel's market share decreased substantially with age, as did perceptions that Camel was the brand with the most advertising, suggesting differential reach, frequency and/or effectiveness of the campaign. DiFranza et al. (1991) compared high school students to adults on four standard measures: recognition, recall, appeal, and brand preference. Compared to adults, the children were found to have greater recall, more ability to identify the product and brand name given the trade character recognition, and were more likely to find the cartoon character appealing. Sales of Camels to children were also reported to have increased substantially since the onset of the cartoon campaign. While no research may be perfect at creating absolute proof of the causal linkages between these observations, readers should examine these articles for themselves to see if their samples and measurements are unreasonable, insufficient to support the offered conclusions, inferior to typical *Journal of Advertising* articles or, most critically, clearly inferior to the research advanced in support of the cigarette industry. I do not find them so.
In contrast to these convergent multiple methods and measures of effects, the methodology and logic reported in Boddewyn (1987) seems modest. This research was sponsored by the international tobacco industry lobbying organization, conducted by a British contract research firm, and published by an American advocacy organization, not by a peer-reviewed scholarly journal or scientific body. It concluded that cigarette advertising does not affect initiation into smoking. And what is the sophisticated methodology of this "good research" in support of this unambiguous conclusion? A self-report question asking children to select, from a list of 13 offered reasons, only the most important reasons for smoking their first cigarette. Not surprisingly, few chose "I had seen advertising," as to do so required that advertising's influence be consciously appreciated, be willingly admitted, to, and be predominant among all of the prompted reasons, not just a contributing factor. One wonders how many might have agreed or disagreed with a statement like "advertising makes cigarettes seem attractive." The self-report question at the heart of this IAA report is, to my knowledge, without precedent in either academic research or trade practice as the sole means of validly assessing advertising's role and effects. Does this illustrate the high methodological standard that the JAMA articles fail to attain?

This suggests that the consultants and apologists for the cigarette industry raise their critical standards when encountering results threatening their tobacco clients' economic or legal interests (e.g. Boddewyn 1989). They and we typically have been far less methodologically demanding of work congruent to the industry's interests, even those admittedly "prepared by and from industry sources" (Boddewyn 1986b, p.1) and self-described as being "at the heart" of the IAA's vested interest efforts to block regulation (Bruce, Keller and Cunard 1985, p.28-29). Despite its manifest bias and many methodological weaknesses, this pamphlet has too often been described as "proof" that cigarette ad bans don't work. As another example, Martin (1993) has taken the initiative to canvass researchers with a detailed questionnaire soliciting critics and criticism of Pierce et al. (1991). The client's strategy does not require winning the provoked debates, just creating enough controversy to "muddy the waters" around the potentially damaging studies to inhibit legislators, jurists and others from relying on them.

(2) On publicity. Boddewyn himself gets ample publicity as the IAA pamphlets bearing his name have been distributed by the industry "to many thousands of influential politicians, bureaucrats, editors, journalists and business executives in different countries throughout the world" (Chapman 1989, p.1272). His opinions have also been placed in the Wall Street Journal (Boddewyn 1986a, p.32) where he claimed that for every cigarette ad connoting healthfulness there are many anti-smoking messages. This is incredible because the industry spends more on promotion and advertising, week in and week out, than health organizations spend collectively in a year. The 500 mentions of the JAMA results may seem substantial, but we don't know where these appeared, the thrust and prominence of these stories, the nature of the audiences reached or the elapsed time involved. Most significantly, we don't know the countervailing reach and frequency of cigarette advertising exposures during the same time period.

(3) On Undue Haste. No evidence is offered to support the libelous charges of undue haste and insufficient review by JAMA editors. When the Journal of Advertising last provided information on submission and acceptance dates, articles appeared which had been submitted, reviewed, revised and accepted within two and one-half months, three and one-half months and four months. Are we, therefore, guilty of undue haste and insufficient review? Hopefully not, as the short turn-around times might have resulted from the eagerness of authors, the efficiency of the referees, the editors' decision about the timeliness of the work and, of course, the quality of the manuscripts when first submitted.

(4) On multiple perspectives. That reviewers in medical and public health journals are not as well-versed in advertising jargon, managerial practices and consumer behavior theory seems likely, as does the allegation that these scholars may not frequently cite our textbooks and journals, but the same can be said for econometric studies whose ambiguous results the apologists endorse rather than criticize. Are these alternative perspectives necessarily erroneous and counter-productive? Marketing and advertising scholarship, like all disciplines, inevitably displays certain paradigmatic preferences, theoretical predispositions and blind spots, some of which are so buried within our jargon that we take them for granted without careful reflection on their validity. For example, the very word "demand" is a commonplace term, and it may capture very well the behavioral insistence of the addicted nicotine user and the resulting "pull" through the channels of distribution. "Demand" seems far less valid, however, in describing the behavior of beginning smokers responding to the product offer-
ings made attractive by advertising, sponsorships, promotional incentives, packaged premiums, retail displays and other "pushing" initiatives of the supplier. Whether we have an untainted perspective on the issues or not, we should not decry research conducted by others with alternative paradigms. Multiple disciplines are needed for policy problems, like those surrounding cigarette advertising, which have managerial, psychological, epidemiological, sociological, developmental, legal, political, educational, and economic aspects.

(5) On simplistic models. No evidence or citations are offered to support the assertion that JAMA authors, in general, subscribe to a simplistic stimulus-response model. My own exposure to health promotion academics, researchers and practitioners, both on local and national levels, contradicts that claim. Most seem to have a rich appreciation of the multiple roles of advertising in potentially shaping opinions, attitudes, perceptions and beliefs, communicating social acceptability, offering health reassurances, and giving cigarette brands symbolic value as emblems of independence, sexual identity or social status. They are also aware that advertising's effects are seen in the long run, not as immediate responses to today's advertising efforts, but as aggregated learning through repeated exposures to professionally designed and tested persuasive communications over many months and years.

It seems inappropriate to castigate others for simplistic models, when very simplistic arguments have been made by industry apologists and "experts" to courts and legislator: (e.g., because kids do not report cigarette advertising as the most important reason for their starting, it has no effect on them whatsoever). Martin swore to one court that cigarette ads are of no appreciable import, no matter what their content or character. This obviously insults the competencies of many advertising agencies, judging their diverse efforts to make brands seem stylish, masculine/feminine, symbols of independence, and/or relatively healthful as all failing to alter public perceptions of the product, either individually or collectively. When challenged by both the judge and cross examiner with hypothetical ads bluntly admitting that cigarettes did in fact cause cancer and death, Martin persisted and contended that even these crude confessions "would have a fairly minor effect" (Janson 1988, p.44).

Premature testimony about cigarettes as a "mature" market. Perhaps the most simplistic and common position used to exculpate the industry is the "mature market" theory, usually asserted with no corroborating evidence. Ward (1989) and others have testified that because of a so-called "fundamental law" (Reid 1989, p.6) of marketing theory, the categorization of cigarettes as "mature" is sufficient to permit unqualified conclusions. Presumed implications include that in today's "mature" cigarette market the firms have no strategic interest in children; that all cigarette advertising affects only current users; that it affects only the perceptions, beliefs and attitudes governing brand choices, not those influencing continuance or quitting; and that cigarette advertising does not in any way affect the perceptions, opinions, attitudes or beliefs of pre-starters.

For many reasons, I doubt either (a) that cigarettes are appropriately classified as a typical "mature" market or (b) even if so classified, that any "fundamental law" exists with axiomatic and invariable implications. (i) "The empirical evidence of the existence and pervasiveness of the product life cycle concept is quite uneven" (Lilien, Kotler and Moorthy 1992, p.513). (ii) Old Gold, Chesterfield, L&M, Lark and Eve brands were advertised for years by J. Walter Thompson, and their researchers long ago told us to "Forget the Product Life Cycle Concept" (Dhalla and Yuseph 1976). They stated that whether considering "product class (e.g. cigarettes), product form (e.g. filter cigarettes), and brand (e.g. Winston) ... it is not possible to validate the model at any of these levels of aggregation" (p.103, examples in original). (iii) Some advertising textbooks by respected authors ignore the product life cycle concept entirely. (iv) The texts discussing the concept as a pedagogical generalization do not treat it as a "fundamental law" with invariant consequences. (v) The diagnostic indicators of "maturity" include diminished profits and ad spending. The tobacco industry falls both these diagnostic tests as it has long been setting records for both its profits and promotional spending. (vi) O'Toole, a distinguished advertising executive and advocate, offers another diagnostic test in asserting that ad strategies for mature products "always specify the competitive brand from which the volume will be taken" (Colford 1986). The industry fails this diagnostic test, as well. (vii) The addictiveness of nicotine, the lethality of cigarettes, the legislative history and idiosyncratic legal status of the cigarette industry all make the industry unique, precluding facile generalizations from the experience with other products at other times. (viii) The "mature market" argument is logically inconsistent with the expressed fear that a cigarette ad ban would be dysfunctional, preventing consumers from
learning about important product developments, for if product developments are of import, by definition the market is not mature. (ix) More importantly, cigarette firms in many ways display their strategic interest in young starters (Follay and Lavack 1992).

Assertions about cigarettes being a “mature market” should therefore be treated as highly suspect without supporting data and/or documentary evidence. Opinions of careful experts should be tentative, at most, about both (a) the validity of the categorization of cigarettes as “mature,” and (b) the validity of the implications presumed to flow from this categorization. Because lives are at stake, professional ethics demand that evidence validating these theoretical notions be examined and presented before conveying certainty to non-experts. Reid (1989), like others, required no evidence for his “mature market” testimony on behalf of R. J. Reynolds and others. He ignored the literature equivocal about the concept’s validity, and the literature specific to the cigarette industry, and the contradictory profit and advertising expenditure data. He ignored his own observation, surely fitting cigarettes, that given “the existence of an undesirable image, advertising can play a major role” (Reid and Rotfeld 1976, p.26). He even ignored all the corporate documents produced in the very same litigation documenting the consumer research and advertising strategies focused on young starters (Follay and Lavack 1992).

All testimony that offers theoretical conjectures while ignoring the relevant literature, evidence and the available case facts is not only speculative, but quite literally ignorant and prejudicial, being based on assumptions rather than evidence. Small wonder that Boddewyn’s experience is that, given the opportunity, “antagonistic lawyers can turn savants into absolute idiots” (Boddewyn 1991, p.14). Small wonder, too, that we are marginalized in policy debates, for the “bad research” by others is less likely to reduce our perceived relevance than is the quality of our own contributions.

(6) On Qualifying Conclusions. We should not criticize other scholars for using qualifiers in their discussions and findings, for all contributors to this literature should be equally as careful. Clearly qualification is appropriate and, were it absent, would be demanded by referees. There is no evidence presented to support the innuendo that “simplified” press releases intentionally avoided these qualifications. That the press may not be as careful in communicating the assumptions, subtleties and qualifications of research processes and findings is a universal problem beyond our scope and authority, except to strive to minimize these tendencies should we issue our own press releases.

(7) On the Surgeon General’s Credibility. The Surgeon General’s authority regarding cigarettes derives, in part, from the focal role and responsibility, but in larger measure because the more than 20 Surgeon General’s reports on smoking and health have been definitive literature reviews compiled by large teams of researchers in elaborate peer review processes, complete with a full auditing of all referenced sources. Since the world health community considers tobacco addiction a “brown plague,” advertising, sponsorships and promotion obviously get consideration as potential vectors of its transmission, even if they are not the only ones ultimately judged important. It is entirely appropriate, therefore, that parts of some of the Surgeon General reports have dealt with commercial communications. Again, no evidence supports the claim that the Surgeon General has disproportionate credibility and influence. This idea is contradicted by both the governments’ tolerance of the cartoon Camel campaign and its aggressive efforts on behalf of the U.S. cigarette invasion of foreign markets (Sesker 1993).

(8) On Political Correctness. An editorial observation from Tobacco Control noting the politicalization of tobacco control initiatives and related research is quoted to buttress the claim that there are “politically correct” methodologies and findings. The inevitable politicalization of the tobacco policy debate does not imply the conclusion that there is an otherwise pure social science of advertising analysis that has been corrupted by “political correctness,” or that this is an issue for the Journal of Advertising.

(9) On Bias and Imbalance. There is no evidence or argument offered that the several journal reviewers who found submissions by Boddewyn “not sufficiently balanced” were rendering inappropriate judgments. Nor is it obvious that these judgments would change were the reviewers better-versed in advertising textbooks and journals, as it does not take an advertising scholar to recognize advocacy with insufficient evidence or lapses in logic. Boddewyn has previously stated: “I am biased because I have served as a paid expert witness for the tobacco industry” (Boddewyn 1989, p.1255). He has also portrayed the health educators and promoters he opposes as “overzealous crusaders” characterized by anti-democratic “totalitarianism” and hypocrisy, suggesting that their concern with smoking and health might be a “conspiracy” (Boddewyn 1986c, p.323-326).
(10) On feeling attacked. We are led to believe that the British Journal of Addiction commissioned critiques of Boddewyn (1989) to “immediately flank” his article. Boddewyn was not the persecution victim he pretends, but one of a group of attackers, as the primary focus of this entire issue was Chetwynd et al. (1988). Seven different papers and a lengthy editorial discussed econometric analyses, related research, and their study of New Zealand data that found that cigarette print advertising had primary demand effects. Boddewyn (1989) was “immediately flanked,” not by Chapman (1989) and Joosens (1989) as claimed, but by the original researchers’ replies to him and to another critique.

Chapman (1989) and Joosens (1989) appeared later in this special issue, and both, like Boddewyn, expressed reservations about the specific study. They did, it is true, also critically discuss related literature and Joosens (p.1281) did conclude that “Boddewyn’s statement of strong international evidence that advertising bans are not an effective way to reduce smoking initiation is not supported by the evidence.” Others elsewhere were simultaneously concurred, noting a total absence of data on per capita income, enforcement of regulations, teenage smoking, prices (absent for 13 out of the 16 studied countries) and, most amazingly, even advertising expenditures, leading to conclusions that were “simplistic, unjustified, erroneous and misleading” (Toxic Substances Board 1989, p.61).

(11) What Is to Be Done? We are given no suggestions, nor are any courses of action obvious, except perhaps to publicize articles appearing here or in our conference proceedings. We can hardly be expected to ignore or categorically disdain other academic literature, or to individually adopt policies of publishing only in our own “specialized” journals, for this intellectual parochialism would be self-defeating. The Academy would also be hard-pressed to draw any line between “specialized” journals and others, or to pass official judgment on their typical intellectual level and methodological rigor.

Perhaps the best thing we can do to maximize our relevance, and the likelihood our opinions are respected, is to follow the traditional values of academic discourse - to do the best we can at independent research, contributing to the literature in the faith that this ultimately best serves the public welfare. Those with friends and clients in the industry could make a meaningful contribution to the literature and the policy debate and, should their presumptions be validated, help demonstrate the already believed innocuousness of the industry and its various promotional efforts. There are many questions that are addressed through examination and reporting of the actual corporate research and strategy documents. While there will be a need for competitive secrecy about current documents, research could be based on dated documents, or those for abandoned campaigns, addressing questions such as:

1. What is the consumer behavior knowledge of the longitudinal life-cycle of smoking, i.e. the typical history of a smoker, and the associated knowledge, beliefs and attitudes at each stage? When and why do starters start, recognize their addiction, become concerned about their mortality, shift brands and trade down to “healthier” products, attempt to quit? What methods are deemed adequate by industrial standards to generate these data?

2. What is the cross sectional profile of the smoking population? How many starters, concerned smokers, switchers, pre-quitters, successful quitters? What are their beliefs, perceptions, attitudes and behaviors? What methods are deemed adequate by the industry standards to generate this understanding?

3. What segmentation schemes do the industry employ? What types of data are used and what are the resulting segments and sizes?

4. What are the brand positions and how do these map onto the segments of smokers? What brands are positioned for “starters”, for the health concerned switchers and “pre-quitters,” for unconcerned “ostriches”? What is the cost and net present value of attracting consumers in each category and what are the resulting corporate priorities?

5. What advertising concepts are used to craft advertising relevant to these or other segments (e.g., images of independence to appeal to adolescent starters’ need for autonomy, self-reliance, and freedom from the authority of parents, teachers, older siblings; pictures of health and filter tech talk to reassure health concerned smokers; images of style and status to provide social identity to marginalized ethnic and economic classes; or positive lifestyle images to foster social acceptance of smoking?)

6. How are aggregate budgets justified? What logic or evidence determines the allocation of total budget to various brands? What justifies the breakdown of aggregate promotional spending into media advertising, sponsorships, sales promotions, merchandising support and other categories?

7. What logic justifies the media mix and scheduling? Who are the target markets for the media buys for various brands? What are the differential roles
and reach of billboards, transit, point of sale, magazines, and other media? How are the television and press coverage of sponsored events measured? What are the estimated reach and frequencies of typical campaigns?

8. What are the industrial standards for measuring the effectiveness of cigarette ad campaigns? What are the relative roles of qualitative research and quantitative measures? What are the conventional criteria employed (e.g. perception, imagery associations, attitude change, belief change, recall, recognition, start rates, quit rates)? What does the industry's research using these methods and criteria indicate are the effects of typical campaigns?

Chapman (1989) suggests that our research would also be improved if, instead of asking only what does advertising do to people, we also ask what do people do with advertising. Other research could address the content and character of cigarette advertising; the purposes and consequences of event sponsorships; the functions and management of sampling programs; or the use of indirect advertising through products with logos, whether premiums distributed in promotional packaging or vended by contests or coupons, like the current Marlboro Miles and Camel Cash.

Whatever aspect is studied, and however the chosen topic is approached, ultimately it will be pertinent research, not impertinent opinions, that will make our scholarly efforts a contribution to the literature and the public good. To date our contributions to those involved in litigation or legislative efforts have often been little more than obvious advocacy or prejudicial presumptions without factual foundation. To attain public policy influence requires evidence derived from relevant research, not specious speculations or baleful bombast. The most reliable way to gain a credible voice in policy debates is the old fashioned way — to earn it.

References:


Martin, Claude R., Jr. (1993), "I'm asking for your assistance ... (letter and questions)," June 16, 5p.


"I am distressed at the venality, duplicity, and general lack of morals of those who testify in government hearings against the cigarette advertising ban or a warning requirement. ... Perhaps they are merely men of zero integrity."