

1973 Cigarette Company Memo Proposed New Brands for Teens

RJR Official Cited Need for 'Share of the Youth Market'

By John Schwartz
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An official at R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. proposed marketing cigarettes to underage smokers as early as the 1970s—and even suggested that teenage rebellion might make the risks of smoking more attractive to that market.

"Realistically, if our Company is to survive and prosper, over the long term, we must get our share of the youth market. In my opinion this will require new brands tailored to the youth market," wrote Claude E. Teague Jr., then the company's assistant director of research and development, in a Feb. 2, 1973, memorandum.

The document, "Research Planning Memorandum on Some Thoughts About New Brands of Cigarettes For the Youth Market," lays out a clear strategy for attracting underage smokers. Teague wrote, "We are presently, and I believe unfairly, constrained from directly promoting cigarettes to the youth market," identified as "the approximately twenty-one year old and under group."

A copy of the memo was obtained by The Washington Post.

While "we should not in any way influence non-smokers to start smoking," Teague wrote, "we should simply recognize that many or most of the '21 and under' group will inevitably become smokers, and offer them an opportunity to use our brands."

The Clinton administration is proposing that the Food and Drug Administration regulate tobacco products as drug delivery devices in an effort to combat underage smoking. Because the memorandum outlines a program to attract the youth market and discusses a plan for the design of a youth-targeted cigarette—incorporating features such as lower nicotine content and less throat irritation than other brands—it would appear to bolster the FDA's case. FDA spokesman Jim O'Hara declined to comment.

Scott D. Ballin, chairman of the Coalition on Smoking OR Health, said that the memo "is clear and convincing evidence that they're targeting kids" and called it "one more nail in the coffin" for the industry's attempts to fight regulation.

RJR spokesman David B. Fisher called the memo "a draft document that reflects preliminary thoughts of one individual in research and development." Fisher said, "We have seen nothing that indicates that it was ever reviewed or acted upon in any way," adding that the document was not secret, having been produced repeatedly in court cases.

Reached at home, Teague said: "I wouldn't care to talk to you. I don't talk to

strangers. Why would I want to talk to you? What earthly gain would it be?"

Tobacco companies have vehemently denied that they market to underage smokers. RJR is currently running an advertising campaign that says FDA regulation of tobacco products is unnecessary and highlights the company's efforts to discourage underage smoking.

The Teague memo delineates a deliberate strategy to appeal to what it calls "learning smokers." Stating that the company should offer "new brands tailored to the youth market," it goes into great detail about the characteristics of such a new product. For example, it says, "The beginning smoker and inhaler has a low tolerance for smoke irritation, hence the smoke should be as bland as possible."

Along with considerations of taste, Teague discussed the precise nicotine delivery of a brand for young people—about 1.0 to 1.3 milligrams per cigarette. "The rate of absorption of nicotine should be kept low by holding pH [acidity] down, probably below 6," it says. RJR, Philip Morris and other tobacco companies have consistently denied that they manipulate nicotine levels.

Teague suggested that the new product should be marketed as a way to fight "stress . . . awkwardness, boredom" and other pressures of the teenage years, and as a way of achieving "membership in a group, one of the group's primary values being individuality."

Teague also suggested that smoking could boost self-esteem—and "the fragile, developing self-image of the young person needs all of the support and enhancement it can get."

The memo warns that the youth cigarette "should not in any way be promoted as a 'health' brand because 'psychologically, at eighteen, one is immortal.'"

The memo states that "the warning label on the package may be a plus" because "if the 'older' establishment is preaching against smoking, the anti-establishment sentiment discussed above would cause the young to want to be defiant and smoke."

RJR has often come under fire for marketing practices that the company's detractors assert are aimed at underage smokers, including the successful "Joe Camel" cartoon campaign. The FDA filings on tobacco regulation cite 1990 memos from RJR managers suggesting that company sales representatives identify stores "that are heavily frequented by young adult shoppers. These stores can be in close proximity to colleges, high schools or areas where there are a large number of adults who frequent the store."

When the Wall Street Journal published that memorandum in May 1990, the company called the memo a "mistake" because targeting to high schools violates company policy.

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