

Without branding elements, it is difficult for tobacco companies to establish brand salience in younger generations.

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Why tobacco companies are so nervous about plain packaging

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The Singapore Government recently announced its plan to proceed with plain tobacco packaging, following in the footsteps of Australia, France, the United Kingdom, Norway, Ireland, New Zealand, Hungary and Slovenia. That means that, as of next year, all tobacco packs sold in Singapore will be a drab brown colour with all logos, fancy colours and branding elements removed and yucky warning labels covering 70 per cent of the pack surface.

Plain packaging has created quite a stir for tobacco companies. In response to plain packaging, the tobacco companies have spent considerable time and money lobbying governments, suing governments, running anti-plain packaging campaigns and trying to sway public opinion.

All the arguments the companies have used to resist plain packaging, such as the argument that it results in crime and terrorism, have been proven wrong. Tobacco industry lawsuits against the Australian and UK governments have failed spectacularly, costing the companies millions of dollars. Despite this, the tobacco companies continue to fiercely oppose plain packaging.

Why is the pack so important for tobacco companies? The answer is simple: External packaging, such as clothing on people, matters.

When it comes to consumer

products, details in the packaging such as colours, send a message to the consumer about what the product is like and who it is for. For example, a pack that is light green or blue tells the consumer that the product is refreshing and, by extension, "healthier". Tobacco companies use these colours to target health-conscious people who might otherwise quit. The pack is therefore an important marketing tool, which the companies use to establish a brand identity and target specific people.

The pack is especially important in markets such as Singapore, where tobacco advertising is heavily restricted. A tobacco industry executive, in internal industry communications, stated in 1994: "When you don't have anything else – our packaging is our marketing."

And for tobacco companies, youth are – and always will be – the most sought-after target group. This is because hardly anyone starts smoking after age 21, and the younger you start, the more likely you will develop an addiction.

Millions of internal industry documents that have been leaked or publicly released via lawsuits against tobacco companies document the tobacco industry's long and shameful history of targeting youth. In the words of a tobacco industry executive in 1981: "Today's teenager is tomorrow's potential regular customer."

But they were also targeting younger kids. Older readers may recall eating candy cigarettes as children, or seeing ads such as the "Joe Camel" cigarette ad that featured a cartoon camel character. A study published in *Jama* found

that Joe Camel reached children as young as three, and that 91 per cent of six-year-olds knew that Joe Camel was connected with cigarettes.

In Singapore, too, tobacco companies have targeted youth. In internal communications, the companies referred to them as "starters" or "entry smokers". In a recent study, we analysed internal tobacco industry documents on Singapore and found that tobacco companies had very carefully designed marketing strategies to lure Singaporean youth into smoking.

In the words of a 1986 tobacco industry report: "The key new business opportunities for Philip Morris in Singapore are among the young market segments."

Companies often focused on "light" or menthol brands as they knew that the younger people in Singapore were more health-conscious. But research now shows that light and menthol cigarettes are just as dangerous to our health as normal cigarettes. In fact, the menthol cigarettes are worse because menthol interacts with nicotine in the brain, making it more addictive. The tobacco companies knew this too, from their own research on menthol.

In Singapore, the pack was an important part of establishing a brand identity that would appeal to youth. For example, one company created a menthol brand called Alpine, which featured imagery of pretty mountains and young couples, and matching imagery and colours on the pack.

Another menthol brand developed for the Singapore market, California, featured images of palm trees, beaches and surfing.

This was because, according to a tobacco industry report: "California is casual and carefree; it is fresh, free and fun. It is a world where the young people would like to be."

Both brands were designed to target health-conscious, fun-loving teenagers who were unlikely to start smoking with brands that might be perceived as too strong or unhealthy.

Plain packaging strips away the ability for tobacco companies to use brands, colours, logos or other pack features to lure youth to smoke.

Without the fresh blue and green colours, it is difficult to mislead them into thinking that some brands are "healthier" than others. Without branding elements, it is difficult for tobacco companies to establish brand salience in younger generations.

Plain packaging exposes tobacco products for what they really are: packs of deadly sticks that, when used correctly, kill more than 50 per cent of its users and shave off more than 20 years of productive life.

Plain packaging is an important part of Singapore's initiative to reduce smoking rates, particularly among younger generations. No wonder then that the tobacco companies are so nervous about plain packaging.

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