

The importance of packaging

Packaging is a central marketing tool for tobacco products and is, in the judgement of marketing experts and courts, a form of advertising (Béguinot E, unpublished data, 2008).^{5,6,7} Tobacco companies monitor and alter packaging on a regular basis to ensure its continuous and increasing appeal to target audiences. Why?



Packages from France, China, India and the Russian Federation show the effectiveness of the package as advertisement. Sources: France – E. Béguinot; China – www.goldenchinabrands.com; India – WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia; Russian Federation – www.cigarettespedia.com.

Tobacco packaging is highly visible. Cigarette packages are pulled from pockets and handbags and lie visible on tables many times each day. Tobacco product displays are ubiquitous in retail stores and outdoor kiosks worldwide.

Packaging is the critical link between the product and all forms of promotion. Packaging becomes more important as other promotional avenues are restricted or eliminated by law. Packaging displays are a highly prevalent and effective form of promotion. So-called “power walls” – large, attractive displays of tobacco packages behind the checkout at retail outlets – promote tobacco products at the critical moment when the consumer is prepared to buy.

“The discrimination in product terms, pure blind product terms, without any packaging or name around it is very limited ... it’s very difficult for people to discriminate, blind tested. Put it in a package and put a name on it, and then it has a lot of product characteristics.”

Don Brown, then Vice-President, Marketing, Imperial Tobacco, Canada (1989)⁸

Packaging conveys product characteristics even when the product itself does not. Tobacco product packaging strongly influences perceptions of the product. Studies have shown that smokers often cannot tell the difference between different brands of cigarettes or other tobacco products.⁵

Packaging and branding is particularly important to young people, who constitute the primary source of new customers for tobacco companies. Tobacco products, and particularly cigarettes, are “badge” products, or products with a high degree of social visibility.⁹ Users perceive their own personality in the brand image, and the brand image reflects back on them.

“A cigarette package is unique because the consumer carries it around with him all day ... it’s part of a smoker’s clothing, and when he saunters into a bar and plunks it down, he makes a statement about himself.”

John Digianni, Cigarette package designer (1990)¹⁰

Tobacco packaging is an equally important medium for communication of public health messages. Health warnings on packaging should be thought of as a mass media campaign virtually guaranteed to be seen by almost all smokers and by many potential smokers:

a pack-a-day cigarette smoker sees the package – including an effective health warning – at least 7300 times a year;

strong, conspicuous warnings could be placed on smoking devices, such as water pipes, which are a prominent feature of social life in many countries;

even where sales of single cigarettes or other unpackaged tobacco products are common, health warnings on packages could be required wherever sample tobacco packages are displayed.

Using tobacco packages to communicate health information is also an extremely cost-effective public health measure for governments. Virtually all of the costs (other than those associated with the implementation of any government policy) are borne by tobacco companies.