

"DOUBT IS OUR PRODUCT"

"If you can "do tobacco" you can do just about anything in public relations. Peter Sparber

Doubt is our product since it is the best means of competing with the "body of fact" that exists in the mind of the general public. It is also the means of establishing a controversy. Within the business we recognize that a controversy exists. However, with the general public the consensus is that cigarettes are in some way harmful to the health. If we are successful in establishing a controversy at the public level, then there is an opportunity to put across the real facts about smoking and health. Doubt is also the limit of our "product". Unfortunately, we cannot take a position directly opposing the anti-cigarette forces and say that cigarettes are a contributor to good health. No information that we have supports such a claim.

Tobacco company Brown & Williamson's 1969 Smoking and Health Proposal

By the 1960s, the tobacco companies were in a pickle. For more than a decade, the news media had reported on scientific research connecting cigarette smoking to health risks. In its [1964 report](#) and on the basis of more than 7,000 research articles relating smoking and disease in the biomedical literature, the Surgeon General's Advisory Committee on Smoking and Health concluded that cigarette smoking causes lung cancer. This would be followed by a health warning labels on each pack of cigarettes and subsequently a ban on cigarette smoking ads on television.

The tobacco companies were in a pickle. The public believes smoking is harmful - in some way. Science, however, was identifying the particular way - smoking causes lung cancer. As they had been doing since the early 1950s, tobacco companies treat the matter as a matter of public relations. The question will be whose message with the public believe?

The tobacco companies can't say that smoking contributes to good health and they can't explicitly deny smoking is unhealthy. Big tobacco can say they disagree and plant doubt in the public's mind about the real harm in smoking. It's a classic "we might be wrong but so too might our opponents." Thus, it's too soon for action.

To achieve this, the tobacco companies developed a playbook on massaging the controversy.

Playbook - the strategies and tactics of the tobacco industry in their nearly half century disinformation campaign to discredit and stop anti-smoking efforts and government regulation include:

- manufacture doubt - "we just don't know whether smoking is harmful or not"
- question science - "there is no proof" and "science cannot say..."
- create controversy - is smoking harmful or addictive? Let's hear both sides!
- find friendly scientists - get credentialed scientists to say all the things above
- attack the messenger - what are the motives and intentions of scientists, writers, publications?
- shift the blame - smokers need to take responsibility and be responsible in their smoking habits
- freedom - let smokers choose and regulate their smoking habits
- delay regulation - since we don't know anything conclusively, it's too hasty to change things
- third party allies - get others to make and defend tobacco's points, notably if the others have been antagonistic to smoking or the tobacco industry

Adapted from Robert Kenner's documentary [Merchants of Doubt](#)