



Media Release

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Tobacco giants capturing consumers online

Industry shows 'alarming sophistication' in internet marketing

Tobacco companies are developing highly effective marketing online strategies, posing a major challenge for tobacco control across the globe, delegates of the Oceania Tobacco Control Conference in Darwin will hear today.

In one of the first public health studies into alternative advertising techniques being employed by tobacco companies, Sydney Medical School's Becky Freeman has uncovered what she describes as the "alarming sophistication" of online marketing by the tobacco industry.

Currently 151 nations, including Australia, enforce restrictions on tobacco advertising across traditional media such as television, radio and print, but online media remains unregulated.

"When the Australian ban on tobacco advertising and sponsorship phased out industry promotions during the 1990s, the tobacco industry continued to spend advertising dollars through alternative channels, which now include 'new media' such as Facebook, YouTube and online viral marketing," Ms Freeman said.

"The ban forced the industry to become more creative at promoting their products and it didn't take them long to see that this new and unregulated medium is often more effective at engaging consumers than traditional advertising."

Latest statistics show almost 75 per cent of the Australian population use the internet and one in two Australians use social networking sites such as Facebook or Myspace. Facebook pages of consumer brands rate among the most popular, with Coca-Cola and Starbucks Coffee both in the top 10.

Ms Freeman said companies such as Marlboro, Peter Stuyvesant and Lucky Strike all had Facebook pages that were used to recruit 'members' and engage them with the product. "One of the most innovative marketing strategies used by a tobacco company online was by the 'Camel' brand, which engaged the online community to help design a new packet.

"The Camel website confirmed that it was the first major pack change in 94 years and that five million adult smokers had been invited to offer their input. This is a perfect example of how innovative tobacco companies are when it comes to engaging consumers online," Ms Freeman said.

Ms Freeman called on public health practitioners and researchers to 'catch up' and learn to better exploit online media for health promotion.

“Public health cannot afford to ignore these emerging media and should be using them not only to beat the tobacco industry at its own game, but to capitalise on the ability to better engage the public with health promotion messages.

“Public health organisations routinely spend significant funds developing new and revamping existing websites in the hope of attracting young users. Yet globally popular websites remain largely ignored by health promoters and public health researchers.”

Cancer Council Australia’s Chief Executive, Professor Ian Olver, agrees: “Public health risks being left behind in a world where our audiences are increasingly taking their cues from online messaging,” he said.

“Monitoring the volume and impact of online health messaging and looking at the potential to regulate alternative forms of advertising being employed by the tobacco industry must be a priority for chronic disease prevention,” he said.

[Becky Freeman will present her research at 4.00 pm today at the Oceania Tobacco Control Conference. Waterfront room 2, Darwin Convention Centre, Northern Territory.](#)

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