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Smoking Gun

Tobacco industry documents expose an R.J. Reynolds marketing plan targeting S.F. gays and homeless people. Its name: Project SCUM.

By Joel P. Engardio and Joel P. Engardio

In its efforts to increase cigarette sales in the mid-1990s, tobacco company R.J. Reynolds hit on a novel bit of niche marketing in San Francisco, according to recently uncovered documents. It created a campaign that focused mainly on two groups of smokers: gays in the Castro and homeless in the Tenderloin. The company called its new project "subculture urban marketing" and gave it a memorable acronym: "Project SCUM."



Tom Dougherty, Tom Dougherty

"This is a hate crime, plain and simple," says Kathleen DeBold, who directs the Washington, D.C.-based Mautner Project for Lesbians With Cancer. "What else do you call it when a group thinks of gays and lesbians as 'scum,' and then targets us with something that kills?"

San Francisco Supervisor Chris Daly, who represents the Tenderloin District, is equally upset. "It's racist, it's classist, it's oppressive. And it is really disheartening to hear. But I can't say that I am surprised. Low-income communities and people of color have always been derided and taken advantage of. Obviously, the tobacco companies feel like they can make money off other people's misery."

The papers that outline R.J. Reynolds' plans are among the

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documents made public by the major tobacco companies as part of a combined 1998 litigation settlement with attorneys general of several states. Project SCUM was discovered last week by an American Lung Association researcher in Colorado, who has been culling the online archives of millions of declassified files to better understand how the powerful and secretive tobacco industry operates. Anne Landman, who last year found out that Philip Morris wanted to attract more gay smokers by turning its famous Marlboro Man into a gay icon ("Outing the Marlboro Man," Bay View, Feb. 16, 2000), quickly passed along her latest find to outraged anti-smoking advocates serving gay and poor communities.

"This is a reminder that, gay or straight, black or white, we are all victims of the tobacco industry. We all suffer because of their greed," says Bob Gordon, vice president of San Francisco's Coalition of Lavender Americans on Smoking and Health.

Project SCUM details how R.J. Reynolds hoped to capitalize on groups it termed "consumer subcultures," including "alternative lifestyle (gay/Castro)" and "street people (Tenderloin)." The cigarette maker wanted to improve the presence of its venerable Camel brand among gays in San Francisco, amid the relaunch of its retro Red Kamel spinoff in 1996. Meanwhile, plans were being made to push the company's discount brand Doral to Tenderloin residents.

The North Carolina-based company -- maker of other top-selling brands like Winston and Salem -- would not comment on the campaign. "We don't respond to those documents," said R.J. Reynolds spokesperson Lisa Eddington. "They are part of the master settlement agreement, and are out there for people to draw their own conclusions."

Anti-smoking advocates devoted to the gay community say they are especially concerned about tobacco companies targeting gays, because of recent studies that show gay populations smoke at significantly higher rates than the general population. Researchers at UC San Francisco found that the proportion of gay men who smoke is 41 percent, vs. 28 percent of men overall. Among lesbians, a UCLA study determined that 56 percent are current and former smokers, compared with 36 percent of women in general. "The tobacco companies are masters at changing their message to fit anyone: Want to be tough and butch? Light up a smoke. Want to be smart and sexy? Light up a smoke," DeBold says.

Fallout

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"The tobacco industry knows we are some of their best customers, so if they are going to organize to target us, we want to organize to fight back," Gordon says. "Isn't it ironic that they think of us as 'scum' -- something filthy and untouchable -- yet they still reach out to us as a group they consider vitally important to their profit margin? They just see us as another set of disposable consumers to addict and dehumanize."

Yet Landman, who has uncovered many documents related to gays and other groups, says the entire tobacco industry cannot be characterized as equally offensive. She notes a difference in tone, for example, between documents generated by Philip Morris and R.J. Reynolds. While both companies actively sought the gay market, Philip Morris never used disparaging terms like "scum."

"Philip Morris is very careful with its language and is very straight-laced in its presentations," Landman says. "But what we find on the R.J. Reynolds site is more raw and unpolished. They are more direct in saying what they mean, and have much less finesse in hiding their true purpose."

That purpose -- which Landman says is borne out by her research -- is shared by every tobacco company: to aggressively and methodically target any possible group they think they can sell cigarettes to.

After retrieving, reading, and cataloging reams of tobacco-related documents for more than two years, Landman says it is rare that anything surprises her anymore. Except last week, when Project SCUM jumped out at her.

"The more I dig through these documents, I come to realize it's all nasty. But this one is particularly nasty. Even if it is a cute acronym, how do you justify it?" she says. "What consumers would want to buy a product from any company that calls them scum?"

Landman notes, however, that in the series of three Project SCUM documents that date from 1995 to 1997, the final one has a handwritten marking that crosses out "scum" and replaces it with "sourdough."

"The name of the project is beyond offensive, and they realized that a little too late," she says. "It's one thing to go after a particular group to extract its money. But it's another to be derogatory while you do it."

Jeremy Mullman

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