

If smoking in a movie is about “free expression,” why do all the characters smoke the same brand?

Big Tobacco has a long history of using cash and favors to promote smoking in movies. Big-screen appearances may be protected by the First Amendment. But so is the audience’s right to know what’s really behind them.

Big Tobacco and Hollywood have mutually profited each other since the 1920s, pumping up stars in ads while glamorizing smoking on screen.

As limits on tobacco advertising in other media have tightened, movies have grown in importance as global promotional vehicles, especially for the young audiences Big Tobacco covets.

Despite Big Tobacco’s 1989 pledge to stop paying for product placement in films (cigar makers followed in 1998), smoking in movies has soared in the last decade.

Even limits on tobacco promotion in the multi-billion-dollar Master Settlement Agreement between the states and Big Tobacco have failed to reverse the trend.

Some in Hollywood say that smoking on screen is “artistic choice” or “creative expression.” They ignore the sordid history of trading cash, goods and publicity for screen time. Meanwhile, moviemakers act as if product placement never stopped.

Example? America’s most advertised cigarette, Marlboro, also dominates the big screen. And when several leading characters smoke in a movie, they never smoke brands from competing companies. That is exactly the sort of “exclusive” demanded by any product placement deal.

The claim that writers and directors are “reflecting reality” doesn’t hold up, either:

- ▶ Smoking on screen is heavier today than in movies from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, when more Americans smoked.

- ▶ Smoking among leading movie characters is more common than it is among comparable people in the U.S. population.



Barry M. Meyer, Warner Bros.



Sherry Lansing, Paramount



Tom Rothman, 20th Century Fox



Dick Cook, Disney

Defenders of artistic freedom? These studio bosses let Big Tobacco promote smoking to global audiences in theaters, over satellite and cable, on tapes and DVDs, and so cleverly that you can’t tell it apart from paid product placement.

- ▶ The characters shown smoking are mostly up-scale, while real-life smokers tend to be low-income and less educated.

- ▶ Tobacco kills four million people a year worldwide, but movies almost never portray smoking and second-hand smoke as unhealthy, let alone lethal. Such positive portrayals used to be purchased outright.

It is not as if Big Tobacco budgets any less for advertising and promotion than before. At last report, the industry was taking in almost six times more in retail sales than Hollywood — and spends more on promotion alone (\$8.2 billion) than Hollywood reaps at the U.S. box office (\$7.7 billion).

Does the First Amendment protect Big Tobacco’s commercial speech wherever it appears? It certainly protects the movies.

Whether actors, directors, editors, set dressers or producers are addicted to nicotine themselves, corrupt enough to accept favors from Big Tobacco, or stupid enough to do the tobacco industry’s dirty work for free, censorship is not the answer.

Free speech is essential to a healthy society. Indeed, the First Amendment is the reason we

can make so many secret documents tracing Big Tobacco’s involvement in Hollywood available to the public.

Big Tobacco argues that its free speech rights prevent states from restricting tobacco advertising to kids.

Yet it has never hesitated to violate the public’s right to know — retaliating against publications critical of tobacco, trying to block damaging research, spreading disinformation. The tobacco industry even lied to Congress about its activities in Hollywood.

But as researchers and public health advocates, we value free speech as an absolute guarantee that information will flow freely and powerful interests cannot suppress the facts.

The facts are these: Sex and violence sell movie tickets. Smoking only sells cigarettes. When Hollywood solemnly defends smoking on screen, Big Tobacco gets away with addiction and death worldwide.

Government should not, and need not, interfere in film content. Instead, we ask studios and the giant media companies that own them to take the following reasonable but life-saving steps. E-mail the studio chiefs yourself and ask them why they don’t...

1] ROLL AN ON-SCREEN CREDIT certifying that nobody on the production has accepted *anything* of value from any tobacco company, its agents or fronts.

2] RUN STRONG ANTI-TOBACCO ADS IN FRONT OF SMOKING MOVIES. Put them on tapes and DVDs, too. Strong spots are proven to immunize audiences.

3] QUIT IDENTIFYING TOBACCO BRANDS — in the background *or* in action. Brand names are unnecessary.

4] RATE ANY SMOKING MOVIE “R.” While this may identify smoking with maturity, it should give producers pause.



**SMOKE
FREE
MOVIES**

Smoke Free Movies aims to sharply reduce the film industry’s usefulness to Big Tobacco’s domestic and global marketing — a leading cause of disability and premature death. This initiative by Stanton Glantz, PhD (coauthor of *The Cigarette Papers* and *Tobacco War*), of the UCSF School of Medicine is supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund. To learn how you can help, visit our website or write to us: Smoke Free Movies, UCSF School of Medicine, Box 0130, San Francisco, CA 94143-0130.