

Smoking

'We will speak as the smoker': the tobacco industry's smokers' rights groups

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Introduction: The tobacco industry usually keeps its commercial and political communications separate. However, the images of the smoker developed by the two types of communication may contradict one another. This study assesses industry attempts to organize 'smokers' rights groups,' (SRGs) and the image of the smoker that underlay these efforts. **Methods:** Searches of the Legacy Tobacco Documents Library, the British American Tobacco documents database, and Tobacco Documents Online. **Results:** 1100 documents pertaining to SRGs were found, including groups from across Europe and in Australia, New Zealand, and Hong Kong. From the late 1970s through the late 1990s they were active in numerous policy arenas, particularly the defeat of smoke-free laws. Their strategies included asserting their right to smoke and positioning themselves as courteous victims of tobacco control advocates. However, most SRGs were short-lived and apparently failed to inspire smokers to join in any significant numbers. **Conclusion:** SRGs conflated the legality of smoking with a right to smoke. SRGs succeeded by focusing debates about smoke-free policies on smokers rather than on smoke. However, SRGs' inability to attract members highlights the conflict between the image of the smoker in cigarette ads and that of the smokers' rights advocate. The changing social climate for smoking both compelled the industry's creation of SRGs, and created the contradictions that led to their failure. As tobacco control becomes stronger, the industry may revive this strategy in other countries. Advocates should be prepared to counter SRGs by exposing their origins and exploiting these contradictions.

Keywords: civil rights, tobacco industry, tobacco smoke pollution

The tobacco industry develops promotions directed both broadly and at specific target markets.^{1–7} The industry also creates communications to counter tobacco control policy measures (e.g., op-eds, political advertising).^{8–13} However, industry commercial and political messages have largely been separate. Previous research suggests that blending them is commercially ineffective.¹⁴ This study examines industry efforts to organize smokers' rights groups (SRGs) to oppose clean indoor air laws, which involved persuading smokers *qua* smokers to act politically, rather than by buying cigarettes.

Social theorists suggest that in consumer capitalism, goods 'place a person in society,' and aid self-definition.¹⁵ Image advertising does not describe specific aspects of its subject, but displays 'images that one may gain and project by using the product.'¹⁶ Such advertising suggests that *this* product will taste good, remove stains, or cure colds, and satisfy profound psychosocial needs.

Cigarettes are usually promoted with image advertising. (The exceptions are ads for ostensibly safer cigarettes.)^{17,18} The tobacco industry has repeatedly identified two 'needs' cigarettes can fulfill: easing social interactions (e.g., promoting confidence or popularity),^{19–21} and relieving stress (e.g., promoting pleasure).^{2,21} Many cigarette ads use these themes: thus Marlboro ads project masculine independence, while Capri ads suggest 'a moment of escape.'²

Despite such advertising, many smokers find their own smoking problematic,²² and as many as 70% say they would like to quit.²³ In situations of conflict over smoking, many smokers 'disidentify' with the category 'smoker.'²⁴ The tobacco industry has attempted to assuage smokers' discomfort through product design^{21,25} and advertising,^{2,14} e.g., developing ads to

reassure smokers that they were not 'social outcasts' because of their smoking.²

Furthermore, smokers frequently support tobacco control policies.^{26–31} The level of support depends on the country, culture, and specific policy: in Japan support for and compliance with smoke-free policies rose with the policy's comprehensiveness.³⁰ Some smokers, particularly those from countries with weak tobacco control policies, find smoke-free laws 'discriminatory.'³² However, experience in California and other jurisdictions with strong clean indoor air laws shows that, once implemented, support for such policies increases, even among smokers.^{33,34} This article shows how the identity proposed by SRGs conflicted with that conveyed in cigarette advertising, exposing contradictions that highlighted the changing social position of smoking.

Methods

Data were collected from the Legacy Tobacco Documents Library (<http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu>), BAT Documents Archive (<http://bat.library.ucsf.edu>), and Tobacco Documents Online (<http://tobaccodocuments.org/>) which hold millions of company documents released in response to litigation. We began with search terms such as 'smokers' rights' and names of organizations. Searches were extended using a 'snowball' strategy. Further information on sources and methods is provided in earlier work.^{35,36} Searches on the Internet Archive (<http://www.archive.org/index.php>) for past SRG sites, and web searches for current sites were also performed. Documents were sorted chronologically and thematically. This study is based on a review of ~1100 documents and 7 websites.

We excluded North America from our analysis, since previous work has focused on US groups.³⁷ We also do not discuss the organization Fight Ordinances and Restrictions to Control and Eliminate Smoking (FORCES; <http://www.forces.org/>) as there is no definitive evidence to date that it is funded by the tobacco industry.³⁸

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Results

Since 1979, the tobacco industry has created or planned SRGs in at least 26 countries worldwide (See table 1). Realizing that public acceptance of its messages about second-hand smoke (SHS) depended on the source of those messages, Philip Morris proposed adopting a variety of personas: 'sometimes we will need to speak as independent scientists, scientific groups and

businessmen; at other times we will talk as the industry; and, finally, we will speak as the smoker.'¹ Organized and predominantly funded by tobacco companies, the SRGs' purposes were to maintain 'controversy' about SHS in the social arena³⁹ and to focus debate on the smoker rather than the tobacco industry or the smoke. SRGs opposed clean indoor air laws and policies on transportation, in workplaces, and in other public spaces,⁴⁰ and sometimes took on other

Table 1 Smokers' Rights Groups mentioned in tobacco industry documents

Country	Name	Founded/first mentioned	Details
Currently active			
Netherlands	Stichting Rokers Belangen (SRB)	1993	Active website: http://www.rokersbelangen.nl
UK	Freedom Organization for the Right to Enjoy Smoking Tobacco (FOREST)	1978	Active website: http://www.forestonline.org
Defunct/no current information			
Australia	Smokers' Rights League	1977	Defunct
	FAIR-GO	1987	No current information
Belgium	The Smoking	1996	No current information
Denmark	Hensynsfulde Rygere (Hen-Ry)	1987	Exposed as industry front, 2000; website not available
Finland	Huomaavaiset Tupakoitsijat (HuTu)	1988	Exposed as industry front, 1990
France	Calumet de la Paix	1993	No current information
	Tabac	1994	No current information
Germany	Erste Raucher Lobby (ERL)	1988?	No current information
	Raucher wehrt Eucht (RAWÉ)	1989	No current information
	Raucher Club Deutschland (RCD)	1997	Website dated 2000
Greece	Eleftheria	1990	No current information
Hong Kong	Freeview	1993	No current information
Italy	Tuttinsieme	1991	No current information
	Associazione Fumatori	1993	Website available, but not active: http://www.assfumatori.it/smoke.htm
Japan	Scores	1994	No current information
Netherlands	Rokers Belangen Vereniging (RBV)	1989	Defunct
Norway	Røykringen	1989	Exposed as industry front, date unclear
Spain	Club de Fumadores por la Tolerancia (CdFT)	1999	Website unavailable
Sweden	Smokepeace	1989	Exposed as industry front, 2000
Switzerland	Raucher Club Schweiz	1990	Website unavailable
	Club der tabak freunde (CTF)	1996	No current information
Planned/No data			
Argentina		1994	
Ecuador		1990	
Guatemala		1990	
New Zealand		1989	
Philippines		1996	
South Korea		1996	
Turkey		1995	
Venezuela		1990	

issues, such as tobacco taxes⁴¹ and 'discrimination' against smokers.⁴²

As SHS was increasingly shown to be a health hazard, its perceived threat to the tobacco industry grew.⁴³ The danger was that, as smoking became less acceptable, smokers would quit smoking to be 'fully acknowledged member[s] of ... society',⁴⁴ and businesses would implement clean indoor air policies to maintain 'social harmony and good customer relations'.⁴⁵ SRGs were envisioned as a tool to reverse this trend.

SRGs were established primarily in democratically governed countries with traditions of citizen pressure groups, oppositional politics, and independent media. An industry discussion about the 'exportability' of Britain's Freedom Organization for the Right to Enjoy Smoking Tobacco (FOREST) remarked that to be successful, the group needed 'an aggressive and intemperate adversary'.⁴⁶ SRGs should be perceived to be joining a debate, not starting one. SRGs could be 'an 'alternative voice' on smoking issues,' providing radio and TV producers with 'a two-sided debate,' which producers preferred to 'an unchallenged monologue'.⁴⁷

Financial relationships and industry control

Financial relationships between the tobacco industry and the SRGs varied. Philip Morris (PM) often started groups later supported by the local national manufacturers' association (NMA).^{40,48–54} In Scandinavia, plans and budgets for Hen-Ry (Denmark) were created and approved by PM and its public relations agency, Burson-Marsteller.⁵⁵ The Swedish NMA gave Smokepeace 250 000 krona (~€27 000), thus allowing the group to produce a magazine.⁴⁸ A 1990 SRG conference cost PM 'approximately US\$820 000 [~€640 000], excluding the cost of sending delegates, which was paid by local NMAs or PM affiliates'.⁵

British American Tobacco (BAT) and the Tobacco Advisory Council (TAC) (an organization of several British tobacco companies) retained a close relationship with FOREST. Although records are incomplete, they indicate that FOREST received £26 000⁵⁶ (~€38 500) in 1991 and as much as £265 862⁵⁷ (~€393 000) in 1995. Contributions from non-tobacco company sources were minimal; ~£6000 (~€9000) in 1994, when FOREST's total budget was £255 000 (~€377 000).⁵⁷ These sources included donations, book sales, memberships, and interest.⁵⁷

Industry documents imply control of other SRGs. In the Netherlands, PM planned to 'continue to support and exploit to a maximum the Smokers' Rights Club'.⁵⁸ PM intended to 'carefully monitor' the Italian Associazione Fumatori's agenda, so it went 'in parallel with' that of the local NMA.⁵⁹ In Greece, PM wanted to 'help establish measurable objectives [for Eleftheria] such that reasonable budget can be prepared,' although PM was 'to step out of driving seat,' and an '[i]ndependent spokesperson' was 'to be appointed.' The organization was to be supported by Greek NMAs.^{53,60} There was also discussion of 'establishing,' 'expanding,' and 'supporting' groups in other countries, including Germany, France, and Spain.^{51,60,61}

The groups' relationship to the tobacco industry was sometimes admitted,^{62,63} sometimes evaded, and sometimes denied.⁶⁴ When asked how much financial support they received from the industry, the Smokepeace (Sweden) representative claimed ignorance: 'I have never seen any, but I assume that we have received support'.⁶² The Danish spokesperson refused to answer, asserting that sponsors were anonymous.⁶⁵

Some SRGs were less than forthcoming about funding. The Italian representative at an international SRG conference claimed that 'no nat[io]nal smokers' group received funding from tobacco companies.⁶⁴ Hen-Ry (Denmark) asserted that 'the tobacco industry does not give public relations aid to the smokers' rights groups'.⁵⁵ However, PM had hired Burson-Marsteller to be 'the public relations agency for the local Smoker's Clubs' in both Sweden⁶⁶ and Denmark and to organize and manage a Nordic SRG conference,⁶⁷ for which all correspondence 'was carried out in Hen-Ry's name'.⁵⁵

A FOREST spokesperson acknowledged that 'FOREST's funding and its alleged role as a "front organisation"' would inevitably arise. He proposed responding 'by pointing to the "scandal" of anti-smoking organizations being funded by the taxpayer'.^{47,68} When FOREST was confronted on this issue by a parliamentary committee, the spokesman admitted getting funding from the industry, but claimed that 'it would only be a front if they told us what to do, if they appointed the staff at FOREST,' which he denied.⁶⁹ (No contemporary evidence on this subject is available; however, the industry had appointed previous FOREST directors and controlled FOREST's budget.)^{70,71}

SRG purposes and membership

The industry's primary goal for SRGs was keeping smoking socially acceptable.^{72–74} SRGs were also supposed to reassure smokers that 'respectable, responsible people' could 'make the choice to smoke,' and that 'smokers are legitimate members of society'.⁴⁵

The companies hoped SRGs would 'motivate' smokers to 'fight for their rights',^{73,75} but gradually realized that this was unlikely.^{47,76,77} In 1994, 15 years after FOREST's founding, the industry still lacked a 'grasp of smokers' attitudes and motivations and what will trigger them into action'.⁷⁸ An Italian industry survey revealed that 72.2% of smokers wanted 'more state intervention on regulating smoking in public places,' and only 1.7% would join an SRG.⁷⁹ A German industry representative noted that 'it was practically impossible to get smokers [to] fight for their rights'.⁴⁴ However, some indigenous smokers' groups were rejected by the industry, which preferred to create its own 'more solid and credible' SRGs.⁸⁰

The tobacco industry repeatedly complained about the difficulties of increasing SRG membership. Some successful membership drives were reported,⁵⁴ but frustration was more common. Shortly after its founding, FOREST leaders admitted that a campaign to increase paid membership had 'failed' to make the group financially self-sufficient, noting that the 'advertising campaign for membership has cost £70 per member!'⁷⁶ The industry variously ascribed these problems to national characteristics (the British were 'non-joiners'⁷⁷ while avoidance of leadership was a 'very Italian' attitude⁵¹) and the 'passive' nature of smokers.⁴⁷ In several instances the tobacco industry proposed using industry affiliates to boost memberships,^{76,81,82} but even this was not necessarily successful: 10 000 retailers were asked to join FOREST, and 4 did.⁸³

SRGs nevertheless claimed to represent large numbers of smokers. Despite the dismal response from Italian smokers, a year later the group reported a membership of 60 000.⁸⁴ The Nordic groups claimed to 'directly or indirectly represent more than 7 million people'.⁸⁵ The spokesman for the international association of SRGs said that they lobbied 'for the rights of the world's 1.2 billion smokers'.⁸⁶

Leaders

Contrary to their denials, the industry controlled SRG leadership. In the UK, the companies demanded that candidates for director of FOREST be 'suitable (to the industry)'.⁸⁷

The TAC planned to 'control' FOREST 'through a third party, so that there would be no direct contact between tobacco company personnel or TAC and the director.'⁸⁸ However, oversight would take place 'on an almost daily basis with occasional more formal review meetings.'⁸⁹

Some leaders maintained long-term working relationships with industry SRGs, including Danish doctor Tage Voss, who once wrote to a colleague that he looked forward to cooking 'another dosis [sic] of poison for the noble knights of world health.'⁹⁰ But sometimes the tobacco industry found it difficult to find reliable spokespeople.^{50,91} In Australia, the industry regarded smokers' rights activist Dr. William Whitby as 'a nut,' though they also groomed him to represent the group.⁹² Another Australian activist was said to 'rush in where angels fear to tread.'⁹³ Stephen Eyres, hired as Director of FOREST after interviews with all of the major British companies,^{87,94–96} embezzled funds to purchase a villa in Spain.⁹⁷

Rhetorical strategies

Smoking as a right

SRGs argued for a 'right' to smoke in an attempt to establish moral authority. In debates about health, the industry 'almost invariably loses,' a PM plan warned, not 'based on who's right or wrong, but on who has the "higher moral ground."'⁷² SRGs hoped to gain that advantage by posing as defenders of freedom.

A key message was that 'People have the right to choose to partake or not in legal activities.'⁸⁰ Thus HuTu (Finland) declared that smoking was not 'illegal ... but the right of every free citizen,'⁹⁸ and the Smokers' Rights League (Australia) said smoke-free trains violated 'the rights of the individual.'⁹⁹ The Greek SRG representative, outraged by US President William J. Clinton's smoke-free White House, suggested that to avoid hypocrisy the US should 'stop posing as defenders of human rights.'¹⁰⁰ There was also talk of adding the right to smoke to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.¹⁰¹

PM also proposed the broader message, 'Discrimination against smokers is undemocratic and sets a dangerous precedent.'⁸⁰ Smokers were protecting their own rights and demanding 'Civil rights for all.'¹⁰² Thus FOREST called the issue 'one of freedom of choice for the individual, and who has sovereignty over a person's body and lifestyle choices.'⁷⁷

However, 'rights' rhetoric was not always perceived to be effective. A BAT representative attempted to compare smokers' rights to gay rights,¹⁰³ but a strategy document noted that 'Smokers do not identify themselves as a group [as] homosexuals do.'⁷⁷ Burson-Marsteller attributed the success of the Nordic groups to their 'messages of moderation and accommodation,' in contrast to the 'far more strident approaches stressing *smoker rights*' (emphasis in original) used in the UK, USA, and Australia.⁴⁵ However, although 'rights' language might be 'too strident ... , or too elitist, or too political,' a 'friendly' approach did not 'rally troops.'⁷⁸

SRGs and policy

As the industry planned,^{104,105} SRGs promoted 'compromise' on the issue of SHS. This message of accommodation had to be 'perceived to be for *smokers*, not for the tobacco industry,' (emphasis in original) PM consultant Burson-Marsteller warned; otherwise, it would 'lack credibility.'⁴⁵

SRG solutions: segregation and courtesy

Smoking areas—excluding smoking from part of the space—were described as protecting everyone's rights. The 'founder' of FOREST, Sir Christopher Foxley-Norris, asserted that

non-smokers were 'entitled to go somewhere they won't be smoked at' but they were 'not entitled to have a one hundred percent monopoly of their views.'¹⁰⁶ The Smokers' Rights League (Australia) described smoking sections on public transportation as 'a system which provides for the rights of each group.'¹⁰⁷ Hen-Ry (Denmark) gave a 'prize of tolerance' to an airline that 'made smokers and non-smokers sit side by side in the same aeroplane without making anyone feel uncomfortable.'¹⁰⁸

The alternative solution was 'courtesy' and 'tolerance.' A 1992 international SRG conference concluded with a 'pledge to fight intolerance and promote courtesy' to resolve 'the smoker–non-smoker conflict.'⁸⁶ Hen-Ry (Denmark), told smokers to ask people if they objected to the tobacco smoke: 'Then it is up to the smokers to show courtesy [sic] and the non-smokers will hopefully avoid to demonstrate [sic] intolerance.'¹⁰⁹ Eleftheria (Greece), and Calumet de la Paix (France), developed similar campaigns.^{110,111} FOREST asserted that already courtesy and tolerance were increasing.¹¹²

Sometimes SRG representatives said that 'courteous' smokers abstained if anyone objected. The FOREST spokesman expected 'the smoker to respect' the objection¹¹³ as did the French SRG.¹¹⁴ But some were not so conciliatory. Danish spokesman Dr Voss explained that 'courteous' smoking meant asking others if it bothered them. But 'if one says yes, we have a problem. We must find a solution to that. I have not taken a stand to [sic] this yet.'⁶⁵ On another occasion he called objecting to smoking 'intolerance and impudence,' although he said he would respect it.¹¹⁵ Less stridently, an Italian newsletter 'predicted' that in the coming year 'Politeness will be fundamental between the two parts: "Do you mind if I smoke?" will ask the courteous [sic] smoker; "I don't really bother" [sic] will answer the tolerant non smoker.'¹¹⁶ In this formulation, the 'courteous' smoker always wins, as the non-smoker must endure tobacco smoke or be labeled 'intolerant.'

Smokers as victims

The industry realized that excluding 'smoke' from an area would not seem unfair, but excluding 'people' might. SRGs emphasized this 'unfairness' by positioning smokers as victims. Erste Raucher Lobby (Germany) described the plight of smokers being 'discriminated against' and 'humiliated.'¹¹⁷ In the UK, Foxley-Norris made explicit parallels with other discriminatory practices, mentioning 'job advertisements asking for non-smokers, although we are not allowed to advertise for non-women or non-whites.'¹¹⁸ Norwegian smokers were 'victims of discrimination,'¹⁰² and in Australia, smokers were said to be 'treated very badly.'¹¹⁹ Collectively the SRGs denounced a worldwide 'climate of persecution'¹²⁰ of smokers.

Tobacco control as oppressors

Tobacco control activists were the persecutors. One FOREST supporter called smoke-free policies a 'new apartheid' and smokers the 'victims of health fascist pass laws.'¹²¹ Hen-Ry (Denmark) characterized tobacco control organizations as 'aggressive and dominant,'¹²² invoking a 'smoker's inquisition.'¹²³ The Greek spokesman said 'fanatical' and 'intolerant' tobacco control advocates believed they had a 'right and a duty' to impose their ideas on others,¹²⁴ while the Swedish spokesman referred to 'Ayatollahs of antismokers.'¹²⁵

SRGs worked to persuade the public that tobacco control policies caused 'futile contradictions,'¹²⁶ 'tension,'^{114,127} 'intolerance and confrontations,'⁸⁴ and even 'war ... between smoker and non-smoker.'^{69,128} But it was SRGs that incited conflict: some provoked, threatened, or applauded non-compliance with smoke-free regulations. SRB (Netherlands) implied that smoking in toilets on smoke-free flights was necessary, saying it was 'a shame smokers have to hide in such

small places.¹²⁹ FOREST supported riders who set up 'customer designated smoking areas' when smoking was banned on trains.^{130,131} The Smokers' Rights League (Australia) also proposed 'A mass 'smoke-in' on trains' in response to a smoke-free policy.^{99,132} The German airline Lufthansa reversed a ban because pressure 'from the smokers' lobby' led them to fear 'confrontations'.¹³³

Political success and legitimacy

SRGs claimed some policy successes, though most were temporary. For instance, they delayed smoke-free policies in public buildings⁷⁴ and on several airlines^{134–138} and rail systems.^{139,140} In Finland, 'HuTu was instrumental' in maintaining tobacco's presence in the consumer price index, and defeating an excise tax increase.¹⁴¹

Perhaps more significantly, according to PM, the Nordic groups achieved 'a legitimate political role'⁶⁷ and were 'accepted by the authorities as smokers' representatives'.^{40,74} Røykringen (Norway), was 'included on the consulting list for tobacco legislation' by the Minister of Social Affairs.¹⁴² In Sweden, the SRG became 'a recognized entity representing smokers,' consulted by government commissions.¹⁰⁴ A Hen-Ry (Denmark) publication on implementing smoking policies included 'a foreword by the Minister of Labour,' the 'main unions have indicated that they intend to use the booklet as a model.'¹³⁷ ¹⁴³ Today, in Britain, the BBC links to FOREST's website as a source of information on tobacco issues 'from the smokers' point of view'.¹⁴⁴

Discussion

The 'right' to smoke

SRGs' claim to a 'right' to smoke that was violated by clean indoor air policies conflated 'rights' and 'legality.' Smoking is legal; however, it is not a 'right.' Rights are specifically defined and 'specially protected, in that they generally cannot be abrogated' by other laws.¹⁴⁵ Examples include freedom of speech and due process. Many legal activities do not fall into this category. For instance, asbestos is not a proscribed substance, yet no one has a 'right' to use it, and the state may regulate and restrict its use. Riding a horse is not illegal, but it is not permitted in most urban contexts. These laws do not violate rights, although they limit people's ability to engage in legal activities. Smoking falls in this category.

Smokers, not smoke

SRGs consistently attempted to keep the focus on 'smokers', not on 'smoke'. Clean indoor air laws were framed as barring people who smoke, not smoke itself, effectively obscuring the fact that anyone not smoking at that moment may enter a smoke-free place. The metonymy of using 'smokers' in place of 'smoke' allowed the groups further to adopt the language of 'discrimination.' Only when it is assumed that the smoker and the smoke are the same thing does this language retain plausibility.

Representing smokers

SRGs were rarely successful in recruiting any significant number of smokers. This may have been because smokers in general do not strongly identify as such. However, it may also have been because many smokers support tobacco control measures, as research from both within and outside the tobacco industry shows.^{33,34,79} Thus the claim of SRGs to represent smokers is false, in terms of both membership and political position.

SRG rhetoric also failed to 'represent' smokers in the sense of creating an effective identity for them. SRG rhetorical

strategies—demanding rights, offering courtesy, suggesting segregation, claiming victimization—all implicitly contradicted the image of smoking and smokers that tobacco advertising promotes.

For example, tobacco ads propose that smoking makes people desirable. The call to organize for rights presupposes that this is not the case, that in fact smoking (unjustly) makes people outcasts. Similarly, positioning smokers as victims emphasizes that smoking does not make them more attractive, but rather makes them disliked.

Tobacco ads suggest that smoking eases social situations, but SRG rhetoric acknowledges that smoking is a source of conflict. SRGs proposed segregation and courtesy as solutions to this conflict. But segregation resolves the issue by isolating smokers. This contradicts the idea that smoking smoothes social integration. 'Courtesy' is also problematic in these terms, as it anticipates that smoking may be offensive. Likewise, positioning tobacco control as 'oppressors' illustrates that smokers are in conflict with others. This conflict reveals cigarettes' failure to facilitate social interaction.

Tobacco ads position smoking as a pleasurable indulgence; however, SRG 'rights' language invokes that of communities disenfranchised because of characteristics either unchangeable (such as race) or deeply significant (such as religion). The idea that smoking is this important, or even necessary, may suggest addiction. It contradicts smokers' desire to be told that 'smoking is *not* the most crucial choice in my life' (emphasis in original).²

SRG language presupposed not that smoking would eliminate social discomfort for smokers, as cigarette ads suggest, but that smokers should be willing to accept social discomfort in order to smoke. The identity SRGs proposed thus required smokers to fight to smoke, even though smoking made them unacceptable. Evidently, even the industry's vast experience with communicating to smokers was unable to adequately resolve these contradictions.

Conclusion

Industry-sponsored smokers' rights groups have been active in much of the developed world. While few SRGs remain in developed countries, the strategy could be revived. Circumstances favorable to industry introduction of SRGs include the expansion of rights-based political/social discourse, the development of citizen pressure groups, and the establishment of strong tobacco control infrastructure. Tobacco control advocates should investigate the funding sources of any SRGs that appear and expose industry alliances. Advocates should also point out the falsity of the 'smokers' rights' concept and its essential contradictions. Integrating tobacco control goals with democratic rights, such as contrasting the freedom of health versus the slavery of addiction, may also be effective.¹⁴⁶

Advocates should also continue to frame smoking as a health issue. Focusing on smoke as a pollutant avoids mentioning the smoker, and thus subverts the tobacco industry's metonymy of 'smoker' for 'smoke.' Eliminating cigarette smoke from indoor environments is equivalent to asbestos removal, and thus does not involve anyone's 'rights.' This argument is consistent with the efforts of tobacco control to focus attention on the smoke (and on the industry), not on the smoker.

One measure of tobacco control's success is the industry's overall failure to persuade smokers to take up a cause putatively their own. To have to fight for an identity that was presented in cigarette ads as socially desirable exposes the misrepresentations of those ads and implicitly calls into question the presumed 'benefits' of smoking. The changing social climate for smoking both compelled the industry to create the SRGs, and created the contradictions that led to their failure.

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Conflict of interest

Ruth E. Malone owns one share each of Altria (Philip Morris) and Reynolds American stock for research and advocacy purposes. No other conflicts are declared.

Key points

- Starting in 1979, the tobacco industry created and supported smokers' rights groups (SRGs) in countries around the world to oppose clean indoor air laws and maintain the social acceptability of smoking.
- SRGs conflated legality with rights to promulgate the idea that there was a right to smoke that was violated by tobacco control policies.
- These groups sometimes achieved temporary policy successes, but were unable to gain significant membership or support due to the inherent contradictions between the image of smoking disseminated in tobacco ads and that demanded by smokers' rights activism.
- Although few SRGs are now extant, the tobacco industry may revive this strategy, particularly in countries with strengthening tobacco control policies and developing rights-based discourse. Tobacco control advocates should be prepared to expose SRG-industry ties and the falsity of the claim to a right to smoke.

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