



## **Low Tar Product Category**

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Concerns have been raised within the tobacco control community regarding the introduction of low tar cigarettes and the use of misleading descriptors such as 'light' and 'mild' (Jarvis & Bates 1999, Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids 2003).

It is reasonable for smokers to interpret low tar as indicating a relatively less harmful product compared to full strength brands. However, there is no evidence of health gains by switching to these brands (Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids 2003). Measurements of tar and nicotine levels are currently determined by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) method which may be misleading as it does not reflect how smokers smoke different cigarettes. When smoking low tar brands, smokers adjust (either consciously or subconsciously) their smoking behaviour in order to obtain the desired nicotine hit by employing various behavioural tactics such as blocking the ventilation holes in the filter with fingers, saliva or lips. Such tactics can increase the tar dose of the low tar product so that they are capable of delivering the tar and nicotine of full strength cigarettes (Jarvis & Bates 1999). Furthermore, many smokers may choose these products as a substitute for cessation seeing it as a safer alternative to full strength cigarettes.

The EU Directive on Tobacco Product Regulation (2001/37/EC) banned the use of misleading descriptors such as 'light' and 'mild' from 30<sup>th</sup> September 2003. Observational evidence however suggests that the tobacco industry are using colours (such as white and silver) to continue to portray this image.

In 1999 The House of Commons Health Select Committee obtained access to the internal documents of five main advertising agencies of the UK tobacco industry. The five agencies were: CDP, M&C Saatchi, Mustoe Merriman Herring and Levy, TBWA GCT Simon Palmer Limited and Lowe Howard-Spink. A range of documents were obtained including: contact reports between client and agency, client briefs, creative briefs, media briefs, media schedules, advertising budgets and market research reports (their own and others by contracted agencies). These documents were scanned during the summer of 2002 at the Centre for Tobacco Control Research to develop a searchable electronic archive (<http://www.tobaccopapers.com>). This site was searched using the keyword 'low tar' yielding 214 results. The database automatically sorts these documents by relevance and the first 100 most relevant documents were briefly reviewed online and those significant were printed out for review.

The documents demonstrate that:

1. Low tar products are perceived as healthier and safer alternatives and are designed a) to ease the guilt associated with smoking and make smokers feel better about their habit, and b) as a substitute for quitting.
2. Strategies are developed to associate low tar brands with aspirational and successful characteristics such as 'stylish', 'modern' and 'sexier' which all go against the voluntary code in force at the time.
3. The packaging of low tar brands is paramount in conveying the 'light' and 'healthier' image of such products.

4. Increasing recruitment to these brands (from all areas of the market including existing smokers plus new recruits and entrants) and stopping those who smoke low tar from quitting are important strategies in the low tar product category.

## 2.0 ANALYSIS OF INTERNAL DOCUMENTS

### 2.1 Perceived as a Healthier and Safer Alternatives

A considerable amount of consumer research has been conducted to explore why people smoke low tar brands and the findings highlight both rational and emotional motivations. Almost all of these reasons focus around health concerns and the perception among smokers that low tar products are healthier:

<i>‘Clear and consistent central reasons for smoking low tar cigarettes.</i>	
<b><i>Balance for most between rational and emotional reasons</i></b>	
<u><i>Rational</i></u>	<u><i>Emotional</i></u>
<b><i>Health</i></b>	<i>Self-esteem</i>
<i>Taste / lack of harshness</i>	<b><i>Stage to quitting</i></b>
	<b><i>Substitute for not quitting</i></b>
<u><i>Rational Reasons</i></u>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Health issues frequently seen central to justify choice of low tar (rather than full strength).</i></li> <li>• <b><i>Generally expressed as ‘they’re not as bad for you’.</i></b></li> <li>• <i>Clear link between this view and seeing low tar as a substitute for quitting.</i></li> </ul>	
<u><i>Emotional Reasons</i></u>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b><i>Less harmful low tar cigarettes hence can be associated with higher self esteem.</i></b></li> <li>• <i>A minority saw low tar as a stage on the way to quitting smoking.</i></li> <li>• <b><i>However, more common was sense that low tar was a way of making quitting less urgent or necessary.</i></b></li> <li>• <b><i>All of the above largely related to concerns over health.’</i></b></li> </ul>	
<i>(Calcraft Buck Research Debrief, 1997)</i>	

This information has been used by the industry to develop targeting and branding strategies that meet the needs of these concerned smokers. Low tar products exploit these rational and emotional motivations by targeting those who have concerns about their smoking behaviour and by positioning the products as healthier than full strength varieties. They are deliberately associated with ‘health’ and ‘health conscious people’ through their brand imagery:

<i>‘Critical to retain key elements of Silk Cut communication.’</i>
<b><i>‘Low tar (“healthy”), quality and distinctiveness (combination of gold and purple).’</i></b>
<i>(Haslam Drury Debrief, 1998)</i>
<i>‘Switching to SCUL [Silk Cut Ultra Low] predictably is pre-eminently explained in terms of the desire to smoke a lower tar and milder brand. Indeed, it is the very low tar of SCUL and its perceived less harmful affect on health which explains the high opinion held by users of their brand. This is supported by the brand’s imagery with the high association with ‘health conscious people.’</i>
<b><i>‘The imagery of Silk Cut Ultra Low is predictably dominated by its association with ‘health conscious people’ and being ‘not for real smokers’, with this applicable to both users and non users.’</i></b>
<i>(Market Trends Research Report, 1995)</i>

Their communication with such smokers is designed to exploit these concerns by reassuring them about the brands they are smoking and by exploiting the urges people have to quit by providing them with a substitute (see Section 2.4):

*'...a smart health conscious professional who feels guilty about smoking but either doesn't want to give up or can't. Although racked with guilt they feel reassured that in smoking low tar they are making a smart choice and will jump at any chance to make themselves feel better about their habit.'*

(M&C Saatchi Creative Brief, 1997)

*'Some ultra low-tar product that has real taste. It doesn't matter where it comes from or if we have to cheat a bit. The point is to stop too much chat about low tar products simply being crap.'*

(CDP Stimulus Material, 1995c)

*'Often the brand taken up "on the way" to giving up, but becomes a half way compromise.'*

(Haslam Drury Debrief, 1998)

## 2.2 Association with Successful and Aspirational Characteristics

Branding tools such as packaging and advertising are used to create successful and aspirational characteristics around low tar brands. Keeping in line with the low tar image of healthy options, such brands are deliberately associated with 'safe', 'sensible', 'intelligent', 'acceptable' and 'smart choices' and in terms of personification are associated with someone who 'goes to the gym' - all of these allude feelings of 'healthy' and 'safe choices'. This thinking is illustrated in the following creative brief for Silk Cut:

*'It's a safe choice.'*

*'If pushed for a view, it's probably quite sophisticated, upmarket, a bit smart, and slightly distant. People smoked it in the 1980s, or their mum smoked it. If personified it is a late twenties female corporate executive - smartly dressed, goes to the gym, clean cut, hard to criticise but ultimately dull, lacking soul and individual personality.'*

(M&C Saatchi Creative Brief, 1997)

*'Low tar cigarettes are the only sensible cigarettes to smoke.'*

(M&C Saatchi Creative Brief, 1997)

*'Reinforce the brand messages as Silk Cut being more than just the 'definitive' low tar cigarette, but the 'smarter' way to smoke.'*

*Ensure that is seen as:*

- *An active, intriguing brand with its own individual image.*
- *A brand that is good value for money, and justifies its premium price.*
- *The most intelligent and acceptable cigarette to smoke amongst fellow smokers and non-smokers alike.'*

(Gallaher Ltd Planning Day Brief, 1998)

Low tar brands are also associated with aspirational characteristics such as stylish, modern, young, witty, trendy and sexy which contravene the voluntary code in force at that time.

*'Low tar products account for about a quarter of the market. Apart from Silk Cut, which dominates, there are no real brands, only sub brands. Low tar is becoming increasingly acceptable - particularly for women and more upmarket smokers. Brands like Silk Cut and Marlboro Lights for example have made lower tar seem more stylish, young and modern than traditional full-strength products.'*

(CDP Creative Brief, 1995a)

*'Stylish and witty keeping with Benson & Hedges quality credentials but more modern, 'trendier', 'less reverential' or 'smug'.'*

(CDP Creative Brief, 1995a)

*'If Benson & Hedges is your boss who you respect and like, but find a bit distant, this is their younger brother, who's got all the upbringing but is more approachable, light-hearted and sexier.'*

(CDP Creative Brief, 1995a)

*'All of these characters are to some extent both aspirational and successful.'*

(Mike Imms Report, 1996)

## 2.3 The Importance of Packaging

An important branding tool, particularly in the face of the advertising and promotion ban and labelling regulation, is the packaging of such products. These regulations restrict the marketing of tobacco products and prohibit the use of terms such as 'light' and 'mild'. Packaging therefore becomes a particularly important marketing tool to convey the low tar image. The documents highlight that packaging is paramount in conveying the light image through a combination of colour, graphics and language:

*'As a pack, it is very clearly perceived to be a LIGHTS packet, and the key signifiers of this are:*

- a) *Extensive use of white.*
- b) *The smaller, thinner graphics'*

*'These design factors are seen as wholly consistent with low tar values of being cleaner, purer - and also quite feminine looking, 'quiet' and somewhat recessive/apologetic.'*

(Mike Imms Report, 1996)

*'Ultra imagery partly related to Silk Cut parentage and partly to very low tar content combination of the two leads to associations such as: feminine, weak, middle class. Ultra pack reinforces this imagery and in particular is seen as very feminine and weak (due largely to whiteness).'*

(Calcraft Buck Research Debrief, 1997)

### *'Use of white on the pack*

- *White signals the low tar category.*
- *Correlation between amount of white, and the tar/nicotine levels of the cigarettes.*
- *Implies a lighter, smoother smoke, less harsh and aggressive.*
- *Also purity and cleanliness.'*

(Haslam Drury Debrief, 1998)

The use of the colour white on packs, for example, is used as a clear signal to the low tar product category. It conveys images such as ‘purer’ and ‘cleaner’ which may mislead consumers about the nature of the product. Under the new EU Directive on Tobacco Product Regulation misleading descriptors such as ‘light’ and ‘mild’ are not permitted. Observational evidence however indicates that colours and graphics are continuing to be used to convey the low tar message.

## 2.4 The Importance of Recruitment and Retention

An important aim of the low tar product category is to recruit and retain smokers. Recruitment comes from smokers of full strength brands and also, worryingly, from ‘new smokers’ and from a ‘recruitment audience’:

**Recruitment**  
**New Smokers**  
*King size’s problem is two-fold, firstly the number of new entrants into the market is both relatively small and declining, secondly king size’s efficacy at courting this group is waning.*  
***Marlboro Lights continues to increase its share of recruits year on year. Absolute price is not the issue amongst this group of smokers, image is paramount. We are competing poorly with M. Lights, simply put they are feisty, we are bland.***

**The Issues**  
*‘If the performance of king size is to better forecast, then we need to find a strategy and tactical deployment that delivers the following (in order of import):*

- *Engenders a greater degree of loyalty amongst current users.*
- *Catalyses increased recruitment from full-flavour smokers.*
- ***Enhances the brand’s appeal amongst new entrants.’***

(Gallaher Ltd Planning Day Brief, 1998)

*‘It is likely that all the Hamlet activity in 1997 will be to establish the ‘Hamlet Extra Mild’ brand. In order to do this, we will produce work against two larger audiences. **Poster and national press against classic smokers and cinema, again at a younger recruitment audience.’***

(CDP Creative Brief, 1996)

Stopping smokers from leaving the market is also viewed as equally important and the documents highlight that the industry have developed strategies (such as removing barriers to staying in the market, eg. price) to persuade smokers to stay:

*‘However, what the figures show is that ‘health’ is in no way the only spur to giving up. **Clearly a large body of people want to give up because they can’t afford to carry on smoking.***

*The ‘mid’ opinion here, apart from giving up totally, is to smoke cheaply. The biggest single barriers to entry for Silk Cut, for the majority of people, looking to give up, are probably its price. Despite what people say in groups about image or product, many of them couldn’t afford Silk Cut anyway.*

***The easiest positioning to take up against Silk Cut is on me too but cheaper.’***

(CDP Action Report, 1995b)

***‘B&H is likely to lose more smokers to quitting than is Silk Cut. We have probably been more successful at retaining than other low tar brands.’***

(Gallaher Ltd Planning Day Brief, 1998)

A Silk Cut Creative Brief discusses running a campaign for their Silk Cut Ultra brand directly after New Year to specifically target those who decided to quit at this time by providing them with a low tar alternative:

*'Extension of previous Ultra Only One campaign with strengthened communication of 1mg message. Need for one specific execution in January which plays on peoples' urge to cut down, give up or at least down trade to low tar.'*

(M&C Saatchi Creative Brief, 1997)

Importantly the industry views quitting as a threat – one greater than that posed by competitor brands:

*'In conclusion, the 'threat' to the existing smoker base for the brand seems more likely to come from a desire to give up smoking rather than from competitor brands.'*

(Market Trends Research Report, 1995)



### 3.0 CONCLUSIONS

The documents highlight that not only are the tobacco industry acutely aware that people smoke low tar brands because they perceive them as relatively less harmful than full strength brands but they actively develop branding strategies to convey this image. For example, the use of white packaging and names such as 'light' and 'mild'. Furthermore, they have developed brand images that create associations and characteristics such as stylish, modern, young and sexy all of which blatantly go against the spirit of voluntary regulations that were in force during this period. The recent UK Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Act (2002) and EU Directive on Tobacco Product Regulation (2001/37/EC) begin to address many of these shortcomings by restricting the advertising and promotion of tobacco products and the use of misleading descriptors such as 'light' and 'mild'. However, the documents clearly outline the importance of colours and graphics in conveying the low tar image and these tools continue to be open to the industry.

Low tar products are positioned as a stage in the quitting process and as a compromise to giving up in order to reassure smokers about their habit and importantly to stop them from quitting. The tobacco industry is ultimately concerned with increasing the number of smokers smoking low tar brands through recruitment from other brands and worryingly from new recruits to the market and by preventing people from quitting. At no point in the documents are any concerns raised about the health effects of these products.

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