

Website Review: www.philipmorris.com

by Nancy Speelman, CSW, CADC

In reviewing the Philip Morris (PM) website, I found it to be quite comprehensive in providing a history of the company's growth (Philip Morris USA celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2002) and in the description of the company's "Mission and Values". It seems that since the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement, Philip Morris claims to have changed their business practices to not market their product to youth *directly*, and to instead focus on the adult population. It also appears that the site no longer attempts to hide or deny that tobacco causes serious illness and death. The site is broken down to the following sections:

About Us: Mission & Values, Company Information, Careers, Press Room, TV Advertisements

Product Facts: Ingredients in Cigarettes, Tar & Nicotine Numbers, Making Our Cigarettes

Health Issues: Cigarette Smoking and Disease, Addiction, Quitting Smoking, Low Tar Cigarettes, Smoking and Pregnancy, Secondhand Smoke, Surgeon General Reports

Responsible Marketing: Tobacco Settlement Agreement, Marketing Practices

Policies, Practices & Positions: Youth Smoking Prevention, Community Involvement, Litter, Environment, Legislation & Regulation, Public Place Smoking, Suppliers

Customer Service: Contact Us, Join Mailing List, Legislative Action Center, Frequently Asked Questions

The website does provide information on the efforts PM is making to alert the public about the health hazards of smoking. Their "mission and values" statements appear to reflect the terms of the Master Settlement Agreement. And from an objective point of view, the site's "health issues" section does include accurate information. Philip Morris makes the following statements regarding these "health issue" topics:

Cigarette Smoking and Disease in Smokers: *Philip Morris USA agrees with the overwhelming medical and scientific consensus that cigarette smoking causes lung cancer, heart disease, emphysema and other serious diseases in smokers. Smokers are far more likely to develop serious diseases, like lung cancer, than non-smokers. There is no safe cigarette.*

Addiction: *Philip Morris USA agrees with the overwhelming medical and scientific consensus that cigarette smoking is addictive. It can be very difficult to quit smoking, but this should not deter smokers who want to quit from trying to do so.*

Quitting Smoking: *To reduce the health effects of smoking, the best thing to do is to quit; public health authorities do not endorse either smoking fewer cigarettes or switching to lower-yield brands as a satisfactory way of reducing risk.*

Secondhand Smoke: *Public health officials have concluded that secondhand smoke from cigarettes causes disease, including lung cancer and heart disease, in non-smoking adults, as well as causes conditions in children such as asthma, respiratory infections, cough, wheeze, otitis media (middle ear infection) and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).*

While the site claims Philip Morris "agrees" that cigarette smoking causes disease in smokers and that it is addicting, it appears that they have not yet made a clear "agreement" about the effects of secondhand smoke, and rather refer to the conclusions of "public health officials".

In addition, the website offers various suggestions on "How to Quit Smoking", as well as links to various other major health related websites and information, such as the American Cancer Society, CDC and others. With this site, users are also able to find local information and resources, such as the NJ Quitline and a link to the NJ Department of Health and Senior Services website.

So, forty years after the Surgeon General's Report of 1964, the website of Philip Morris finally admits the health consequences of their products. But why the change in heart? Are we to assume that Philip Morris is now genuinely concerned for the health of its customers? Of course not. Having a past background in advertising, I couldn't help but think what an incredible marketing campaign this company has created and achieved in a clear attempt to cover themselves from any future lawsuits for not disclosing information. For if the company was truly concerned about the health of its customers, they would make the ultimate change and stop the production of their nicotine delivery/cancer-causing devices completely. Their website then could simply read, "Sorry, closed for business".



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admitting the health consequences of smoking to the public, the companies could then defend themselves from liability in the courts, and could claim that smokers knowingly took the risk of using their products (see Nancy Speelman's review of the Philip Morris web-site).

In a 1972 interview with the Wall Street Journal, Philip Morris vice president James Bowling repeated the company's promise to consumers from two decades earlier that, "...if our product is harmful, we'll stop making it." He repeated the company's position in a 1976 interview when he noted: "from our standpoint, if anyone ever identified any ingredient in tobacco smoke as being hazardous to human health or being something that shouldn't be there, we could eliminate it. But no one ever has."

Mr. Bowling, the Vice President of Philip Morris, was clearly either entirely ignorant of the information being provided by his own scientists some ten years earlier (unlikely), or, he was blatantly lying to the American public (very likely).

It has taken the industry almost 40 years to concede that the conclusions of the 1964 Surgeon General's Report were accurate. I wonder how long it will take them to fulfill their promise of 1954, a promise repeated again in the 1970's, to take seriously the health of their consumers, and to stop selling products that kill people when used as intended. Don't hold your breath.

For a more detailed account of the tobacco industry's record of lying to the public about the effects of tobacco, contact Jonathan Foulds at: jonathan.foulds@umdnj.edu