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Branding the Rodeo: A Case Study of Tobacco Sports Sponsorship

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Abstract

Rodeo is one of the few sports still sponsored by the tobacco industry, particularly the US Smokeless Tobacco Company. Rodeo is popular in rural communities, where smokeless tobacco use is more prevalent.

We used previously secret tobacco industry documents to examine the history and internal motivations for tobacco company rodeo sponsorship. Rodeos allow tobacco companies to reach rural audiences and young people, enhance brand image, conduct market research, and generate positive press. Relationships with athletes and fans were used to fight proposed restrictions on tobacco sports sponsorship. Rodeo sponsorship was intended to enhance tobacco sales, not the sport.

Rural communities should question the tradition of tobacco sponsorship of rodeo sports and reject these predatory marketing practices.

Sports sponsorship has been part of tobacco promotion since the industry invented baseball cards to associate cigarettes with sport,¹ and it continues to represent a challenge for tobacco control worldwide.²⁻⁵ Sports sponsorship is associated with smoking behavior⁴ and appeals to youths,² maintains presence on television in restricted markets,^{3,6,7} and recruits third-party allies to fight marketing restrictions.⁸

Rodeo originated in the 1800s. The Cowboy's Turtle Association was formed in 1936 and became the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA) in 1975.⁹ Cigarette companies explored rodeo sponsorship during the early 1970s, when tobacco advertising was banned from broadcast media in the United States.^{3,5,6,10} The US Smokeless Tobacco Company (USST)^{11,12} has sponsored the PRCA since 1986 and the National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association (NIRA) since 1974. The 1998 Smokeless Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement limits USST to 1 sponsorship per year bearing a product's brand name. In 2008 USST made Professional

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Human Participant Protection

No protocol approval was required because no human participants were involved in this study.

Contributors

P. M. Ling originated the study, obtained funding, and supervised all aspects of its implementation, data analysis, and writing. L. A. Haber conducted data collection and analyses and wrote research memos. S. Wedl conducted additional data collection and analyses and led writing the first draft of the article. All authors contributed to interpretation of findings and to revision and review of drafts of the article.

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Bull Riding (PBR) its single branded sponsorship (Copenhagen).¹³ USST uses its PRCA corporate sponsorship to continue other marketing activities at rodeos.

Spending on advertising and promotion by the 5 major smokeless tobacco companies reached a record high of \$251 million in 2005, including \$15.8 million specifically on sports and sporting events.¹⁴ The PRCA stated in 2007 that it had 650 rodeos annually in 41 states, with more than 33 million attending, ranking it seventh in overall attendance among all sports.¹¹ Both PRCA and PBR events are televised.¹⁵ Although tobacco advertising on television is banned, television cameras may pick up branded banners, chute signs, scoreboards, and cowboys' vest patches during televised rodeo events.

Smokeless tobacco use is associated with oral cancer, gum disease, and nicotine addiction.^{16, 17} Although the overall prevalence of smokeless tobacco use among adults and adolescents declined between 1986 and 2003,¹⁸ sales of moist snuff products (USST's main products) increased by 109% from 36.1 million pounds in 1986 to 75.7 million pounds in 2005, as did overall sales revenues.¹⁴ Rodeos provide tobacco companies access to rural audiences, which have higher rates of tobacco use¹⁹ and are reached less effectively by anti-tobacco media campaigns.²⁰ Rodeos are also attended by and popular with children.

Previously secret tobacco industry documents can help guide tobacco control efforts by providing insights into how and why tobacco companies pursue marketing activities.²¹ We analyzed tobacco industry documents to address 3 questions: (1) What audiences did tobacco companies hope to reach at rodeos? (2) What marketing strategies were used to promote tobacco products at rodeos? (3) In addition to increasing sales, what other benefits did tobacco companies obtain through rodeo sponsorship?

METHODS

We searched tobacco industry document archives from the University of California, San Francisco Legacy Tobacco Documents Library (<http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu>), and Tobacco Documents Online (<http://www.tobaccodocuments.org>) between August 2002 and August 2003, with supplemental searches in June 2006, after additional documents from USST were posted publicly. Initial search terms included "rodeo," "sponsorship," "plan," "budget," "market," "strategy," "sports," "PRCA," and "PBR." Initial searches yielded thousands of documents; we reviewed those pertaining to rodeo sponsorship and related marketing activities. Searches were repeated and focused by standard techniques.²² We conducted further snowball searches for contextual information on relevant documents by names, project titles, brand names, document locations, dates, and reference (Bates) numbers.

We analyzed a final collection of 215 research reports, presentations, memoranda, advertisements, and plans. Information from documents was triangulated with data from published literature, tobacco company annual reports, official organization (such as USST or PRCA) Web sites, public Webcasts, and examination of promotional materials. Because of the large number of tobacco industry documents and the imperfect way in which some are indexed, we may not have identified all relevant documents.

RESULTS

RJ Reynolds Tobacco Company (RJR) first sponsored PRCA rodeos in 1972 with the Winston Rodeo Series.²³ When tobacco sponsorship of rodeo started, concerns were raised because of youth attendance at rodeos and limits on commercialization of municipal facilities.²⁴ A 1981 strategic planning memo written to RJR executives by a marketing firm spelled out how RJR initially agreed not to advertise at the rodeo to establish a relationship with the PRCA:

When Winston entered its association with the PRCA, there was concern by some board members about a tobacco company tying [sic] in with the sport. These fears were quailed [sic] however, by Winston explaining that it cannot direct its advertising or promotional efforts to you.

Based on these concerns, rules were put on the books at that time stating that no advertising would be allowed in the rodeo arena.²⁵

These rules were not enforced, however, and over time the PRCA increasingly cooperated with RJR's promotional activities.²⁴ RJR's sponsorship of PRCA rodeo continued until 1987, when US Tobacco (later USST) became the exclusive sponsor.^{26–28} Other tobacco companies, such as Brown & Williamson and Philip Morris, were involved with rodeo on a smaller scale.^{29–33}

Targeted Marketing

Rodeo marketing efforts have traditionally focused on males of low socioeconomic status. RJR sponsorship in the 1970s and 1980s^{23,34} focused on core Winston customers and young males.^{24,35–37} A 1979 Brown & Williamson marketing document described rodeo attendees as having “traditional values, to be middle class or lower, to be high school educated or less, to be hard-working, blue-collar types”—matching the marketing targets for the Raleigh cigarette brand.³⁸ US Tobacco's 1979 smokeless marketing plans for rodeo defined the company's “core” user as the “outdoorsman, farm worker, factory worker, [and] coal miner.”³⁹

American Tobacco Company pursued bull-riding sponsorship for its Bull Durham cigarette brand in the early 1990s. Bull Durham was a discount cigarette targeted to low-income young men rather than to the typical older female purchasers of very low-priced cigarettes. Bull-riding sponsorship was viewed as 1 way to establish the discount brand's personality, and plans were to “increase carton buying patterns” through sequential promotion of escalating purchase sizes, from 2 packs to a 5-pack minicarton, progressing to a full carton.⁴⁰

To a lesser extent, rodeo sponsorship allowed cigarette companies to target ethnic populations. In the early 1980s, RJR sponsored Hispanic rodeos in Los Angeles, California; New York City, New York; and Houston, Texas.⁴¹ Philip Morris's 1987 Marlboro marketing plans introduced the “Marlboro Charreada... a unique combination of rodeo and Hispanic entertainment” as part of plans to target the Hispanic population.⁴² In 1985 the Lorillard Tobacco Company sponsored Black World Championship Rodeo, which included 3 rodeos in the northeastern United States.⁴³ The same year, RJR sponsored the Bill Picket Invitational Rodeo, which celebrated the “talents and skills of the American black cowboy.”⁴⁴

Rodeo and Marketing to Youths

Historically, rodeo promotions appealed to youths. A 1975 RJR campaign promising free Winston Rodeo bumper stickers prompted requests from youths younger than 21 years.^{45–47} RJR sent letters back to these children telling them how to get around the “company policy, voluntarily adopted, [that] we do not advertise or promote the sale of our cigarette brands to persons less than 21 years of age.”⁴⁷ The letter advised,

Thank you for your note advising us that you are not 21 years of age or older, but that you would still like a Winston Rodeo Bumper Sticker. If you will have one of your parents sign their name on the below listed statement, we will be happy to send them the Winston Rodeo Bumper Sticker.⁴⁵

RJR sponsored the Mesquite Championship Rodeo during the mid-1980s⁴⁸; an advertising solicitation from this rodeo from 1993 estimated that 20% of attendees were “children 12 and under” and the remaining 80% were “adults.”⁴⁹ RJR public relations strategies⁵⁰ and

correspondence with sports marketers⁵¹ from the 1990s discuss or acknowledge children's attendance at rodeos.

Other tobacco companies' documents also show awareness of children at rodeos; Brown & Williamson advertised in *Rodeo News* during the 1980s and estimated that 70% of rodeo attendees during that period were adults.^{52,53} A 1991 memo to the American Tobacco Company exploring rodeo magazine advertising for Bull Durham reported that almost 30% of readers of *Rodeo News* magazine were younger than 19 years.⁵⁴ An internal observer of a 1985 Lorillard-sponsored Black World Championship Rodeo estimated that approximately 70% of attendees were adults, with the balance made up of children.⁵⁵

Marketing Strategies for Rodeo Sponsorship

Building brand image—RJR enhanced its brand exposure at rodeos through free samples, branded merchandise, scoreboards, stadium signage, and cowboy and rodeo staff uniforms.^{23,29,56–63} Although rodeo cowboy events had never had scoreboards, RJR invented the Winston rodeo scoreboard for use at its sponsored events (R.N. Proctor, PhD, unpublished data, 2009).⁶⁴ A 1981 strategic planning document written by a marketing firm for RJR states that the rodeo scoreboard was first introduced to circumvent RJR's original agreement with the PRCA not to advertise in the arena:

The Winston rodeo scoreboard, due to its extremely functional nature, was largely responsible for breaking through the no-advertising barrier. Although the rule remains on the books today, it is not enforced at all.²⁵

Winston scoreboards served as rolling billboards on the roads when transported between events,⁵⁹ and scoreboards created permanent signage at sports facilities during nonrodeo events.⁶¹

For the 1982 Winston Rodeo Series, RJR planned to produce a guide to help the media cover rodeo more effectively; the company also planned to place rodeo news stories in regional and national magazines, in-flight magazines, rodeo program inserts, and business papers.⁶⁵ During the late 1970s and early 1980s, RJR produced numerous press releases about rodeo cowboys participating in Winston-sponsored rodeos.^{66–81} It also placed rodeo-related stories in major Los Angeles newspapers and facilitated the appearance of cowboy Charlie Sampson, “the Professional Rodeo Cowboy Association's first black world-champion bull rider”⁸² on CNN.⁸³

Sampling—Distribution of free samples (sampling) was an important way to make both cigarettes and smokeless tobacco products appealing to new users. A 1983 financial analysis of US Tobacco Company noted,

Unlike many consumer products, one needs to be ‘taught’ how to use moist-snuff. Too large a ‘dip’ can cause an initial bad experience that can turn off the consumer forever. U.S. Tobacco, as the primary marketer, has invested heavily in sampling programs to ‘teach’ promising markets.⁸⁴

USST distributed free samples of spit tobacco at sponsored sporting events, including rodeo; its 1982 sales promotion annual report stated that 12700 cans were distributed at 16 NIRA rodeos.⁸⁵ RJR also distributed free cigarettes at rodeos,⁵⁷ and a 1989 sports marketing summary noted that although sampling was becoming less acceptable to the general public, attendees at sponsored events “actively seek out the samplers.”⁸⁶ Sampling also included “personal selling,” which used paid spokespersons to promote tobacco products to friends and peers. In the 1980s, US Tobacco's comprehensive college marketing program hired students to promote

its products on campus.^{87–89} The newsletters for this program contain numerous accounts of using sporting events, including college rodeo, to promote smokeless tobacco products.^{87,88}

Rewards of Rodeo Sponsorship

Research conducted for RJR showed that the Winston Professional Rodeo program increased Winston purchases.⁹⁰ As fans attended more rodeos, their trials of Winston cigarettes increased, they associated Winston and rodeo more frequently, their perceptions of the Winston image improved (such as rating it as a more satisfying cigarette), and they were more likely to be Winston smokers.^{23,91} A US Tobacco document from 1979 reported that sales of the company's moist smokeless products grew more than 10% per year during the previous 5 years, attributable in part to its sponsorship of Rodeo Super-stars and its College Rodeo Scholarship Program.³⁹

Conducting market research—RJR collected names and contact information from rodeo attendees for future marketing research; the company concealed this by hiring a third-party market research company to collect the data.⁹² A 1973 letter from a G.E. Harlow of the RJR Marketing Research Department to manager Richard Dilworth outlines a plan to collect contact information from fans covertly at the Red River Rodeo in Wichita Falls, Texas. Female employees of a market research firm would “ask a couple of dummy questions” and then ask for name, address, and telephone number “in case my supervisor wishes to check my work.”⁹² The arena manager was to “know as little as possible about what we are doing. Certainly he should not tell his employees that RJR or Winston is doing any research.”⁹²

Entertaining and influencing important guests—Sponsorship of major sporting events, including rodeo, gave RJR the opportunity to entertain important guests, such as politicians, sales force members, and potential allies.⁶¹ In a 1989 RJR speech about special events (including rodeos), the speaker explains how sports marketing makes political allies:

[T]he political contacts we have made in sports marketing have proved invaluable. Just think about it, Reynolds sponsors over 2,400 events a year. That translates into 2,400 opportunities to put a politician in front of anywhere from 3,000 to 200,000 potential voters. An opportunity provided by Reynolds that's too good to be true for the politician.⁸⁶

He points out that sports facility owners and players in their events have lobbied on RJR's behalf when unfavorable legislation is introduced: “NASCAR alone has been instrumental in killing tax increases in both Florida and Alabama.” He goes on to say that the tobacco interests “intend to call on these people with increasing frequency [to support RJR's political position] as the environment gets tougher.”⁸⁶

Influencing legislation—In 1988 both Canada and Australia considered national restrictions on tobacco advertising that included a ban on sports sponsorship (although the sports sponsorship bans were not enacted at that time).^{93,94} In 1985 staff of the US House Subcommittee on Health and the Environment, chaired by Henry Waxman (D-CA), discussed oversight hearings on tobacco advertising and promotional practices, and many health groups called for a total ban on tobacco advertising and promotion.⁹⁵

RJR and the Tobacco Institute (the trade and lobbying organization for the tobacco industry) reacted by using allies formed through sports sponsorship to fight potential sports marketing restrictions.^{96,97} In 1985, members of the Tobacco Institute, RJR, and sports promotion groups, “ranging from racing cars to rodeo cowboys,” came together in the Committee for Affordable Sports and Entertainment (CASE)^{98,99} to “oppose measures to prohibit or restrict sponsorship of events.”⁹⁸

The Tobacco Institute planned to support CASE by providing information and research designed to show that banning sports sponsorship would have wide-ranging effects on the economies of small towns.¹⁰⁰ Although CASE appeared to be a separate organization, internally the Tobacco Institute stated that it established CASE with help from RJR.¹⁰¹ The Tobacco Institute planned to poll registered voters at sporting events to show support for sponsorship; the opinion researcher hired to carry out the polling wrote to institute vice president Fred Panzer that although broad regions would be surveyed for national applicability,

the specific businesses interviewed will be determined in close consultation with you and Jim in order to identify those establishments which stand to lose the most if the subject sporting events are cut back or eliminated.¹⁰²

The Tobacco Institute continued to support and expand CASE between 1986 and 1988 to testify on the industry's behalf.^{103,104} CASE submitted a statement "on behalf of the industry" to the Interagency Committee on Smoking and Health hearing on the effects of tobacco sponsorship of sporting events, held on October 28, 1988.¹⁰⁴⁻¹⁰⁶

In early 1993, Philip Morris became a founding member of the American Coalition for Entertainment and Sports Sponsorship (ACCESS), a 501(c)(6) organization (a tax-exempt business league that may engage in limited political activities), which included RJR, US Tobacco, Penske, and International Speedway Corporation.¹⁰⁷ The organization presented itself as a broad coalition of sport sponsors and event promoters,¹⁰⁸ but internally, the stated goal of the organization was "to defend tobacco sponsorship."¹⁰⁷ Although ACCESS focused on racing sponsorship, it included rodeo organizers on its advisory board, including Lewis Cryer, president of the PRCA.¹⁰⁹⁻¹¹¹ The group opposed a mid-1990s proposal for the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to regulate tobacco, which included restrictions on sport sponsorships,^{111,112} by encouraging sports fans to write letters to the FDA against this legislation^{111,113} and sponsoring studies showing public support for corporate sport sponsorship.¹¹⁴

In 1994 the Federal Trade Commission proposed regulations requiring smokeless tobacco warnings on rodeo promotional materials.¹¹⁵ US Tobacco prepared petitions and instructions for fans on how to write letters opposing these restrictions¹¹⁶⁻¹¹⁸ and paid for their collection.¹¹⁹⁻¹²² A letter from US Tobacco to ACCESS thanked it for its help during the public comment period and noted that the trade commission documented more than 59000 responses in opposition to the regulations, which were never passed.¹²³ In 1996, Phillip Morris and US Tobacco proposed an alternative plan to the proposed FDA ban on sports sponsorship that would have allowed continued sponsorship of rodeo and motor sports.¹²⁴ The tobacco companies filed lawsuits challenging the FDA proposal, ultimately prevailing in a 2000 US Supreme Court decision overturning the regulation.^{125,126}

DISCUSSION

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first investigation of tobacco industry advertising and sponsorship in the rodeo industry and the way the tobacco industry used its connections to rodeo to support its larger political agenda. To date, the majority of literature on tobacco sponsorship has focused on motor sports, which receive 70% of all tobacco sport sponsorship.^{2,3,5,7,127} Many of the benefits tobacco companies obtain from motor sports sponsorship are also found in rodeo sponsorship. Rodeo is an increasingly important sponsorship for smokeless tobacco: in 2008 USST used its single Copenhagen brand sponsorship for the Professional Bull Riders, and the company remains a major corporate sponsor of NIRA and PRCA, with the company name, rather than a brand name, appearing in its sponsorship materials.

Policy makers could address tobacco sponsorship by adopting tobacco-free rodeo policies or eliminating distribution of tobacco samples. Tobacco sponsors inappropriately target young, rural males with low socioeconomic status; tobacco rodeo sponsorship is not traditional (it began in the 1970s); and many of the economic arguments raised against sponsorship bans were public relations efforts funded by tobacco companies and organized by their lobbyists.

Rodeo sponsorship has also facilitated tobacco companies' access to children. The tobacco industry correctly argues that the majority of rodeo attendees are adults, but their internal documents also note that as many as 25% to 30% of rodeo attendees are younger than 18 years. Rodeo is promoted as a family event that features special activities for children.^{128–131} The PRCA and PBR Web sites have sections devoted to children's clothing, games, and toys,^{11, 15} and both rodeo associations offer discounts to children at select rodeo events.

Several studies have shown a link between tobacco sport sponsorship and increased smoking rates in children,^{2,4,132} although none have focused specifically on rodeo sponsorship. For example, smoking rates among adolescents aged 13 to 17 years increased from 2.4% to 11.1% after viewing a 1996 cricket series in India that was sponsored by Wills cigarettes.¹³² Tobacco sponsorship of sports increases smoking rates by creating a positive association between sports and smoking.⁴ A 2006 literature review concluded that tobacco promotions that include brand name sport sponsorship increase rates of smoking initiation in a dose-dependent manner.¹³³

Our analysis illustrated how the tobacco industry was able to use rodeo sponsorship to affect tobacco legislation by building political relationships and by creating third-party organizations such as CASE and ACESS to lobby on their behalf. These tactics were effective; it was not until 2001 that sport sponsorship was restricted to 1 major sporting event per company (as part of the Master Settlement Agreements, not legislation or regulation), and it has yet to be completely banned.⁵ Fear of losing financial support and premium items such as scoreboards makes individual rodeos reluctant to give up tobacco sponsorship. These fears are not unfounded: after Montana State University decided not to allow the distribution of free tobacco samples at their 1998 rodeo, NIRA dropped them as the site of the College National Finals Rodeo, which moved to Casper, Wyoming.¹³⁴

Public health groups are working to support tobacco-free rodeos. The Buck Tobacco Sponsorship Project and the related National Tobacco Free Rodeo Project at the Public Health Institute, a nonprofit public health organization, work to encourage rodeos to prohibit tobacco sponsorship and to provide technical assistance, such as model policies, success stories, and fact sheets.¹³⁵ More tobacco-free rodeo policies are being adopted: in March 2008, Casper Baca Rodeo Company, an independent rodeo promoter that produces 50 rodeos per year throughout the Southwest, adopted a policy that banned tobacco advertising, sponsorship, and sampling at its rodeos.¹³⁶ Local ordinances restricting tobacco sampling have been adopted in Greeley, Colorado; Chico, California; and Pendleton, Oregon, and numerous policies restricting tobacco sponsorship have been adopted throughout California, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and South Dakota.¹³⁵ These efforts have included media advocacy and public engagement counteradvertising campaigns urging rodeos to reject tobacco sponsorship (Figure 1).

Tobacco industry sponsorship of rodeo sports has been pursued primarily to increase tobacco sales, not to enhance the sport or the local community. The promotion of deadly tobacco products has no place in family-oriented community events and should be eliminated. Sponsorship also helps tobacco companies build allegiances with rodeo fans and government officials, which are then exploited for lobbying purposes. Rodeo sports also represent an opportunity for public health intervention, particularly to address health disparities in rural tobacco use. Alternative partnerships that promote community health should be explored.

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FIGURE 1.

Anti-tobacco sponsorship counteradvertisement published in the special rodeo issue of the *Clovis Independent*, April 20, 2007. Reprinted with the permission of the Public Health Institute.