

# Neutral package and tobacco tactics – what we need to know!

## *Pachetul neutru și tacticile industriei tutunului – ce trebuie să știm?*

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### Abstract

In the last year after the implementation of the plain packaging (PP) in Australia, another type of battle and tactics of another war from part of the tobacco industry started. Their campaigns became increasingly intense after the announcement of Great Britain, Ireland, France, and Hungary. This article is trying to identify these new tactics and how we can fight against them.

**Keywords:** plain package, smoking, tactics

### Rezumat

În ultimul an, după implementarea ambalajului simplu (pachetul generic), în Australia a început un alt tip de luptă și tactici care fac parte dintr-un alt război din partea industriei tutunului. Campaniile lor au devenit tot mai evidente după anunțarea Marii Britanii, Irlanda, Franța și Ungaria. Acest articol încearcă să identifice aceste noi tactici și modul în care putem lupta împotriva lor.

**Cuvinte cheie:** pachetul generic (neutru), fumat, tactici

### Neutral package and tobacco tactics-what we need to know!

In the last year after the implementation of the plain packaging (PP) in Australia, another type of battle and tactics of another war from part of the tobacco industry started. Their campaigns became increasingly intense after the announcement of Great Britain, Ireland, France, and Hungary. This article is trying to identify these new tactics and how we can fight against them.

### We have to know first of all our enemy-the Australian lesson

When the Plain Packaging Act was introduced in Australia (The *Tobacco Plain Packaging Act 2011* came into effect in Australia on December 1st, 2012), the tobacco industry set up a front group called the Alliance of Australian Retailers where the involvement of the tobacco industry became evident. This Alliance of Australian Retailers (AAR) is a tobacco industry front group financed by Philip Morris, Imperial Tobacco and British American Tobacco (BAT). It was set up to oppose the government's introduction of plain packaging in Australia, and is operated by the Melbourne-based public relations firm The Civic Group (TCG)<sup>(1)</sup>. The AAR claims to represent “the owners of your local corner stores, milk bars, newsagents and service stations” and wants to “make the voices of small retailers heard, and to oppose plain packaging until it is overturned”. When launched, the AAR did not reveal its industry connections and instead presented itself as a grassroots campaign created by small businesses against plain packaging. Internal tobacco industry and AAR documents that were leaked to the media revealed that the Alliance was set up and run by the tobacco industry to lobby against plain packaging. This is an example of Astroturfing (“is the term used for the faking of a grassroots movement, when in reality the agenda and strategy is controlled by a hidden company or organization. In that sense, it is one of the typical Third Party Techniques - a very specific use of Front Groups, consisting of individuals pretending to be voicing their own opinions on their own

initiative, mimicking genuine activist groups”), a campaign pretending to be a grassroots initiative, while hiding its true origin, goal, and funding. This is a new, and not often apparent, tactic of the tobacco industry. As some honest journalist said: “The tobacco industry is not only funding the campaign being run by the Alliance of Australian Retailers (AAR) to stop plain packaging being introduced, it is employing the public relations firm to run the campaign, approving who will do media interviews and managing the strategy for lobbying government”<sup>(2)</sup>. When the tobacco industry said that their “Campaigning against Plain Packaging was done openly and transparently” they forgot to tell exactly how much of the budget was included in funding AAR. Public representatives revealed that the BAT company spent AU \$ 3,482,247 on a broad media campaign against plain packaging in Australia<sup>(3)</sup>. It is not clear from the BAT letter whether or not this budget included the funding for AAR<sup>(3)</sup>. Lobbying government is another modality of attack. TCG said the campaign needed to: “Build concern among the targeted decision makers that if the campaign does not cease it is likely to increase the probability that it will extract a political cost... the campaign will keep going and keep damaging their political standing unless they change their position”<sup>(4)</sup>. How they are doing this? They tried to destroy the image of the stakeholders and politicians. One example is the explicit answer of TCG response targeting and discrediting the then Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd: “The campaign needs to repeatedly take Rudd off message and reinforce prejudices about him being superficial, making-policy-on-the-go, and “saying whatever he thinks people want to hear”<sup>(4)</sup>. They based their campaign arguments on those put forward by the industry including: there is no evidence that this radical policy will work; it will lead to an increase in illegal imports; it raises the potential for compensation for the companies from loss of intellectual property rights; it risks breaching Australia's international treaty obligations. How is the TCG ordering these campaigns? They suggested if the anti-tobacco front tries to put limits on the campaign's



advertising they have to use another argument: “arguing the constitutional implied right of freedom of communication on political matters”<sup>(5)</sup>.

Finally, the primary argument of the tobacco industry was the obvious lack of effectiveness of PP in Australia. The advantage of the actual stages of preparations for different new countries deciding to switch to plain packaging is the large number of sheets proving the multiple benefits of the neutral package.

### How the NGO fighting for the plain packaging act?

Australian NGOs did three things, all of which were successful and are strategies which could be used on a national and a global scale. It is an algorithm was based on<sup>(1)</sup>:

1. Promoting the links and funding to friendly journalists who ran stories in major newspapers. This generated a lot of free media on radio and other media platforms. It also meant that any time this group came out and said anything in the press, journalists were educated and willing to ask them about their funding and if the tobacco industry was controlling their press releases.

2. Making sure that key politicians including, but not limited to, the Health Minister, knew that these types of groups were just industry front groups. In particular, writing to Ministers who are responsible for the supposed issues these front groups represent – Minister responsible for tax, for intellectual property, for trade, for consumer affairs, etc. If the Minister’s have any sense, they won’t want to be aligned with the tobacco industry or their front groups.

3. Running large half page ads in major newspapers to educate the public that this group and their campaigns were being funded and pushed by the tobacco industry.

4. Focusing on the well documented and widely known health risks of smoking because the industry knows that body of research is unassailable. The NGOs said that it is not overly beneficial to dwell on issues such as intellectual property, tax, and personal freedom arguments in which the tobacco industry is likely to find sympathisers. At the

same time, there is no need to respond to every argument that appears in the media; the tobacco industry will be trying to get as much air time for their opposition as possible in order to create doubt in the minds of the public. Spending more of our time doing advocacy behind the scenes, speaking directly to the politicians, powerful allies and other decision makers is more important. Public support will come if you keep the focus on health arguments, particularly on the impact of tobacco use on children, and you will be able to discredit or undermine their ‘experts’ and allies doing their dirty work .

### What is the evidence of the effects of plain packaging coming from Australia

Plain packaging is working. There are already many articles proving the benefits. There are multiple beneficial effects of the Plain Packaging Act.

#### **Effects on children**

The introduction of standardized packaging has reduced the appeal of cigarette packs. Significantly fewer students in 2013 than 2011 agreed that ‘some brands have better looking packs than others’ (2011: 43%; 2013: 25%,  $p < 0.001$ ), with larger decreases found among smokers (interaction  $p < 0.001$ ). Packs were rated less positively and more negatively in 2013 than in 2011 ( $p < 0.001$ ). The decrease in positive image ratings was greater among smokers<sup>(6)</sup>. Awareness that smoking causes bladder cancer increased between 2011 and 2013 ( $p = 0.002$ ). There was high agreement with statements reflecting health effects featured in previous warnings or advertisements with little change over time. Exceptions to this were increases in the proportion agreeing that smoking was a leading cause of death ( $p < 0.001$ ) and that smoking causes blindness ( $p < 0.001$ ). The frequency of students reading, attending to, thinking or talking about the health warnings on cigarette packs did not change. Acknowledgement of negative health effects of smoking among Australian adolescents remains high as this study demonstrates<sup>7</sup>. Apart from increased awareness of bladder cancer, new requirements for packaging and health

warnings did not increase adolescents' cognitive processing of warning information.

## **Effects on adults**

Some authors<sup>(8)</sup> compared responses from continuous cross-sectional telephone surveys of cigarette smokers during pre-plain packaging (April–September 2012, pre-PP) with others surveyed in the transition period (October–November 2012) and a cohort during the first year of implementation (December 2012–November 2013, PP year 1), using multivariate logistic regression analyses. The results are convincing. From pre-PP to PP year 1, more smokers disliked their pack ( $p < 0.001$ ), perceived lower pack appeal ( $p < 0.001$ ), lower cigarette quality ( $p < 0.001$ ), lower satisfaction ( $p < 0.001$ ) and lower value ( $p < 0.001$ ) and disagreed brands differed in prestige ( $p = 0.003$ ). There was no change in perceived differences in taste of different brands. More smokers noticed GHWs ( $p < 0.001$ ), attributed much motivation to quit to graphic health warnings (GHWs) ( $p < 0.001$ ), avoided specific GHWs when purchasing ( $p < 0.001$ ), and covered packs ( $p < 0.001$ ), with no change in perceived exaggeration of harmfulness. PP year 1 saw an increased proportion of the population believing that brands do not differ in harmfulness ( $p = 0.004$ ), but no change in the belief that variants do not differ in strength or the perceived harmfulness of cigarettes compared with a year ago. Interactions signified greater change for four outcomes assessing aspects of appeal among young adults and two appeal outcomes among middle-aged adults. They conclude that the specific objectives of plain packaging were achieved and generally sustained among adult smokers up to 12 months after implementation. These findings provide some of the strongest evidence to date that implementation of PP with larger GHWs was associated with increased rates of quitting cognitions, micro indicators of concern and quit attempts among adult cigarette smokers<sup>(8)</sup>. Also, they report for those who were followed in the early transition period significantly greater increases in rates of stopping themselves from smoking (OR=1.51, 95% CI (1.08 to 2.10)) and higher quit attempt rates (OR=1.43, 95% CI (1.00 to 2.03)) and for those followed-up in the *late transition* period a greater increase in intentions to quit (OR=1.42, 95% CI (1.06 to 1.92)) and pack concealment (OR=1.55, 95% CI (1.05 to 2.31)<sup>(9)</sup>. In a multivariable models, researchers found consistent evidence that several baseline measures of GHW effectiveness positively and significantly predicted the likelihood that smokers at follow-up reported thinking about quitting at least daily, intending to quit, having a firm date to quit, stubbing out cigarettes prematurely, stopping oneself from smoking and having attempted to quit<sup>(10)</sup>. This is yet another proof that PP with larger GHWs in adults may lead to changes in smoking behavior<sup>(10)</sup>.

## **Effects on attitudes and intentions**

The objective of changing the attitudes and intentions of smokers was also accomplished by The Plain Packaging Act is associated with lower smoking appeal, more support for the policy and more urgency to quit among adult smokers. Compared with branded pack smokers, those smoking from plain packs perceived their cigarettes to be lower in quality (adjusted OR (AdjOR)=1.66,  $p = 0.045$ ), tended to

perceive their cigarettes as less satisfying than a year ago (AdjOR=1.70,  $p = 0.052$ ), were more likely to have thought about quitting at least once a day in the past week (AdjOR=1.81,  $p = 0.013$ ) and to rate quitting as a higher priority in their lives ( $F = 13.11$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Plain pack smokers were more likely to support the policy than branded pack smokers (AdjOR=1.51,  $p = 0.049$ )<sup>11,12</sup>. The introductory effects of The Plain Packaging Act legislation among adult smokers are consistent with the specific objectives of the legislation in regard to reducing promotional appeal and increasing the effectiveness of health warnings. Adjusting for background trends, seasonality, anti-smoking advertising activity and cigarette costliness, results reported from another study<sup>13</sup> showed that 2–3 months after the introduction of the new packs there was a significant increase in the absolute proportion of smokers having strong cognitive (9.8% increase,  $p = 0.005$ ), emotional (8.6% increase,  $p = 0.01$ ) and avoidant (9.8% increase,  $p = 0.0005$ ) responses to on-pack health warnings. Similarly, there was a significant increase in the proportion of smokers strongly disagreeing that the look of their cigarette pack is attractive (57.5% increase,  $p < 0.0001$ ), says something good about them (54.5% increase,  $p < 0.0001$ ), influences the brand they buy (40.6% increase,  $p < 0.0001$ ), makes their pack stand out (55.6% increase,  $p < 0.0001$ ), is fashionable (44.7% increase,  $p < 0.0001$ ) and matches their style (48.1% increase,  $p < 0.0001$ ). Changes in these outcomes were maintained 6 months post intervention<sup>(13)</sup>.

Another contribution on the behavior of smokers of PP in Australia was the increasing of the size of HWLs (health warning labels) on this neutral package which appears to have led to an overall increase in desired levels and strength of some reactions, but evidence of reactance was among a small minority<sup>(14)</sup>. Smokers thought more about the harms of smoking and avoided the HWLs more after the policy change, but frequency of forgoing cigarettes did not change. Consistent with theories of illness perceptions and coping, current findings after introduction of PP indicate that the larger, prominent graphic health warnings on plain-packaged tobacco products had pervasive effects on threat perceptions and subsequent behavioural responses. While some of the reported responses were adaptive (e.g. attempts to quit), others were maladaptive (e.g. avoiding the warnings)<sup>(15)</sup>. The media campaign that supported Australia's new pictorial cigarette warning labels and plain packaging policy was associated with more attention to and talking about warning labels<sup>16</sup>. Following plain packaging implementation, there was a significant reduction in perceptions that 'some cigarette brands are more harmful than others'. There was no overall change in perceptions of prestige. However, there was a significant interaction for age. Analyses indicated a reduction in perceptions that some cigarette brands are more prestigious than others' among younger participants ( $p = 0.05$ ), but no change among older participants ( $p > 0.20$ )<sup>(17)</sup>. The findings support the notion that PP has reduced the capacity for smokers to use pack branding to create and communicate a desired identity<sup>(18)</sup>. One example is coming from another study. Plain packaging was associated with significantly reduced smoker ratings of, positive pack characteris-

tics' ( $p < 0.001$ ), 'positive smoker characteristics' ( $p = 0.003$ ) and 'positive taste characteristics' ( $p = 0.033$ ) in the Winfield brand name condition only<sup>(19)</sup>.

## Other effects of PP

### Effects on pack display/social acceptability

There are studies demonstrating a sustained reduction in visibility of tobacco products and smoking in public, particularly in the presence of children, from pre-PP to 1 year post-PP. This effect is likely to reduce smoking-related social norms, thereby weakening an important influence on smoking uptake and better supporting quit attempts. Prevalence of pack display among patrons declined from pre-PP (1 pack per 8.7 patrons) to early post-PP (1 pack per 10.4), and remained low 1 year post-PP (1 pack per 10.3). This appeared to be driven by a sustained decline in active smoking post-PP (pre-PP: 8.4% of patrons were smoking; early post-PP: 6.4%; 1 year post-PP: 6.8%)<sup>(20)</sup>. Following Australia's 2012 policy of plain packaging and larger pictorial health warnings on cigarette and tobacco packs, smoking in outdoor areas of cafés, restaurants and bars and personal pack display (packs clearly visible on tables) declined<sup>(21)</sup>. Pack display declined by 15% [adjusted incident rate ratio (IRR) = 0.85, 95% confidence interval (CI) = 0.79–0.91,  $P < 0.001$ ], driven by a 23% decline in active smoking (IRR = 0.77, 95% CI = 0.71–0.84,  $P < 0.001$ ) between phases. The decline in pack display coincided with the full implementation of plain packaging from December 2012, was stronger in venues with children present and was limited to mid and high socio-economic status (SES) areas. The proportion of packs orientated face-up declined from 85.4%

of fully branded packs pre-PP to 73.6% of plain packs post-PP (IRR = 0.87, 95% CI = 0.79–0.95,  $P = 0.002$ )<sup>(21)</sup>.

### Effects on calls to Quitline

There has been another consequence of PP: a sustained increase in calls to the Quitline after the introduction of tobacco plain packaging. This increase was not attributable to anti-tobacco advertising activity, cigarette price increases nor other identifiable causes. This means that PP is an important incremental step in comprehensive tobacco control<sup>(22)</sup>. There was a 78% increase in the number of calls to the Quitline associated with the introduction of plain packaging (baseline, 363/week; peak, 651/week [95% CI, 523–780/week;  $P < 0.001$ ]). This peak occurred 4 weeks after the initial appearance of plain packaging and has been prolonged<sup>(22)</sup>.

## Support for legislation

Since implementation of PP along with larger warnings, support among Australian smokers has increased. Support is related to lower addiction, stronger beliefs in the negative health impacts of smoking, and higher levels of quitting activity<sup>(23)</sup>. Trend analysis showed a slight rise in opposition to PP among smokers in the waves leading up to their implementation, but no change in support. Support for PP increased significantly after implementation (28.2% pre vs 49% post), such that post-PP, more smokers were supportive than opposed (49% vs 34.7%)<sup>(23)</sup>.

All these results coming from a variety of publications are very convincing concerning the benefits for the long-term implementation of PP and counteracting the tobacco industry. ■

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