

Emotions not cooling down in tobacco wars

By Makebra M. Anderson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON (NNPA) — To those on the sidelines, tobacco companies and grassroots anti-smoking groups seem to be locked in a never-ending arms race to reach young people.

For years, cigarette companies were able to brazenly appeal to inner city youth. But attorney generals from around the country sued the tobacco industry seeking to recover some of the health costs associated with smoking. Rather than go to trial, a Masters Settlement Agreement (MSA) was reached in 1998 and things were supposed to cool off.

But they didn't.

Brown & Williamson Tobacco Co. launched its "Kool Mixx" promotion that was billed as a "celebration" of hip-hop music and culture. It featured a hip-hop DJ "mixing" competition with a \$10,000 cash prize, a "House of Menthol" Website that provided live footage of the DJ competition, a "Kool Mixx" CD ROM that included mixing software and music files, "special edition" Kool cigarette packs that featured hip-hop designs and "Mixx Stick" radios. But anti-smoking activists saw nothing cool in the Kool campaign.

They launched a campaign against Brown & Williamson's campaign. The attorney generals in the New York, Maryland and Illinois agreed with the activists and filed suit against the tobacco company, claiming that the promotion violated the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement (MSA) making it illegal to directly promote tobacco products to minors.

The MSA was reached after attorney generals in 46 states, five U.S. territories and the District of Columbia filed suits against the tobacco industry seeking compensation for the millions of dollars it had lost on tobacco-related illnesses. Among other

things, it prohibits participating cigarette manufactures from targeting youth through promotions and advertising in teen magazines.

"We have not violated the MSA. We wanted to get people's attention—especially the attention of adult customers and adult smokers in an engaging way. We only want to communicate with people who already smoke," explains David Howard, spokesman for R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, the parent company of Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corporation. "Kool is the leader—they've been around the longest. They continue to bring out programs like Kool Mixx. This was its sixth year in existence and it has obviously been popular among smokers."

Sherri Watson-Hyde, executive director of the National African-American Tobacco Prevention Network (NAATPN), an African-American anti-smoking group, says the "Kool Mixx" campaign has been around for years, but has never been so blatant in their attempt to lure young African-Americans.

"The MSA is designed to ensure the protection of young people from aggressive marketing from the tobacco industry," says Watson-Hyde. "The reason we went after them now is because this is the first time they actually released a specialty cigarette with images of hip-hop figures and culture on the packaging."

In July, the Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corporation was purchased by the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, and representatives from R.J. Reynolds ensure that their marketing did not target a specific audience.

"We were not specifically targeting African-Americans. Advertisements are used to communicate with adult smokers. Our goal is to get the attention of adults who



have already made the choice to smoke," says Howard. "We were targeting adult smokers. All of the Kool Mixx events were held in adult only venues and had specific age restrictions."

Helen Lettlow, assistant vice president for Priority Population Department at the American Legacy Foundation, whose goal is to prevent youth from becoming smokers, says that it's obvious the tobacco company was targeting Black youth.

"Even if hip-hop isn't just a culture for African-Americans they [R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company] have no business marketing to youth," she explains. "The attorney generals believe that many of the magazines that had Kool brand advertisements were mostly read by African-American youth and that's why they filed a lawsuit against them. It would be disingenuous and false to believe that they weren't targeting African-Americans."

In a settlement with the attorney generals reached on October 5, R.J. Reynolds agreed to further restrictions on all future "Kool Mixx" promotions.

The settlement reads, "In the event that Reynolds conducts any DJ mixing and/or MC competitions as part of any future Kool Mixx promotion, all such competitions shall only be conducted in adult only facilities... Reynolds shall not include any Brand Name or the words 'MIXX' or 'House of Menthol' on any promotional merchandise... CD-ROMs may be distributed only in adult only facilities or by direct mail to individuals who Reynolds has previously determined to be an adult smoker... and 'special edition' packs shall only be distributed in adult only facilities and shall not be sold in any retail stores or by direct sales through the mail, telephone or over the Internet."

As is the case in virtually every out-of-court settlement, the tobacco company does not admit that it violated the MSA.

"We have seen that over the years it ['Kool Mixx'] has been a popular program. This campaign is an effective and responsible way to communicate with our customers," says Howard, the company spokesman. "We admit-

ted no wrong doing in the settlement. The settlement said that we had to hold all of our events in age-restricted venues and we were already doing that. They didn't say we couldn't do specialty packs or CDs—we just can't sell specialty packs at retail. We can distribute the CDs at events, but not in magazines."

Lettlow says the settlement is a victory for the American Legacy Foundation and will help reduce the burden of poor people—especially people of color.

"Because of the vigilance of the attorneys general, the tobacco companies' feet were held to the fire to make sure the terms of the Master Settlement Agreement were followed," she said.

The settlement also required the tobacco company to pay \$1.46 million to be used for smoking prevention programs in communities affected by the "Kool Mixx" campaign.

"They agreed to stop certain marketing tactics and on top of that, they agreed to a financial settlement that will go to four non-profit organizations including the NAATPN, CDC Foundation, Bobby Right Community Center in Illinois and the American Lung Association of Chicago," Lettlow explains.

Watson-Hyde, whose tobacco prevention organization will receive a part of the settlement, says the funds will be used to improve current anti-smoking efforts.

"The settlement payments are to put resources on the ground to move youth smoking prevention programs in specific areas," said Watson-Hyde. "The agreement will definitely begin to strengthen what is already available by curbing marketing, curbing promotion, and limit like promotions with stuff that appeals to young people."

Maryland Attorney General Joseph Curran agrees.

"As the nation's leading

cause of preventable death, tobacco kills over 45,000 African-Americans each year," he says. "This campaign targeted a hip-hop audience, including youth. I hope this settlement sends a strong message that kids are off-limits for tobacco companies."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, cigarette smoking still remains the leading cause of preventable death in the United States, claiming the lives of approximately 440,000 people each year.

The Centers estimate that 22.5 percent (46 million) of adults smoke cigarettes. Of those 46 million, 28.5 percent are between 18 and 24 years old; 25.7 percent are between 25 and 44 years old; 22.7 percent are between 45 and 64 years old and 9.3 percent are 65 or older.

Among the 22.9 percent of high school students that smoke in the United States, 25.5 percent are White, 20.5 percent are Hispanic, 14.3 percent are African-American, and Watson-Hyde says that tobacco use is among the lowest in African-Americans, but won't stay low if tobacco companies continue to target Black youth.

"We will continue to scrutinize tobacco companies as they try to lure our youth into lifestyles that will lead to shortened life and ultimately death," she said. "The industry claimed it has changed, but they have not changed their ways. It's business as usual in the tobacco industry."

And if to prove that point, R.J. Reynolds has announced that it will launch flavored cigarettes. "With the release of Warm Winter Toffee, I think they have just what they wanted," Damu Smith, a national community organizer for NAATPN, says in a statement. "You don't get any closer to candy than toffee."

And with that move, the arms race for youth escalates.

FBI: More than 7,400 hate crimes in 2003

WASHINGTON (AP) — Over 7,400 hate crime incidents occurred nationwide last year, more than half of them motivated by racial prejudice most often against Black people, the FBI reported Monday.

Hate crimes motivated by anti-Black racial bias totaled 2,548 in 2003, more than double such crimes against all other racial groups combined. There were 3,150 Black victims in these cases, including four who were

murdered, according to the annual FBI report.

The overall total of 7,489 hate crime incidents reported in 2003 was slightly above the number reported in 2002. Nearly two-thirds of the crimes involved in such cases are intimidation, vandalism or property destruction.

But there are also hundreds of violent crimes, including 14 murders. There were more than 2,700 assaults, 444 bias-related robberies, burglaries and thefts,

and 34 arson incidents.

The report shows that crimes categorized as anti-Islamic remained at the about same level in 2003 — 149 crimes — as the year before. There had been a spike in such crimes immediately after the 2001 terror attacks, helping drive the overall hate crime number much higher that year.

By far the most hate crimes based on religion were directed at Jews, with 927 incidents in 2003, about the same

as in 2002.

The report also found more than 1,200 hate crimes based on sexual orientation, including 783 against male homosexuals. That included six murders.

The FBI hate crimes report is drawn from information submitted by more than 11,900 law enforcement agencies around the country. Only about 16 percent of those agencies reported any hate crimes in their jurisdictions during 2003.

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