

Upfront

Smoke and Mirrors: Can a tobacco company ever be socially responsible?

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Smoke and Mirrors

Can a tobacco company ever be socially responsible?

Since the World Health Organization clamped down on tobacco advertising, corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives are among the few remaining outlets that tobacco companies have to promote themselves publicly. British American Tobacco Malaysia (BATM), for example, has won the favor of the Malaysian government and people by helping tobacco growers, making donations to cultural institutions, funding scholarships, developing youth smoking prevention programs, and reporting on its activities. A recent scholarly review of BATM's CSR efforts concludes, however, that "a socially responsible tobacco corporation is an oxymoron and must be identified as such."

"We wanted to hold up a mirror and show that BATM's activities cannot be reconciled with the fact that tobacco is the world's leading cause of preventable illness and premature death," says Simon Barraclough, a professor in the School of Public Health at Australia's La Trobe University and the article's lead author.

The review, which appears in the April 2008 issue of *Social Science & Medicine*, identifies several paradoxes in BATM's CSR initiatives. For example, although the company plants trees to be carbon neutral, it does not track the environmental impact of

cigarette smoke or discarded packets and butts. BATM sponsors a youth antismoking program, but its message that smoking is an adult activity may actually encourage children to use tobacco. The company funds so-called independent research on teenage smoking at the University of Malaya, but the university is one of BATM's major shareholders.

And though BATM has received

a good public image and a relaxed regulatory environment. At the same time, the Malaysian government is the largest local shareholder in the corporation. The authors question whether the government can effectively regulate an industry in which it is a major investor, and conclude that voluntary self-regulation is not enough. "These [tobacco companies] have had decades [to improve their practices] and fought

it tooth and nail all the way along," they say.

Stacey Smith, a director of advisory services at Business for Social Responsibility, has a more sanguine outlook on tobacco CSR.

"Tobacco companies can be socially responsible even though they are promoting a dangerous product," she says. Smith, who has helped such tobacco companies as Altria and Philip Morris hone their CSR strategies, says: "Our mission of advancing social responsibility is

best achieved by not judging companies. We are not an arbiter of what is or isn't socially responsible. When we work with tobacco companies, we start with them where they are."

Barraclough disagrees: "If you are serious about countering the health effects of tobacco, you have to counter the promotion and sale of tobacco products. CSR is now part of the problem, not the solution."

—Alana Conner



A pedestrian takes a puff in downtown Kuala Lumpur. As an act of CSR, many tobacco companies designate smoking spaces. Although these spaces protect health by isolating smoke, they also preserve smoking's legitimacy.

awards for its CSR monitoring, the company declines to report on several standard Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) indicators, including a "description of policy for preserving customer health and safety during use of products and services," the authors report. Meanwhile, the BATM Web site denies that secondhand smoke is harmful to people's health.

Because of its CSR initiatives, the researchers document, BATM enjoys