

## Original Investigation

# The Menthol Marketing Mix: Targeted Promotions For Focus Communities in the United States

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Received July 2, 2010; accepted October 18, 2010

## Abstract

**Introduction:** This study analyzes tobacco industry menthol marketing strategies aimed at urban predominantly Black populations.

**Methods:** Data are drawn from an interview with a former Brown & Williamson Tobacco Company trade marketing manager, tobacco industry documents on Kool promotions in urban areas, and public health literature on tobacco marketing.

**Results:** Tobacco companies recognize the growth potential for the menthol segment in these urban communities. They have higher levels of price discounts and signage, exert tight controls over the retail environment, and use hip-hop lifestyle to associate menthol products with urban nightlife, music, fame, and cultural edginess among younger smokers.

**Conclusions:** Tobacco companies regard the urban Black menthol segment as one of the few markets in which they can grow sales despite declines elsewhere in the United States. Consequently, this population is surrounded by intense and integrated levels of marketing. We need strong monitoring, regulation, and enforcement efforts that will counter the industry's use of menthol at multiple levels in urban environments.

## Introduction

Menthol tobacco products represent a significant portion of the tobacco market, used by one in four smokers (National Cancer Institute [NCI], 2009) and amounting to one in five cigarettes sold in the United States in 2006 (Federal Trade Commission [FTC], 2009). Among Blacks, the use of menthol is more pronounced, used by approximately 70% of smokers, compared with 21% of White smokers in 2006 and 2007 (NCI, 2009). The pattern of marketing that led to this disparity has been characterized by Gardiner (2004) as the "African Americanization of menthol."

In order to sell a product, commercial marketing firms manipulate the marketing mix or variables related to product, price, place, and promotion (Siegel & Doner, 1998). In the strategic campaigns run by tobacco companies, we can see specific designs for varied types of menthol products (tobacco brand variations, packaging, and inserts); price discounts and value-added promotions; place, including distribution channels, control of the retail environment, and other locations that sell tobacco to consumers; and promotion themes, messages, images, and channels designed for new and established segments of smokers (Biener & Albers, 2003; Kreslake, Wayne, Alpert, Koh, & Connolly, 2008; Kreslake, Wayne, & Connolly, 2008; Ling & Glantz, 2002; NCI, 2008; Pollay, Lee, & Carter-Whitney, 1992).

The marketing mix will be based on geographic location (Yerger, Przewoznik, & Malone, 2007). According to La Tanisha Wright, former trade marketing manager for Brown & Williamson Tobacco Company (personal communication, March 27, 2010), Brown & Williamson used terms such as "focus" and "nonfocus" to refer to urban and nonurban populations. These code names hid allusions to variations in marketing due to race and ethnicity.

Menthol has come under increasing scrutiny as the Food and Drug Administration implements the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act (U.S. Food and Drug Administration [U.S. FDA], 2010). This legislation restricts cigarette flavorings that could appeal to youth, but menthol has been exempted from that restriction pending review by the Tobacco Products Scientific Advisory Committee.

This paper demonstrates how the marketing mix is used to fuel growth in menthol tobacco sales among new and existing Black smokers in urban areas. The high rates of tobacco-related diseases and relative difficulty with smoking cessation among Blacks make it a high priority to understand these methods and the implications for prevention and regulation (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [U.S. DHHS], 1998). The results can help guide counter-marketing efforts, inform policy measures, and limit the influence of menthol.

doi: 10.1093/ntr/ntq201

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## Methods

Descriptions of marketing strategies aimed at focus communities were provided by La Tanisha Wright, based on her work at Brown & Williamson as Trade Marketing Manager and Controlling Manager in Detroit, Michigan, and Atlanta, Georgia, from 2001 to 2004 and currently a tobacco control advocate with the National African American Tobacco Prevention Network (Gardiner & Clark, 2009). Ms. Wright responded to written questions provided by the other two authors regarding Brown & Williamson marketing practices. Questions and answers were provided in writing in March 2010, paraphrased by Cruz, and then checked by Wright. The questions were: "What are focus, nonfocus, and focus-on-the-fringe communities?" and "How did Brown & Williamson manipulate its tobacco products, its prices, its places, and its promotions to improve sales in focus communities?"

The *Trinkets & Trash* (2010) collection of tobacco marketing images at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey was searched to find examples that illustrated Wright's results.

Tobacco documents were located in the Legacy Tobacco Documents Library found at the University of California San Francisco (<http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu>) in September 2010. The search term "nonfocus" yielded 120 documents. Unrelated documents (mostly related to focus group testing and focus cells in biology) and duplicates were excluded resulting in seven marketing-related documents. Two of them outlined Kool cigarette marketing plans, thus confirming material presented by Wright. R. J. Reynolds took over the Kool brand line from Brown & Williamson Tobacco Company in 2003, so the Kool documents reflect strategies in play at both companies.

In response to each question, we provide public health research literature related to the question, Wright's testimony, and excerpts illustrating her points from the tobacco documents. The literature and documents provide confirmation of the observations described by Wright.

## Focus Communities

Yerger et al. (2007) describe a nexus of "race, class, and place" that drew several tobacco companies in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s to penetrate low-income Black urban areas. During those years, the nature of the urban environment leads to certain refinements and innovations that are with us today, such as display shelving that could be kept neat and organized in small convenience stores, after major retailers abandoned the inner cities.

According to La Tanisha Wright, Brown & Williamson used terms such as "focus," "nonfocus," and/or "focus on the fringe" to conceal specific minority targeting. "Focus" refers to communities and/or stores that have urban characteristics. They are in predominately low-income Black communities and have high menthol sales with brands, such as Kool and Newport. Correspondingly, "nonfocus" refers to communities and stores that have suburban/rural characteristics. They are predominately White communities and have high nonmenthol sales with brands, such as Marlboro. "Focus-on-the-fringe" communities share the characteristics of focus and nonfocus communities.

In a 2002 business report for Kool cigarettes, focus communities are represented as an important source of menthol market growth: "KOOL is delivering a premium message to its anticipated audience and concentrating in 22 trend-setting urban cities where the majority of this audience lives. These cities house the 102 focus assignments that KOOL has identified to be key to the growth of the brand. Field personnel in these assignments have the sole purpose to build equity and image for KOOL by engaging both retailers and consumers in quality interactions with the brand" (Kool USA, 2002, p. 1). In 2003, the company pushed harder in focus areas: "Establish at retail that KOOL is the Master of the Game. In focus assignments, demonstrate it through leading presence and visibility, quality, distribution, innovation, retail partnerships, consumer engagement, and clear brand essence communication. In nonfocus assignments, communicate it through visibility, distribution, quality, and clear brand essence communication" (Kool USA, 2003, p. 5). These memos confirm the role of urban communities as important avenues for advancing menthol market share.

## Products

Menthol tobacco products emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s with Salem, Newport, and Kool first positioned as remedial or medicinal types of products, then repositioned as providing a positive and refreshing taste (Pollay & Dewhirst 2002; Sutton & Robinson 2004).

The smoother milder taste of menthol cigarettes has been found to appeal as a starter product for youth, used by 44% of adolescents age 12–17 years in the United States (Hersey et al., 2006; NCI, 2009).

Kreslake et al. have found that tobacco companies have developed an array of product designs that can appeal to smokers at varying levels of smoking experience (Kreslake, Wayne, Alpert, et al., 2008; Kreslake, Wayne, & Connolly, 2008). Lighter mentholated products, such as Newport, Salem Black Label, and Marlboro Milds, help to mask the harsh taste of tobacco among beginners. Mid-level mentholation is found in Salem Green Label, Camel Menthol, and Kool. Higher levels, designed for seasoned smokers needing a stronger menthol sensation, are found in Marlboro Menthols. Innovative new products such as Camel Crush allow smokers to crush a small capsule in the cigarette to release the level of menthol they desire (Trinkets & Trash, 2010).

Wright describes what happens with brand products when the trade managers visit contracted stores. They need to make sure that there is a sufficient distribution of their company's key brands to maximize sales and ensure that certain styles of flavors are prioritized. Cigarette brand styles are merchandised from full to light flavors on cigarette displays (Figure 1). Trade managers push the retailers to ensure that the full flavors are more visible than other cigarettes at all times.

In 2003, most of the major companies reportedly saw the urban "full menthol" market as the key location for recovering sales at a time when nonmenthol brands were declining in the United States (Kool USA, 2003).

The cigarette package is another compelling aspect of product design that can get the smoker's attention over hours and sometimes days. In a 2003 business plan, Kool USA (2003,



Figure 1. Kool store shelving and display in Milwaukee, WI, 2009.

p. 17) marketing staff report that “on-pack communications” are an aggressive and strategic platform that can appeal to smokers who might not otherwise be exposed to bar campaigns and as a source of discount coupons for all smokers.

Cigarette packages can also provide reinforcement of choice for smokers. Figure 2 illustrates a special line of packages that were initially distributed during bar promotions. Kool USA (2003) explains that these “playful innovative limited edition packaging designs were implemented to reinforce the leading character of KOOL,” with appeal for young adult smokers under 30 years considering a trial of the brand at bar events.

Bar promotions have been used in urban areas, in part, to introduce markets to new products such as Camel’s exotic



Figure 2. Kool Mixx store display with special edition packs, 2003 (Trinkets & Trash, 2010).

blends *Dark Mint*, Kool’s Smooth Fusion menthol flavors such as *Midnight Berry*, and others before they reach store shelves (Figure 3; Biener & Albers, 2003; Lewis & Wackowski, 2006; Sepe & Glantz, 2002). The use of flavors and sweeteners, interesting new names, and attractive packages may appeal to relatively young tobacco users (Lewis & Wackowski, 2006).

## Price

The price of tobacco is one of the most important elements of the industry’s marketing mix. Tobacco corporations spend more on retailer and consumer incentives to reduce price than on all other marketing categories put together (FTC, 2009). Several methods are used to control price and promote sales, including discounts to retailers that can lead to lower prices and discounts for consumers received at the sale or through direct mail marketing, such as the Smooth Fusion brand coupon in Figure 3 (Feighery, Ribisl, Schleicher, & Clark, 2004; Sumner & Dillman, 1995; White, White, Freeman, Gilpin, & Pierce, 2006). The customers most likely to take advantage of these discounts are young adults, women, those who smoke more, and Blacks (White et al., 2006).

Wright describes the types of contracts she had with the retail outlets that sold tobacco in her territories. As a sales incentive, she could provide tobacco buy-down (discount) programs to retailers, thus increasing the retailer’s profits. In these contracts, tobacco companies gain tight control of each aspect of the store’s tobacco environment for the company’s brands, including how the store offers the products, promotions, prices, signage, and presence or placement of signs, shelves, displays, and products. Retailers must adhere to strict contract requirements, including meeting 100% distribution on select brands at all times to maximize sales opportunities, passing promotions on to consumers, and allowing the placement of advertisements and displays at the primary point of sale (near cash registers, candy, magazines, gum, etc.) Failure to meet all contract elements at all times could result in the suspension and/or termination of the retailer’s discount programs and/or contract payments. One of her responsibilities was to monitor compliance during her regular visits to each store.

Wright found that predominately Black communities had substantially more liquor and mom-and-pop stores per

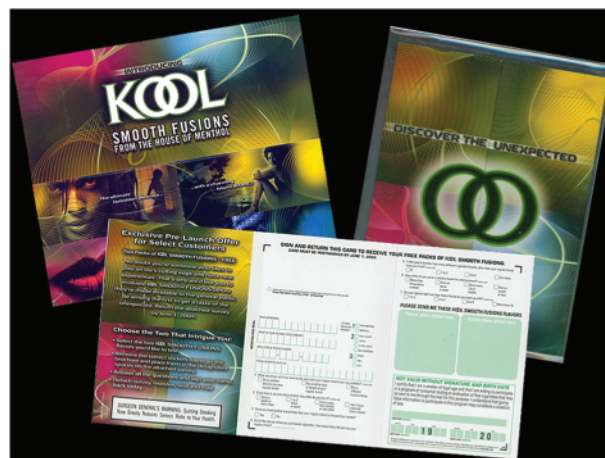


Figure 3. Kool Smooth Fusions direct mail offer for free cigarette pack, 2004 (Trinkets & Trash, 2010).



capita than in nonfocus communities. Because of the high density of stores, these trade channels tended to experience low sales volumes for all types of products (tobacco, alcohol, sweet/salty snacks, etc.). In order to maximize the store's profits, tobacco discounts provided by the tobacco company were essential.

Wright often provided focus stores with premium tobacco contracts, providing the retailer with excessive discounting and advertising, and enhanced brand communications for menthol products. These contracts helped the stores sell the products at a discount compared with other stores. Stores outside these areas could also get discounts but not as large and not as long lasting. For example, a nonfocus store might receive 50 cents off per pack of mentholated cigarettes for 6 months out of the year, while a focus store could receive \$1.00–\$1.50 off per pack for the entire year.

Wright's focus stores received greater allocations of coupons and "Buy 1, Get X Free" promotions as compared with the more expensive and less desirable "Buy 2 or Buy 3, Get X Free" promotions provided to nonfocus stores. Tobacco companies also offer smokers prizes or "free gifts," such as a set of dominoes with a pack purchase, as incentives to promote smoking (Figures 2 and 3).

Programs that offer coupons or promotional items to individuals are designed to encourage brand loyalty and to avert switching to other brands or quitting (White et al., 2006). R. J. Reynold's assessment of ethnic markets in 1977 noted that switching among acceptable brands was common in Black status seekers (R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, 1977). To counter this practice, Wright reports that "switch-selling" programs are conducted more frequently in focus communities. These kinds of programs offer discount coupons, access to brand Web sites and a guarantee of future direct mail promotions with additional cigarette promotions, cigarettes, coupons, and information about upcoming tobacco-sponsored events. The goal is to avert brand switching and maintain brand loyalty.

Kool USA (2003) recognizes that the menthol segment is highly competitive. It outlines each of the major tobacco companies' focus on this segment, leading to increases in discounting rates and effective use of free goods in key menthol priority outlets. The Kool business plan notes that the intensity of this focus has made it extremely important and costly for the corporations to keep their brands at very competitive prices at all times or they would lose market share to other comparable brands.

### Place

Tobacco is distributed primarily through retail outlets, which in turn are tightly controlled by tobacco distributors. Through interviews with retailers, Feighery, Ribisil, Clark, and Haladjian (2004) identified methods by which tobacco distributors establish this control, such as the payments and discounts described earlier, in exchange for control over the tobacco displays, the amount and location of shelving and signage, and other conditions governing product visibility.

Wright adds that Brown & Williamson had a practice of placing a higher quantity of interior and exterior signs at focus

retail stores, with mentholated products being the primary products advertised. They would receive a greater quantity of high-profile cigarette displays often prominent because of flashy colors and images, florescent lights, and rotating movement that would attract store patrons of all ages. Focus displays feature more pack facings for mentholated products than for non mentholated products depicted in Figure 1.

Kool USA (2003) reports that 1,600 stores that received the Buy One Get One Free promotion in 2002 resulting in a menthol segment share increase compared with those that did not receive the promotion. The trade managers in those territories said this approach gave them the advantage they needed to create merchandise presence at these stores. Kool USA also describes the thorough vetting they gave to every item in the retail environment to assure a "clean big brand presence" that was "consistent, uniform, and simple" (Kool USA, 2003, p. 38). Some of these items would become semipermanent fixtures, such as plastic countertop mats that were glued down in prominent locations.

### Promotion

In 1977, R.J. Reynolds concluded that the number of Black smokers would probably increase as the number of White smokers declined, making them an important segment to recruit (R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, 1977). Using data from their studies of Black consumer lifestyles, Reynolds and the other major tobacco corporations identified key segments based on values, locations, media usage patterns, and tastes. Campaigns based on extensive formative research led to specific tobacco products, imagery, and locations to reach and appeal to Black audiences (Balbach, Gasior, & Barbeau, 2003; Gardiner, 2004). Several studies found higher density and concentrations of tobacco billboards in predominantly Black urban areas (Davis, 1998; Hackbarth, Silvestri, & Cosper, 1995; Stoddard, Johnson, Sussman, Dent, & Boley Cruz, 1998).

In 2004, the young urban Black had become an even more promising part of the tobacco growth market. Wright, Campbell, and others (Gardiner & Clark, 2009; Hafez & Ling, 2006; Kool USA, 2003) describe the use of an integrated marketing mix exemplified by the Kool DJ Mixx campaign in 2004 using "poets of urban hip-hop" models, settings, and language of urban nightlife to reach young Blacks. The tobacco product was newly named and wrapped in new packaging. Promotion channels involved urban tobacco-sponsored bar nights with free samples, center-fold magazine ads with an interactive Kool Mixx CD attached in *Vibe* magazine, direct mail promotions, and a "DJ" Web site, all designed to reach young urban Blacks in bars, clubs, and their homes, shown in Figure 2.

Music has played a major role in menthol marketing aimed at Blacks and young Hispanics in multiple campaigns (Gardiner, 2004; Hafez & Ling, 2006). In particular, Kool MIXX and other tobacco products such as blunts have been inserted into hip-hop and rap culture (Campbell, G. in Gardiner & Clark, 2009) described by Kool USA as "the most relevant cultural trend among menthol" adult smokers under 30 (Kool USA, 2003, p. 29). Hip-hop is a lifestyle that involves rap artists and the clothing, jewelry and cars that they and their fans prefer. Their words, moves, and music appeal to 12- to 24-year-old graffiti artists using street-oriented forms of expression

(Hafez & Ling, 2006). Central to hip-hop are the “MC’s” and “DJ’s,” who can be either well-known or emerging celebrities featured in the campaign posters, as performers, and on pass word-protected tobacco brand Web sites (Campbell, G. in Gardiner & Clark, 2009). For example, the Kool XL Innovators Award on the Kool Web site in 2008 had pages devoted to different artists from three generations of hip-hop culture, including Big Daddy Kane, “MC” from Harlem; Ice T and Grandmaster Kaz; a Bling designer; and graffiti artists (Cruz, T. in Gardiner & Clark, 2009). This array of artists demonstrates how tobacco companies can market cultural aesthetics based on young adult culture in the urban environment (Hendlin, Anderson, & Glantz, 2010).

Kool USA (2003) recognized the importance of the Kool MIXX campaign, expanded it from an event-only platform to an integration of event plus retail plus magazine promotions and electronic media in 2003, designed to reach the adult under 30 smokers in urban markets. Promotions were developed for CD’s, the Internet, Motorola pages, inserts in two young adult magazines, new cigarette packaging, and distribution of free samples at bars. It was considered successful in raising brand ratings, imagery, and trials by users new to the brand, making it in the company’s estimation the fastest growing premium menthol brand in their target population.

## Discussion

Tobacco products have been aimed at the culture, lifestyle, neighborhoods, economics, and tastes of low-income urban Black smokers in such an integrated fashion that it may undermine tobacco education and control efforts. The retail contracts, heavier advertising, discounts, and urban life-oriented campaigns make it very difficult to extricate the urban Black smoker from this web of influence.

The campaigns, through bars and interactive Web sites, resonate with youth and young adult values about the importance of music, hip-hop lifestyle, and urban culture. Tobacco control advocates can appeal directly to youth through these same mechanisms before the youth are legally old enough to frequent tobacco-sponsored entertainment, turn in discount coupons, or play on tobacco brand Web sites. Interactive Web sites can be used positively to point out exploitation of youth urban culture by tobacco corporations and to inoculate youth by spoofing or having them develop spoofs of the promotional messages aimed at young adults.

Menthol smokers need help unsubscribing from these Web sites, as well as from direct mail, and E-mails from tobacco companies when they seek cessation help. They may need the support of family and friends to maximize motivation, recognize and resist tobacco cues in their environment, and reduce other barriers to quitting.

Given the ubiquitous nature of menthol promotions in the urban store environment, it would be short sighted to limit control efforts to individual change. Change needs to happen at the retail, community, and policy levels as well.

Tobacco advocates should work collaboratively with urban Black organizations and business alliances as partners to reject these products and practices at local retailers, bars, and on the

Internet. They can design counter-marketing campaigns that demonstrate how menthol advertising and pricing strategies are designed to maximize sales in their populations. These types of messages can help ignite resistance to these strategies and build healthier social norms about tobacco corporations. Collaborative research and community efforts can help leadership groups understand how retailers are controlled by tobacco retail contracts. If business groups can organize retailers in a community to support one another in this health issue, then they may have bargaining power to resist the requirements and incentives of the marketing managers in order to improve the health of their customers.

At the same time, tobacco control groups can work toward regulation and enforcement of retail sites with tobacco retail licensing, municipal signage featuring laws against tobacco sales to youth, and numbers to call for sales violations. There should be efforts to enact controls over the location and pervasiveness of retail signage, displays, and discounting near schools, thus limiting urban density of tobacco marketing.

Existing policies and settlement agreements can be used to combat tobacco promotions in magazines and at events with a high number of youth audience members by collaborating with agencies that enforce the Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement (Lieberman, 2004) and the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act (U.S. FDA, 2010). These controls are designed to protect youth, but the enforcement agencies need help with documentation of problems. They should, additionally, address the pediatric implications of menthol as a flavor additive that makes it possible for large numbers of youth to adapt to the harsh taste of tobacco. Menthol and its chemical substitutes should be removed from tobacco, so it no longer serves as a flavoring with direct appeal to youth.

Menthol, as a flavoring, is the lynchpin in a tightly integrated series of campaigns aimed at the urban poor, especially Blacks who suffer disproportionately high rates of tobacco-related diseases (U.S. DHHS, 1998). This product needs to be restricted so that it no longer serves as the major gateway to smoking in this population.

These recommendations are based on qualitative data. Industry practices have been described by responses from one trade marketing manager from Brown & Williamson Tobacco Company corroborated by public health research literature and tobacco industry documents. The data from the trade manager may not represent the views or practices of other tobacco corporations or other trade managers. It should be verified by additional research with a larger number of sources. The tobacco industry document search was confirmatory rather than exploratory, identifying documents that validated Wright’s testimony. Other document searches might have provided different evidence. There may be forms of targeting that have not been identified. Consequently, these results may be used to identify important practices, but we would need more information to confirm the prevalence or effects of these practices.

These data enrich our understanding of what the industry intended and how it operated. Integrated marketing practices are defined by tobacco corporations, exploiting market segments to help push their sales ahead of the competition. Future studies should consider tobacco niches that are defined by the

profit concerns of the tobacco corporations rather than by the demographics of populations.

## Funding

Data provided by Wright were partially gathered while employed by Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corporation from 2002 to 2004.

## Declaration of Interests

None declared.

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