



Short Communication

Reaching consumers: How the tobacco industry uses email marketing

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ABSTRACT

Tobacco companies are restricted from engaging in many traditional forms of marketing. Direct marketing is one way tobacco companies can reach consumers while complying with regulation and avoiding negative public perception. There is little research on this type of opt-in marketing, which includes mail marketing, email marketing, web marketing, and mobile marketing, and its impact is not well understood. This study examined 6990 tobacco company emails received by individuals living in the state of Minnesota, US between January 2010 and May 2015 to determine email frequency by brand. These emails were gathered as part of ongoing surveillance of tobacco industry direct marketing. A subset of these emails received between October 2014 and May 2015 ($n = 1646$) were content analyzed to identify the purpose of the email communication along with type of product promoted. Tobacco companies use email to communicate with consumers on a regular basis. This communication was observed to be as frequent as nine times per month. Emails are most commonly used to promote contests (54.1%), content on tobacco company websites (39.1%), and tobacco coupons (15.7%). Email promotion of menthol-flavored tobacco products was common and was associated with promotion of coupons. Emails promoting menthol had a 1.9 times higher prevalence of also promoting coupons (95% CI: 1.52–2.37). Little is known about tobacco company email marketing and this study fills an identified research gap. A deeper understanding of this type of marketing is needed in order to counter tobacco industry messaging and advance tobacco control.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement, the US tobacco industry has been restricted from engaging in many traditional forms of marketing, including billboards and branded merchandise. Direct marketing to consumers enables tobacco companies to market their products while complying with regulations (Lewis and Ling, 2015). Through direct marketing, consumers are reached through mail, web, email, and mobile marketing platforms. These types of marketing are opt-in, meaning consumers elect to receive marketing directly from companies. Tobacco companies use direct marketing to build relationships with consumers who receive regular coupons and free giveaways (Brock et al., 2015). Tobacco companies began direct marketing in the 1970s when it was determined that these tactics were an efficient way to reach existing consumers, recruit new customers, and inspire brand loyalty. These approaches allow tobacco companies to target specific segments of the market with tailored messages (Lewis and Ling, 2015; Lewis et al., 2004a). There is evidence that tobacco companies use direct marketing to target women, people of low socioeconomic status, young adult smokers, and menthol smokers (Brown-Johnson et al.,

2014; Richardson et al., 2014; Lewis et al., 2015). This type of targeted marketing is concerning given its potential to exacerbate smoking-related health disparities. For example, by using direct marketing to reach menthol smokers tobacco companies also target African Americans, who use menthol cigarettes at disproportionately high rates (Caraballo and Asman, 2011).

In 2013, US cigarette and smokeless tobacco companies spent a total of US\$68.8 million on direct mail and web marketing (Federal Trade Commission, 2016a, 2016b). Companies spent an additional US\$281.1 million on coupons and US\$41.5 million on non-branded specialty items, both of which are often distributed through direct marketing channels (Federal Trade Commission, 2016a, 2016b). These resources help tobacco companies maintain and expand their direct marketing reach. Studies estimate between 35.2% and 49.9% of current smokers receive direct marketing through the mail (Lewis et al., 2004b; Choi et al., 2013). A recent study found that 12% of 15–17-year-olds and 26% of 18–23-year-olds are exposed to direct marketing and this type of marketing is associated with smoking behavior (Soneji et al., 2013). Further, 49% of young adult smokers report receiving emails from tobacco companies and 58% report visiting tobacco company websites (Lewis et al., 2015).

Tobacco company direct marketing is recognized as an area needing additional research (Cruz, 2009). Most studies that examine direct marketing use a cross sectional or cohort design to quantify participation levels among adults and adolescents (Lewis et al., 2015; Lewis et al.,

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2004b; Choi et al., 2013; Soneji et al., 2013). Of these, only one examines tobacco email marketing (Lewis et al., 2015). Others analyze tobacco company documents about direct marketing (Lewis and Ling, 2015; Lewis et al., 2004a; Brown-Johnson et al., 2014; Richardson et al., 2014). Few analyze content of direct marketing materials (Brock et al., 2015), and none that we are aware of examine tobacco company email content. The purpose of this study is to examine tobacco company direct email marketing to assess frequency and intended purpose. Understanding how tobacco companies use email marketing is essential to countering these promotions.

2. Methods

Emails were collected between January 2010 and May 2015 as ongoing surveillance of tobacco industry direct marketing for the following tobacco and e-cigarette brands: American Spirit, Black & Mild, Blu, Camel, Copenhagen, General Snus, Grizzly, Longhorn, MarkTen, Marlboro, Newport, Redman, Skoal, Swisher, USA Gold, and Vuse. These brands were chosen based on market share, and they account for more than 65% of the US cigarette market, almost 90% of the smokeless market, over 80% of the cigar market, and over 60% of the e-cigarette market (Maxwell, 2015; Maxwell, 2013; Reynolds American, 2012; Altria Group, 2012; Lorillard, 2012; Swedish Match, 2012; Convenience Store News, 2015). Emails were received by participants who live in the state of Minnesota. Participants were selected as a convenience sample with emphasis on selecting for geography, younger age (below 35), and gender breakdown. Participants registered to receive direct marketing materials from selected brands by going to brand websites, signing up, and going through age verification process. Participants were instructed to forward on all marketing materials received.

There were a total of 85 registrations for the selected tobacco brands, with each brand having between one and 14 registrations. Most registrations were completed in 2010. Additional registrations were added in 2014. Analyses were conducted per registration to account for this. A total of 6990 emails were received all of which were automated marketing emails from the selected tobacco companies or affiliated brands.

The following variables were coded for all emails received during the five-year period ($n = 6990$): date received, tobacco brand promoted, and email subject line. For a more recent subset of emails received between October, 2014 and May, 2015 ($n = 1646$), we coded the following additional variables: purpose(s) of email, if the email promoted menthol-flavored tobacco, and type(s) of tobacco product being promoted.

Coding was completed by a single trained coder who used a pre-determined set of codes for all variables. When coding email purpose, those emails that did not fit into pre-determined codes were initially coded as “other.” Later, those emails were re-examined and additional codes were created where themes were identified. Email purpose was determined by examining the email subject and body.

Analysis included calculation of descriptive statistics and proportions for categorical variables. Statistical differences in proportions were assessed using chi-square tests. Prevalence ratios (PR) were calculated to assess relationships between menthol promotion and email purposes using the GENMOD procedure for regression in SAS v9.4 (SAS Institute, Cary, NC).

3. Results

3.1. Email marketing frequency

For the 6990 emails received during the full study period, the largest share came from Marlboro followed by Newport, Black & Mild, and Camel. Marlboro sent the most emails per month per registration; Grizzly was second most frequent. Because these emails were received by multiple participants, there were duplicates. Marlboro sent the most

unique emails per month on average followed by Blu and Camel (Table 1).

For the subset of emails received October 2014 to May 2015 ($n = 1646$) the largest share came from Marlboro ($n = 1078$, 65.5%) followed by Skoal ($n = 107$, 6.5%), Black & Mild ($n = 102$, 6.2%), Newport ($n = 79$, 4.8%), Copenhagen ($n = 64$, 3.9%), Grizzly ($n = 64$, 3.9%), Camel ($n = 47$, 2.9%) and Blu ($n = 32$, 1.9%). Marlboro and Grizzly were top in terms of communication frequency. Marlboro sent an average of 9.6 emails per month per registration and Grizzly sent 8.0. Copenhagen and Blu followed, with an average of 2.0 emails per registration per month. Marlboro (18.9), Grizzly (6.0), Skoal (2.6), and Blu (2.6) sent the most unique emails per month, on average.

3.2. Promoting affiliated brands and causes

Sixty-five (0.01%) emails promoted brands no one registered for but are affiliated with selected tobacco brands. For example, emails were received from Zonnice (nicotine gum manufactured by the company that makes Camel). The largest share ($n = 56$) came from Citizens for Tobacco Rights, an advocacy arm of the Altria Company.

3.3. Email marketing purpose

The most common email purpose was promotion of a contest or sweepstakes (54.1%). These contests offer participants the opportunity to win prizes by logging in to tobacco company websites and playing games or completing other activities (e.g. watching a video or commenting on message board). Promotion of content on the company's website, such as blogs, recipes, and music downloads, was the second most common email purpose (39.1%). The third most common was promotion of tobacco coupons (15.7%); in order to receive these coupons, consumers must login to the tobacco website. Promotion of a new tobacco product or brand extension (7.0%), a birthday or holiday greeting (4.3%), promotion of tobacco company sponsored event or “bar night” (4.2%), and notification that free gift was shipped (1.9%) were also commonly identified purposes. Only 53 (3.2%) of emails promoted a purpose defined as “other” and some promoted multiple purposes (24.7%).

Table 1

Emails received and number of registrations by brand January 2010–May 2015, Minnesota, US ($n = 6990$).

Brand	# of emails received (%)	Avg. # of emails per registration	Avg. # of emails per registration per month	Avg. # of unique emails per month
<i>Cigarette brands</i>				
Marlboro	4354 (62.3)	311.0	5.5	11.8
Newport	905 (12.3)	64.6	1.2	1.5
USA Gold	57 (0.8)	57.0	1.2	0.9
Camel	373 (5.3)	28.7	0.6	2.4
American Spirit	4 (0.1)	2.0	0.1	0.1
<i>Smokeless tobacco and snus brands</i>				
Grizzly	98 (1.4)	98.0	2.0	1.6
General Snus	61 (0.9)	61.0	1.8	1.7
Copenhagen	163 (2.3)	40.8	0.7	0.9
Longhorn	23 (0.3)	23.0	0.4	0.3
Skoal	235 (3.4)	18.1	0.3	1.1
Red Man	7 (0.1)	7.0	0.2	0.2
<i>Cigar brands</i>				
Black & Mild	572 (8.2)	44.0	0.8	1.8
Swisher Sweets	12 (0.2)	12.0	0.3	0.3
<i>Electronic cigarette brands</i>				
Blu	40 (0.6)	20.0	2.0	2.8
MarkTen	9 (0.1)	4.5	0.5	0.3
Vuse	12 (0.2)	6.0	0.5	0.6

3.4. Promotion of menthol-flavored tobacco

Promotion of menthol-flavored tobacco was common. Menthol was promoted at significantly different rates among cigarette ($p < 0.0001$) and smokeless tobacco brands ($p < 0.0001$), and was most common in emails from Newport (88.6%), Camel (77.9%), Longhorn (70.0%) and Grizzly (64.1%).

Emails that promoted menthol had a 1.9 times higher prevalence of coupon promotion (95% CI: 1.52–2.37; $p < 0.0001$) and 1.32 times higher prevalence of web content promotion (95% CI: 1.17–1.49; $p < 0.0001$) than those that did not.

4. Discussion

This study examined tobacco company email marketing and, to the best of our knowledge, is the first to analyze a large sample of tobacco company-generated emails for content and purpose. Results highlight four key findings about how tobacco companies use this type of marketing. First, tobacco companies frequently communicate with consumers through email. Sometimes this communication is as frequent as nine times per month which likely helps tobacco companies with brand reinforcement.

Second, tobacco company email marketing serves a variety of purposes. The most commonly identified purpose was promotion of a contest. Tobacco companies regularly run contests for free prizes and giveaways. Most of these prizes are small and have little value (e.g. a water bottle, t-shirt, or headphones). However, some prizes are much larger (e.g. a free trip or car). In order to enter to win a prize of any size, participants must login to the tobacco company website. Therefore, emails that promote contests give recipients reason to visit a tobacco company website where they can be exposed to additional marketing. Emails also frequently promoted content on tobacco industry websites such as recipes, blogs, and videos. Emails promoting contests and web content had subject lines like “A trip to NOLA is waiting... Enter for your chance to win” and “Discover the most unique night out in Dallas” from Marlboro and “You may just bag 1 of 600 deer antler kits” from Copenhagen. Emails also promoted coupons with subject lines like “Your next coupon is two clicks away” from Skoal. Coupons reduce the cost of tobacco products. This can reduce the public health impact of tobacco tax increases and encourage increased or continued tobacco use (see Fig. 1 for an example of a tobacco company email).

Third, tobacco companies use their email marketing databases to cross promote other products and causes. For example, Altria sends action and advocacy alerts under the umbrella of their Citizens for Tobacco Rights (CTR) group to those who've registered to receive marketing materials. Emails from CTR frequently encourage action against local tobacco control measures with subject lines like “Rally at the Capitol to fight the MN tobacco tax hike!”

Finally, promotion of menthol-flavored products was associated with a higher prevalence of coupon promotion. This is troubling as we know menthol cigarettes are disproportionately smoked by African Americans, women, and individuals of lower socioeconomic status (Carballo and Asman, 2011). Coupon promotion to these groups likely makes purchase of tobacco more accessible and could further worsen health disparities.

This study has limitations. Emails were coded by a single coder. However, variables were typically clear and easy to identify, and coding was straightforward. Also, the 85 registrations were not randomly selected but were selected for brand market share and surveillance.

Despite these limitations, results provide useful information about a form of tobacco marketing that is largely invisible, poorly understood, and identified as an area needing additional research (Cruz, 2009). Further, results provide a fuller picture of how this type of marketing fits into the broader context of tobacco promotion. For example, promotion of coupons through email marketing is another facet of tobacco companies' intense focus on promotions that reduce tobacco prices (Federal



Fig. 1. An email from Grizzly received on April 21, 2015 by an individual living in Minnesota, US. The subject line of this email was: “Enter the Experience DARK Challenge for Chances to Win.” This is an example of an email promoting multiple purposes. The DARK Challenge was a contest with a chance to win prizes such as a Polaris Ranger 6 × 6. Further down in the email is a coupon promotion. The majority of emails from tobacco companies are HTML emails, meaning they feature graphics, images, and are visually appealing to the reader.

Trade Commission, 2016a, 2016b). Understanding the full picture of how tobacco companies reach consumers is essential to developing counter marketing and prevention efforts.

5. Conclusions

Tobacco marketing is causally linked to tobacco use (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Direct marketing is one way tobacco companies avoid existing restrictions and reach

consumers. Further research is needed to understand how direct marketing is received by recipients and how tobacco companies use the medium to target specific populations. Deeper understanding of this type of marketing is needed to counter it and advance tobacco control.

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

Transparency document

The [Transparency document](#) associated with this article can be found, in the online version.

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