Health Warning Labels

The tobacco package is an essential communication vehicle for the tobacco industry

Tobacco companies depend on package design to build brand recognition and promote sales, especially because advertising for tobacco is becoming increasingly limited in many markets.

- Packaging establishes brand imagery that is often completely opposite to the realities and dangers associated with tobacco product use.[2] Tobacco companies create brand imagery which promotes ideals of status, wealth, sex appeal, glamour, slimness, manhood, athleticism and health, among many others.

- For the smoker, especially the teenage smoker, the tobacco product pack represents a badge that makes a statement about how he or she wants to be seen by others.[3]

The Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) requires effective health warning labels

The FCTC, the world's first global public health treaty, establishes a policy framework for reducing the devastating health and economic impacts of tobacco. Article 11 of the FCTC requires Parties to implement effective measures to warn against the harmful impact of tobacco use on all tobacco product packaging within three years after ratification. Implementation of a pictorial health warning label (HWL) policy presents no financial cost to governments; fees are borne by tobacco companies.

Global progress on the implementation of health warning labels

Governments have made extraordinary progress in improving tobacco HWLs by implementing measures as outlined by the Article 11 Guidelines of the WHO FCTC. As of November 1, 2016, at least 118 countries and jurisdictions have approved legislation requiring pictorial HWLs with a size of at least 30 percent of the principal display areas of the pack, printed on packages of cigarettes and, in some cases, other tobacco products such as cigars, waterpipe, smokeless tobacco, and loose tobacco. At least 108 countries and jurisdictions have finalized requirements for pictorial HWLs; however, not all of them have necessarily implemented the pictorial labels.

> "Our final communication vehicle with our smokers is the pack itself. In the absence of any other marketing messages, our packaging… is the sole communicator of our brand essence. Put another way: When you don't have anything else, our packaging is our marketing." [1]
>
> Mark Hulit, Phillip Morris Executive, 1994

FUMER CAUSE UNE MORT LENTE ET DOULOUREUSE

(Mauritius, 2009)

FUMER PROVOQUE LE CANCER DE POUMON
المبكرة التدخين يسبب الوفاة

(Chad, 2015)

COMPONENTS OF EFFECTIVE HEALTH WARNING LABELS*

COMPONENT	DESCRIPTION	IMPACT
Pictorials	Illustrate the harmful effects of tobacco use through pictures and/or pictograms.	Photos and strong graphics help smokers visualize the nature of a tobacco-caused disease better than words alone. Pictures are more likely to draw attention and are more likely to be remembered when an individual makes decisions about whether or not to smoke or cut back on smoking. Pictures are especially important in regions with low literacy or where research shows smokers are ignoring text-only HWLs. Pictorial HWLs are likely to reach children and adolescents, especially the children of smokers, who are particularly vulnerable.
Size	Cover at least 50 percent of the package's principal display areas.	Large messages are more likely to be noticed. Label effectiveness increases with size. Large labels provoke emotional responses and increase motivation to quit.
Location	Place HWLs on principal display areas (front and back—the largest panels of the package).	Messages in prominent locations are more likely to be noticed.
Message Content	List risk factors by highlighting harmful effects and impact of tobacco use and exposure to secondhand smoke. Include the magnitude of specific risks. Identify the addictive nature of tobacco. Use specific message content for different tobacco products (cigarette, cigars, smokeless, waterpipe).	Messages highlight the harmful effects of tobacco use and provide important public health information to the public, which may not be otherwise accessible. Messages eliciting unfavorable emotional associations about tobacco use are more believable and convincing.
Rotation and Number	Use multiple HWLs on all tobacco products concurrently or rotate them periodically.	Prevents overexposure and the audience becoming desensitized from a single image.
Color, Background and Font	Use full color. Contrast colors with the background and the text.	Maximizes visibility and ease of comprehension.
Cessation Information	Provide cessation advice and local quitline phone number and/or website.	Helps smokers to quit.
Language	Use the country's principal language(s).	Messages in all principal languages ensure a broader reach.
Source Attribution	HWL can identify a source, such as a national authority (*e.g.*, Minister of Health) that recommends the health messages.	Depending on the culture, attribution can add credibility to the message

*The components highlighted in this table are best practices derived from WHO's FCTC Article 11 Guidelines and The Tobacco Labelling & Packaging Toolkit produced by the Tobacco Labelling Resource Centre.

Key Messages

- Pictorial health warning labels effectively communicate the risks of tobacco use by increasing knowledge about risks associated with smoking, decreasing intentions to smoke among adolescents, persuading smokers to quit, and keeping ex-smokers from starting again.

- Effective health warning labels are large, clear, multiple, rotating, cover at least 50 percent of the total tobacco pack and consist of both text and graphic images.

- The WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control obligates Parties to implement large, clear, rotating pictorial health warning labels on all tobacco product packaging within three years of ratifying the treaty.

(Brazil, 2009)

References

1. Hulit M. Presentation at the May 17, 1994 Corporate Affairs Conference: Marketing Issues (internal industry document.) Philip Morris. 1994. Bates No. Bates No. 2504015017/5042. http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/jga42e00

2. Center for Behavioural Research in Cancer. Health warnings and contents labelling on tobacco products: Review, research and recomendations/ prepared by the Centre for Behavioural Research in Cancer. Report prepared for the Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy Tobacco Task Force on Tobacco Health Warnings on Content Labelling in Australia. Carlton South: The Center; 1992.

3. Cunningham R, Kyle K. The case for plain packaging. Tobacco Control. 1995;4(1):80-6.