

## Colin Noble

# Recruiting the young smoker

The advertising campaign to sell Regal cigarettes in the north of England based on the character of Reg has recently won the top award from the advertising industry. Research carried out in three high schools in Kirklees LEA with 11–15 year old pupils suggests that they are highly vulnerable to the advertisements. This comes at a time when the government has again postponed a decision to enforce an EC directive to ban the advertising of tobacco products.

It is widely accepted that the tobacco industry has to find 300 new smokers every day in order to replace the number who die from tobacco-related diseases. In this 'replacement' context, the young must be a target. Companies usually justify their advertising as "competing for their market share" and not promoting more smokers. However, the research in Kirklees shows that 73% of the young people see Reg as advertising cigarettes rather than Regal.

Many tobacco industry-watchers were initially puzzled by the nature of the Reg advertisements, which portray an overweight, middle-aged man with severely limited intelligence and lifestyle. How could such an image

be attractive to young people?

I carried out this research using questionnaires with 113 pupils in years 7, 8 and 10. The classes were in all cases mixed ability, with about 10% of the children being from Asian families.

The vast majority (85%) of the pupils were familiar with the 'Reg' advertisements, of whom about half liked the campaign, although the majority did not like Reg as a character and would not have liked him as a friend. However, they thought that Reg would be popular amongst his own friends and that he enjoyed life. The most important part of the survey found that of those who had seen the advertisements a consistent percentage, in the low forties, thought that they would influence young people and make them more likely to smoke. It was also clear that those who thought that Reg did not worry about life were also more likely to think that he would influence young people to smoke.

It is evident that the Regal campaigns do affect young people. Although Reg is not a character they admire or would want to emulate, he does have certain characteristics with which they identify — mainly those of enjoying himself and not worrying. Hence there seems to be an association between a stress-free, relaxed life and smoking.

The amount of pressure on young people in the Britain of today is considerable, and into this arena of doubt and anxiety comes Reg who, although a 'slob' (a description often used in the group discussions), does appear to have put all his troubles behind him with the help of Regal cigarettes.

This study supports three recommendations:

1. *That the government accepts that young adolescents are generally aware of tobacco advertisements and the messages they contain.*

2. *That larger-scale and more sophisticated studies be established to measure the impact of tobacco advertising on young people, particularly those more esoteric, non-tobacco-specific campaigns.*

3. *That the government prepares for a total ban on advertisements for all tobacco products should these urgently-needed surveys confirm the Kirklees findings.*

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