The Marlboro Man: The Making of an American Image

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Table of Contents

- Introduction
- From "Mild as May" to "Tough as Shoeleather"
- Marboro Man Meets the Surgeon General
- Promotions, Sports, and Fantasy Consumerism
- Bibliography

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Comments or Suggestions?
Philip Morris began a legacy of bold moves to meet market challenges by taking a virtually unknown woman's cigarette and reintroducing it with a new masculine face and filter in the midst of the first lung cancer reports. Marlboro was first introduced to the public in the 1920s behind the theme "Mild as May". The brand originally targeted a female audience through a series of ads in 1926 showing a feminine hand reaching for a cigarette (PM History 6). It faced trouble in the 1930s and attempted to rejuvenate itself with a clever advertising gimmick, changing the ivory tip to red in order not to smear ladies' lipstick. During World War II, however, the brand again faltered and had to be taken off the market. Three brands, Camel, Lucky Strike and Chesterfields surfaced with a firm hold on consumers after the war. Mass production in the late nineteenth century and the development of the corporation in the twenties had left "America transformed from a culture urging self-restraint to one built on immediate gratification through the ownership of goods and pursuit of leisure time." (JAH 1020). After the rationing of popular brands, such as Camel, and a severe shortage of tobacco during the war, the fifties were an exaggerated example of this change in American culture. Cigarettes were consumed in abundance. They were considered both glamorous and beneficial at the time and were promoted by headlines that read "For Digestion's sake smoke Camels." or "Lucky Strike-A Light Smoke." Differentials in price and make had existed for years without much shift in brand preference, indicating a marked inelasticity for certain brands. The market was not welcoming to new types of cigarettes and it was speculated that "smokers could be expected to stay with the same brand for a lifetime, unless provoked to change." (White 121).

Philip Morris saw its chance to reintroduce Marlboro in the early fifties when the first studies linking cigarette smoking to lung cancer were released. Consumers began feeling mislead by the established brands and dropped their old allegiances. They were willing to try other brands but were unable to break away from smoking completely, due to what would later be attributed to nicotine addiction. Disillusioned consumers turned to Marlboros, the new "safer" filtered brand. Ross B. Millhiser, president of Philip Morris in 1968, looked back on Marlboro's window of opportunity and explained that "the filter revolution caused more switching than all the cigarette manufacturers with all their money could have induced." (White 121) Unfortunately for Marlboro, formerly known to be "Mild as May", the new filters were considered effiminate. The dilemma would be to appeal to the attitudes of an old group of customers with a new concern, addicted men who feared lung cancer.

Philip Morris took the challenge to a midwestern agency, the Leo Burnett Company of Chicago, and reintroduced Marlboro to the nation in 1955 with the "Tattooed Man" campaign. Joseph Cullman, then president and chief executive officer of Philip Morris Inc., explained, "We felt that West of the Alleghanies we could secure a better understanding and feel of grass-roots America and what it wanted in a cigarette." (Esquire 8/60 146) The resulting campaign assured buyers, with television commercials and printed pages, that "You get a lot to like with Marlboro, filter, flavor, flip-top box." The image of the "new Marlboro smoker as a lean, relaxed outdoorsman--a cattle rancher, a Navy officer, a flyer--whose tattooed wrist suggested a romantic past, a man who had once worked with his hands, who knew the score, who merited respect," (Esquire 6/60 146) proved that there was nothing sissy or feminine about these filtered cigarettes. The first advertisements spoke directly to the masculine audience suggesting in a descriptive paragraph that they try "old fashioned flavor in a new way to smoke." They reassured men that the filter did not change Marlboro quality and the
Man-sized taste of honest tobacco comes full through. Smooth-drawing filter feels right in your mouth. Works fine but doesn't get in the way. Modern Flip-top box keeps every cigarette firm and fresh until you smoke it. (Made in Richmond, Virginia, from a new Marlboro Recipe) [Image 1]

Black and white full-page advertisements were divided between large blocks of information about the new filter and flip-top box and a close-up, weathered, handsome, face whose strong tattooed hand held a Marlboro cigarette. The brand name, printed bold and extra-large in its own blocked-out top section of the page was mirrored on a smaller scale in a pack of Marlboro cigarettes in the bottom corner of the page. The picture of the pack also had its own detailed copy, "New Flip-Top Box. Sturdy to keep cigarettes from crushing. No tobacco in your pocket. Up to date. Popular filter price." In a voice that was friendly, unpretentious and honest the Marlboro men gained the trust of millions. The "Tattooed Man" campaign was described by Cullman, as "virility without vulgarity, quality without snobbery" (Esquire 6/60). In New York after their introduction in 1955, Marlboro became the top selling filtered cigarette literally overnight, and eight months after the campaign opened, sales had increased 5,000 per cent (Esquire 6/60).

The "Tattooed Man" campaign provided a diverse pool of working men as applicants for the final Marlboro representative. In the first years of advertisements public responses to the different personalities were monitored and the cowboy gradually emerged as the most popular character. Repetition and clear, compelling imagery through the years became key factors in Marlboro's keen brand identification today. "Frequent repetition is necessary to impress the sales message so deeply that it will affect buying behavior even when the logical content of the message is forgotten." (Tennant 170). The Leo Burnett Company began building a foundation of knowledge for the consumer to be reemphasized every time the Marlboro man was seen. Thus, the first time the public met the Marlboro cowboy he was not the silent image of advertisements today; he had to explain himself and his product. Life magazine ran a three page spread [Image 2] in January 1957 entitled "The Marlboro Man. What's he like..." The next two pages contained a eight-frame story board with different action shots of the plump, middle-aged cowboy still donning the tattooed hand, but wearing western boots, hat and a business suit. The top of the page reads, "The Marlboro Man speaks for himself..." He takes the reader on a tour of his ranch and describes Marlboro's filter, flavor, and flip-top box in a casual monologue. He introduces himself, "I'm a rancher. Grew up in this part of the country..." and his Western way of life, "Own my own ranch...ride from one end of it to the other every day...I like the life a man leads out here... the good feeling of being your own boss." At the precise moment the reader begins to get jealous, the tactful Marlboro man redirects the conversation to a more familiar topic, "Like to smoke, too. [He's a lot like you] My brand's MARLBORO. In my book, it's a lot of cigarette..." The connection between the West, being one's own boss and smoking Marlboros is made in four frames and then supported by the reader's new friend, the Marlboro Man, and his promise of a quality that appeals to every man, from the "easy-drawing filter" to the box which keeps loose tobacco "out of a man's pocket". Finally, he directly addresses the reader as he takes a draw of his cigarette, "You know what they say about MARLBORO, don't you? 'You get a lot to like.' Well that's how it is living on a ranch. You'd like that, too." By spelling out the image in this first introduction, and by repeating the educational information through the years, the Marlboro Man would never again have to explicitly ask the question, "You know what they say about Marlboro?" A narrowing process followed over the next forty years where this cowboy was recognized in a slew of campaigns. He taught the consumer about filters, promoted the flip-top box, enticed women to try "the cigarette made for men that women like", explained that long white ashes are a sign of good tobacco, and invited us to
relax. Eventually he could be silent and his reputation and familiarity would beckons us without words to come with him to a place we would come to know well, Marlboro Country.

Philip Morris, with the Marlboro cowboy, has capitalized on what the cigarette advertising industry realized as an unique quality in its products. "The physical characteristics of the standard brands are nearly identical and their individual demands are highly elastic, yet despite close similarity, consumers are not indifferent to the choice of brands but show enduring loyalties based upon very slight physical differences or upon irrational grounds." (Tennant 163). The irrational appeal of the strong individual is bolstered by the strong geometric design of the red, white and black-lettered flip-top package. It was designed by Frank Gianinnoto in 1954 and carefully tested through consumer surveys by Elmo Roper&Associates and the Color Research Institute. (Advertising Age 11/9/88) When displayed on open cigar counters consumer reaction was gauged on hidden cameras as their eyes settled on the bright packaging (Esquire 6/60). Like a cowboy's holster for his favorite gun the packaging makes a statement. It is estimated that the average smoker removes his or her cigarettes 20-25 times a day. In 1987, Thirty-two years after the box was designed, Forbes magazine (2/9/87) polled smokers and offered them Marlboro cigarettes unaltered except in a generic brown box and at half price. Only 21% were interested. The public embraced the red box as a symbol of membership to the club that recognized the Marlboro Man as their spokes-person. A 1959 ad showed the Flip-top box as a unifying element "From the Klondike to Key West.... Every man is a 'Marlboro Man' once he discovers that Marlboro is for real smoking." [Image 3]. The box is a carrying card available to everyone. It is visible proof of participation in or appreciation for a certain idealized way of life that not many actually get to experience. Consumers carrying the box were now investing themselves and their reputation in the positive image of the Marlboro Man.
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process followed over the next forty years where this cowboy was recognized in a slew of campaigns. He taught the consumer about filters, promoted the flip-top box, enticed women to try "the cigarette made for men that women like", explained that long white ashes are a sign of good tobacco, and invited us to relax. Eventually he could be silent and his reputation and familiarity would beckons us without words to come with him to a place we would come to know well, Marlboro Country.

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Promotions mean exposure, an important element in advertising, of which Marlboro has taken full advantage. Marlboro has gained allies in the art and entertainment world by sponsoring sales promotions on its packs that donate money to local museums and by budgeting money toward cultural recipients from the American Crafts Museum to the Dance Theater of Harlem. (Business Week 8/8/88) New York's Lincoln Center for performing Arts, in 1987 allowed a huge banner advertising the Marlboro Country Music Festival featuring Dolly Parton, Alabama, and the Judds, to hang on the front of the public building flashing the red and white triangular logo of Marlboro cigarettes. The Country Music Festival banner follows the Marlboro Western image, but like the Marlboro Country ads the placement of the banner, hanging in New York, shows the appeal is not limited to a country Western audience.

Before the ban of cigarette commercials in 1972, Philip Morris sponsored television events including the weekly coast to coast pro-football and championship playoffs, Perry Mason, Rawhide, a western series, and Troubleshooters, an adventure-thriller.(Esquire 1960). Mike Wallace's Night Beat, sponsored by Marlboro after it's first night on the air, embodied the qualities the company was looking to associate itself with, "Shock impact, originality, a talented reporter obviously in the ascendant...and an intimation of public service through fearless reporting"(Esquire 1960). After the ban, Marlboro chose sports events for their promotions. Once off the TV air waves, the company stopped sponsoring big, team sports such as football and baseball which were sponsored by other cigarette companies. Marlboro preferred to be the solo sponsor of solo sports. Emphasizing the rough individual, Marlboro invited all of its patrons who sat safe at home smoking Marlboros from the red and white pack to feel a part of the win each of the 28 times Marlboro Formula One driver, Alan Prost, crossed the finish line.(PM History 38) Sponsorship became a clever way to get around the restrictions. During the 1989 Grand Prix, a promotional sign for Marlboro that hung by the track was clearly visible for 46.17 minutes of NBC's 93.62 minute coverage of the event.(Channels 1/1990).

Sports and outdoors gear is a logical extension in the minds of consumers who have grown to know the Marlboro Man and his wild country. A promotion that saved the number one brand during the recession of the early 1990s featured the essence of the Marlboro Man's adventure and virility. During the recession, while "brands in other industries faltered, tobacco's image-mongers persuaded smokers not just to remain loyal but to accept huge, twice yearly price hikes"(The Economist 4/10/93) based on the notion that cigarettes were "price inelastic" and the big names would remain competitive no matter what the price. The $.80 to $1.00 gap between premium brands and generics had become too much and consumers were switching to generics at an alarming rate. In 1981 discount cigarettes claimed none of the market, but by 1993 they occupied more than 30%. (Economist 4/10/93). Frugal shoppers were switching to unknown brands and not switching back even as the recession waned. Afraid that they would permanently lose their market share which plunged with the brand's share of shipment volume from 26% in 1989 to 21.3% in 1993(Advertising Age 4/5/93), Philip Morris announced a plan which has been deemed their "biggest gamble with the almost priceless Marlboro franchise"(Brandweek 11/12/93). The plan included a twice extended $200 million promotion as well as price cuts totalling up to 60 cents a pack to narrow the margin between the generic brands.

The promotion, Marlboro Adventure Team, advertised in ten page brochures to distributors, posters,
high-tech exhibits, buttons and special packaging, features a group of ten outdoorsmen who hike and bike through the Southwest. Consumers were invited to participate and team up with the adventurers. An accountant working in the basement of a New York firm could earn 'miles' by saving specially marked UPC codes on Marlboro packs and vicariously enjoy the life of a Marlboro Man roughing it in the mountains. The miles redeemable for licensed sportswear and gear, "an upscale outdoorsy set [which] includes heavy parkas, fleece pullovers, sleeping bags, rainsuits, Swiss Army watches, carabineer key chains and all-weather lighters." (Brandweek 12/14/92). The promotion countered R.J. Renyold's, Philip Morris' greatest competitor's, Camel Cash promotion which offered trendy, hip, quirky Joe Camel products. Ironically, the "Adventure Team" promotion was the first and only period in which advertising did not show the Marlboro man or smokers.

The dramatic price cut, called 'Marlboro Friday' on Wall Street, caused Philip Morris stock to drop from $64.12 to $49.37, a 23% drop that represented a one day loss of $13 billion in shareholder equity and left 30 points attributable to Philip Morris alone in a drop of 68.83 points in the Dow Jones industrial average. (Advertising Age 3/26/94). Experts were skeptical of the plan, noting the expense of $2.4 billion in Philip Morris USA's 1993 operating income, but Marlboro had increased its market share to 26.8% from an all time low of 22.1% in just nine months--in a market place where every share point is valued at $450 million. (Brandweek 3/28/94). Philip Morris could afford the investment in its future. Ellen Merlo, vice president of corporate affairs, expressed that "from the visibility, awareness, and number of participants [consumers ordered 14 million Adventure Team items]--this promotion is if not the most successful, one of the most successful promotions ever run in the package-goods industry," (Advertising Age 12/28/93).

Philip Morris and Marlboro know what they are talking about when they mention visibility, awareness, and advertising success. Along with their foresight and gumption to boldly meet challenges in the market place, their advertisements have also kept the public's interest, by retaining and refining the same image and visibility for almost forty years. While others have varied, Marlboro remained consistent, clear and compelling in it's imagery. Marlboro has used tactics as simple as giving away a Marlboro Sports Calendar with sports fans team listings, and as involved as the latest "Country Store Gear" sales, a scaled down version of "Marlboro Adventure Team"[Image 9] which invites participants to "Head out, Ride Hard, Kick Back and Gear Up". A multimillion dollar glossy quarterly, Philip Morris Magazine, is distributed free to more than five million customers at the net cost of $1.75 million/issue (White 131). Sponsorship of events secures strong allies in the struggle against anti-smoking legislation, and sales of promotional gear provide contacts and an enormous mailing list in case of a future ban on printed cigarette advertisements.

The unarguable backbone of America's attraction to Marlboro cigarettes, however, remains the Marlboro cowboy. Men claim him as their own and want to live his life. In a 1995 Playboy two-page spread [Image 10] the Marlboro men share a secret with the masculine audience, "Behind every good story, there's a man who has lived it. Come to Marlboro Country." Young lifestyles also mesh with the "contemporary, confident, self-assured, daring, adventurous, mature" (White 124) cowboy. John Benson, former account executive for Leo Burnett, believes the "Marlboro cowboy dispels ...the myth [that] in order to attract young people you've got to show young people." (White 124). Women too are drawn to the masculine image. During the "Country Store" promotion, where the company advertises boots, spurs, hats and jackets in a catalog and order form, Benson relates a time when they received a letter from three women in Texas ordering a cowboy. (White 127)
From his first appearance as the "tattooed man" to present images where he races into the sunset on his horse with no more than a hint of what is being sold, the brand name or red package, the Marlboro man has weathered forty years of successful advertising[Image 11]. He has taught the public about filters, promoted the red flip-top box, sold gear and sympathized with each generation's sensibilities. He encompasses years of educational information about cigarette make, quality, and about the Marlboro company, in a single image and with the keenest brand identification to date. Selling a product that is deadly, in a market that is increasingly unforgiving and restricted, the Marlboro Man stands proud against the odds as an icon of rugged individualism and of an ideal lifestyle that appeals to all Americans.

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