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BY LINE CAREN FRENCH
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**** REPORT ON PUBLIC RELATIONS ****
**** How they'd like a burning issue ****
**** IMAGE REPAIR - Most practitioners questioned would urge ****
**** Tobacco industry to concentrate on fair pay ****

BY CAREN FRENCH

Special to The Globe and Mail

LAWYERS, politicians, journalists and comedian Rodney Dangerfield while incessantly about the problem of getting no respect. But if there is one job that above all others cries out for image repair, it is that of the tobacco industry executives.

With smoking under siege across North America, Canadian tobacco bosses have found themselves in the curious position of selling a legal product, which pays a whopping - although recently slashed - tax bill while, at the same time, being measured for coming shots on America's Most Wanted. But while industry reaction in Canada has been to fume quietly, south of the border the response has been sulphurous.

From advertorials in small-town media and giant spreads in The Wall Street Journal to industry-backed "demo days" for matches on Capitol Hill, the U.S. tobacco industry has very publicly "fired up." The most recent battleground - certainly not to the choosing of the defenders - was a congressional hearing where tobacco mandarins were grilled over allegedly spiking their product to make it more addictive. The confused performance by the industry gawk - for one awful moment caught like rabbits in the headlights as an asthmatic child pleaded for breathable air - was a Doonesbury dream and a nightmare for cigarette makers in Canada.

Asked how they might advise cigarette makers, Canadian public relations practitioners - none currently representing the industry - understandably responded with all the enthusiasm of blindfolded lapdancers invited to perform in a minefield.

Not only was the tobacco conundrum seen as unique - without the damage control avenues offered by short-term crises such as poisoned Tylenol or polluted Panna - or evolving issues such as pain by the forest industry to log private deer clear tracks, but it posed potent internal conflicts for respondents. At least one respondent who, on this question, asked to remain anonymous, said his firm would refuse to represent tobacco rather than risk a multiplicity of the only industry that he is aware of that would likely decline - "in its part of the area of political correctness."

In considering their responses - offered cautiously in the absence of vital research - most practitioners urged that industry chiefs concentrate on the issues of fair pay and discrimination ahead of disputes over health hazards.

"There are fundamental issues of freedom involved," said David Weiner, a Toronto partner of National Public Relations Inc., a Montreal-based public relations firm. He said that despite the aggressive "advertorial" campaign by tobacco companies in the United States, "I'm surprised the Americans have not made a bigger issue of that (freedom of choice)."

All respondents urged direct contact with smokers. Most urged that the message - if not the delivery - be national and not regional in scope. But there was disagreement over whether the Canadian tobacco industry should take a leaf out of the U.S. book and become more high profile.

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The public message should be answered, Mr. Anderson said. But he thinks the best thing you can do is let your own people speak for themselves and help clean up the mess. Your PR firm should be making sure the world knows you are helping to be part of the solution.

Shearon Phelan & Hoyle, a New York-based PR firm, is handling communications and public relations for the MGS. Unlike its public relations management program, would go a step further.

The incredible arguments delivered by the U.S. tobacco bosses in the recent hearings were proof that it's time to abandon the old defenses and move rapidly to new ground, he said.

"I would say to a client's show time. You have to be able to say something positive and not to maintain simply a defensive stance."

Delivery of the message might be different in Quebec, French-speaking Canadians in general are more comfortable with U.S. in your face image during that the rest of Canada, Mr. Phelan said.

"That's largely a function of language," which, curiously, gives French speakers more licence to be publicly assertive and "American" than their softer-spoken Anglo siblings.

But when it comes to content, the message should be consistent across Canada. That message should focus on the future - even if it means risking a flood of legal claims, Mr. Phelan said.

The only thing I could advise them to say is that we are getting out of the tobacco industry. You can couch that in softer terms. You can say we are doing it by spending more money on research to find out more about any possible dangers of use of the product."

The offer might dovetail with a shift from smoking products into pharmaceuticals, he said.

Vancouver's Jean Gormier, president of Gormier Communications Inc., would not give up the ship.

"There is room for the industry to promote the concept of smoking in moderation. The public is used to such campaigns - by beer and liquor companies." Such a strategy would appear to a lot of people and position the tobacco industry as being responsible.

When speaking directly to their audiences, tobacco representatives might focus on the issue of freedom of speech, he said. "As long as the product is legal, why should there be restrictions in communicating about it?"

At the same time, the industry could factually, but quietly, support smokers' rights groups and sponsor a group that would compare the societal costs of smoking versus those the state might incur if people were not smoking.

Mr. Gormier said such an investigation might discover that people who have large amounts of chronic diseases that reduce even more health care.

If that's the case, even the tobacco cloud could have a silver lining.

ADDED SEARCH TERMS

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Canada, United States

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