

Slide 1

Get 'em when they're young, keep 'em when they're old: Menthol's role in initiating and sustaining tobacco use

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140th Annual Meeting of the
American Public Health Association
October 27-31, 2012
San Francisco, CA

Slide 2

Presenter Disclosures

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(1) The following personal financial relationships with commercial interests relevant to this presentation existed during the past 12 months:

No relationships to disclose

Slide 3

Research Questions

1. Are/were menthol cigarettes marketed with health reassurance messages?
2. How do smokers tend to view menthol cigarettes?
3. What are the perceived sensory and taste rewards of menthol?
 - 3a. Do menthol's perceived sensory and taste rewards relate to initiation?
 - 3b. Do menthol's perceived sensory and taste rewards relate to quitting?

3

Slide 7

1. Messages: Health Reassurance

The following are the key obstacles to overcome:

A. KOOL must move into the health reassurance segment so that 45% of KOOL business will be in the perceived product safety arena by 1982 which will approximate the 45% of total smokers who will be smoking hi-fi products by 1982.

Brown & Williamson (estimated), 1978, vsm6600 (nd)

7

Slide 8

2. Consumer Perceptions of Menthol

There were indications that the menthol smokers subconsciously perceived menthol cigarettes as being healthier. There was somewhat of a "health image" associated with menthol, related to its masking of the tobacco taste, and its association with medicine, colds, and sore throats.

Bates Barton Durstine & Osborn, 1957, bdb31400 (nd)

Rides on the connotation that menthol has health overtones

Brown & Williamson, 1978, vsm2100 (nd)

It is interesting to note that several respondents began smoking menthol cigarettes when they had a cold because their regular brand was too harsh. One respondent believed that "menthol cigarettes are better for you".

Brown & Williamson, 1980, bdb2300 (nd)

8

Slide 9

2. Consumer Perceptions of Menthol

Brand switching has resulted in a 13% gain for Menthols which is larger than the 8% for all F&B brands, the only types gaining from claimed switching.

FROM (Q.5c)	WHY SWITCHED TO (Q.5e)
Pall Mall Gold	I started smoking Kools when I had a cold. It felt good so I kept on smoking them.

Lorillard, 1972, ysm7600 (nd)

9

Slide 10

2. Consumer Perceptions of Menthol

First of all, mentholated cigarettes are considered relatively mild.
While some brands are "strong" in comparison to other mentholated brands, all brands are seen as "mild" compared to non-mentholated brands. The mentholated cigarette is perceived as soothing in its effect on the throat, a smooth, cool, smoking sensation compared with a harsh, irritating sensation produced by non-mentholated cigarettes.

Because of its relative mildness, several respondents report that they can smoke a mentholated cigarette the first thing in the morning.
Whereas doing this with a non-mentholated cigarette produces unpleasant results, smoking a mentholated one does not.

RJ Reynolds, 1973 (66) 40027600

Slide 11

3. Sensation and Taste

Original reason for menthol was therapeutic -- providing a refreshing alternative to hot, harsh tobacco taste of existing brands

Product should provide a smooth smoking experience that is easy to adapt to

Scott Allen & Hamilton, 1990, p.13289 (65)

Menthol smokers want to smoke a "refreshing" cigarette.

- they tend to define refreshment primarily as coolness plus smoothness/mildness
- they smoke menthol cigarettes primarily to avoid negatives they associate with non-menthol smoking, i.e., harshness, dryness, hot taste, unpleasant aftertaste.
- menthol is not a major benefit in itself but a means to achieve the benefits they want -- coolness, smoothness/mildness, fresh, clean taste and aftertaste.

RJ Reynolds, 1988, 40049200 (66)

Slide 12

3a. Initiation

- 1) FIRST-TIME SMOKER REACTION IS GENERALLY NEGATIVE
 - FOREIGN TASTE
 - HARSH/BITTER
 - ADOPTION REQUIRES SLOW ACCLIMATION
- 2) INITIAL NEGATIVES CAN BE ALLEVIATED WITH A LOW LEVEL OF MENTHOL
 - REDUCES HARSHNESS/BITTERNESS
 - TAKES EDGE OFF FLAVOR
 - PREVIOUS TASTE EXPERIENCE
 - TRADITIONAL AND MAINTAINS INTEGRITY

RJ Reynolds, 1988 (66) 40049200

Slide 13

3a. Initiation

Menthol brands have been said to be good starter products because new smokers appear to know that menthol covers up some of the tobacco taste and they already know what menthol tastes like, via-a-vis candy. The level of menthol in the product is, however, critical. A product having a moderate to high menthol taste will usually be rejected by starters, while the same level will be quite acceptable to established menthol smokers. Indeed, this is the dilemma which 800L KS and 100s face today.

Brown & Williamson, 1987 (id) p6/100

13

Slide 14

3a. Initiation

In rejecting the "regular" cigarette taste, the smokers are referring back to their own experiences. These young smokers began smoking the "popular" brands, Winston, Marlboro, Tarcyton and Kents, etc., and moved to menthols for a variety of reasons or circumstances; the rejection of tobacco taste, the search for a "milder" cigarette, personal influence, or the circumstances of having a cold and wanting to continue smoking, but being unable to "handle" the hot taste of cigarettes in an already irritated throat.

RJ Reynolds, 1978 (id) 68/49,00

14

Slide 15

3b. Cessation

reasons. Generally when a respondent reported that he made a conscious decision to switch to a mentholated brand it was because of some problem, minor or major. For instance, many switched to mentholated cigarettes because of throat irritation, colds, coughs or chronic bronchitis. Sometimes respondents saw smoking a mentholated brand as the only alternative to giving up smoking altogether.

William Day, 1971, wa37/600 (id)

Menthol smokers express slightly less desire to quit smoking than do non-menthol smokers--29% would like to quit, versus 43% of non-menthol smokers.

Roper Organization, 1979, ro466/00 (id)

15

Slide 22

Implications

- Menthol's
 - flavor,
 - sensation, and
 - perceived reduced risk and social acceptability attract young initiates, and de-motivate quitting in smokers who may otherwise quit.
- Making cigarettes more attractive to new smokers and less desirable to quit among established smokers contributes to the incidence of tobacco-related diseases and to the public health burden.

22
