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Tob. Control 2009;18:333-334
doi:10.1136/tc.2009.030510

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Sean Penn and American Spirits in a Vanity Fair feature: blurring journalism and cigarette advertising

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Received 24 March 2009
Accepted 8 April 2009

Sean Penn is one of the great actors of our time. He is also a heavily addicted smoker, and he uses his real-life smoking to convey independence and rebelliousness. Penn entered the film scene in the early 1980s, and by the mid-1980s, the tobacco industry had identified him as one of the next generation of actors who could be useful in perpetuating the rebel smoker image developed by James Dean and Marlon Brando in the 1950s,¹ and perpetuated during the 1960s and 1970s by stars such as John Cassavetes.

Like Penn, Cassavetes had a strong streak of independence; he is considered one of the pioneers of independent film. During the early 1980s, when Penn first started appearing in movies, the tobacco industry was heavily involved in paid product placement, and Cassavetes, to whom Penn dedicated his first movie (*The Indian Runner*), was an object of these deals. As an example, a 1981 letter from Brown & Williamson's brand placement agency confirmed that, in exchange for \$163 000 (2009 value) paid to the producers of the film *Tempest*,² Cassavetes and his wife, the actress Gina Rowland:

"...will both use Barclays cigarettes in such a way that the packages will be readily identifiable by movie-goers, as well as future cable television, video cassette, video disc, and network viewers".

While it is not clear that the John Cassavetes-big tobacco connection seeded interest in Sean Penn, internal memos during that time focused on Penn's public persona exemplifying the brand appeal needed to override younger people's caution about smoking's risks. In a 1986 brand strategy presentation, Camel's ad agency³ noted that:

"...among younger smokers...18-20...movies provide idols and role models (Dirty Harry, Sean Penn), who represent independence and rebellion, but within the constraints of society".

Brown & Williamson, brainstorming a new brand to compete with Marlboro, identified Penn as one of the "Prototypes of Contemporary Masculinity...sexy, scruffy, not clean-cut...street-wise more than sophisticated".⁴ Given the clear interest in Penn, it is no surprise that tobacco industry documents link several 1980s films in which he appeared to paid tobacco product placement:

- *Racing with the Moon* (1984, Paramount) Studio writes Reynolds "seeking permission to use a vintage Camel cigarette billboard" in the film (such placement may have been tacitly predicated on a consideration from the tobacco

company to the film production or studio, with permission to use trademarks as formal cover).⁵

- *Casualties of War* (1989, Columbia) American Tobacco reports that it supplied the production with Pall Mall and Lucky Strike.⁶
- *We're No Angels* (1989, Paramount) "Results" reported by American Tobacco's placement agency: "Sean Penn and Robert De Niro stop into a general store where they ask for a pack of Lucky Strikes".⁷

For his tobacco industry admirers, Penn hasn't disappointed in the public arena. He garnered immense media attention when he defied the French smoking ban at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival, where he headed the film jury, by lighting a cigarette at their first press conference.⁸ Our curiosity was sparked when we saw him puffing away on the cover of the Special Berlinale issue of *Vanity Fair* (fig 1), prominently displayed at a Hamburg airport news-stand.

The interview with Penn took place in Los Angeles and was the lead story in the print issue, but was not posted on the *Vanity Fair* website. Within the article were an additional four photos, three showing Penn smoking, with one identifying his brand, American Spirit. One of the inside photos was a reproduction of the cover photo with the caption, "A Rebel Thawing". The other two served to flesh out one object of Penn's rebelliousness, American smoking bans and his association with American Spirit. In fig 2 Penn is shown smoking with the caption, "What is Sean Penn's opinion on American smoking bans? He smokes an American Spirit". Figure 3 shows a colour photo of Penn smoking, with his feet propped up on the table and a pack of American Spirits at his feet. There are also references to American Spirit within the text of the article: "At the time he lights up an American Spirit, he reports that he has read a newspaper report this morning on the intent to ban smoking outdoors in California. 'Unbelievable,' he says laughing, 'I was sitting outside on my terrace, smoking, when I read this'".

American Spirit is a brand of cigarette manufactured in the USA by the Santa Fe Natural Tobacco Company (a Reynolds American Subsidiary). For the record, in response to a direct inquiry from the authors, Santa Fe Natural Tobacco Company said that, "[W]e do not have any agreement with Mr. Penn or his representatives regarding tobacco products (or anything else), nor have we ever supplied tobacco products to him gratis or at a discount". Santa Fe declined to disclose how much it was spending with *Vanity Fair* or the Condé Nast publications group "due to the proprietary nature of advertising plans" (Mark

Ad watch



Figure 1 Cover of the special Berlinale edition of Vanity Fair with the caption: Sean Penn, A Man With a Mission.



Figure 2 Inside picture of Penn smoking with the caption (next to the cigarette), "What is Sean Penn's opinion on American smoking bans? He smokes an American Spirit".



Figure 3 Second inside picture of Penn endorsing American Spirits while smoking.

Smith, Santa Fe Natural Tobacco Company, Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA; personal communication). However, the same month, *Vanity Fair* (USA) carried an American Spirit advertising insert costing \$114 000.⁹ Whether or not money changes hands, feature articles such as these have to be extremely valuable to the industry by tying its product to a celebrity and everything he stands for. And whether or not it is true, such feature articles serve to make a fine actor look like an industry shill.

Funding: Funding was received from the European Commission and Ministry of Health of the Federal Republic of Germany.

Competing interests: None.

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