

# Philip Morris to Push Brand on Gay Media

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By Joanne Lipman

The tobacco industry, after being beaten back in its controversial efforts to woo blacks and women, may be turning its marketing muscle on another minority: homosexuals.

In a move that could prompt renewed fury over tobacco marketing, industry giant, Philip Morris Cos. Next month will unveil Benson & Hedges Special Kings - an 85-millimeter of its longer, upscale smoke - with ads directed in part at the homosexual market. Among other publications, the brand's introductory ad campaign is scheduled to appear in the October/November issue of *Genre*, a fashion and lifestyle magazine for homosexual men. The ad campaign apparently marks the first time that a major tobacco company has advertised in the national gay press.

Philip Morris stressed that its new Kings brand, scheduled to be introduced Sept. 7, is geared to young, affluent smokers, not just homosexuals. Philip Morris plays down advertising in homosexual magazines, saying *Genre* represents only a tiny fragment of a media plan that includes such mass publications as *Esquire* and *GQ*. The brand is designed for smokers 21 to 34, male and female, a spokeswoman said. "*Genre* happens to reach part of the market we're looking for."

Yet the move to advertise in the national gay press is unprecedented for a tobacco company as conservative as stodgy Philip Morris, the very company behind the macho Marlboro Man. It reflects the economic realities facing all tobacco marketers today. Smoking continues to decline at a rapid clip and loyalty to premium-based brands is eroding.

The gay market, meanwhile, "has more brand loyalty and discretionary dollars," says Don Tuthill, *Genre*'s publisher. "We're the people who spend a few more dollars, and we'd probably switch brands" to support a marketer that caters to homosexuals.

Philip Morris's plans to include the homosexual-oriented publication in its advertising is already inflaming critics. "We're opposed to any kind of targeting, whether its youth, women, blacks, Hispanics and now gays," said Scott Ballin a spokesman for the anti-smoking group Coalition for Smoking or Health, when told of the cigarette giant's campaign.

For the critics, Philip Morris's pursuit of homosexuals is reminiscent of efforts of the rival RJR Nabisco to target blacks and blue-collar women. More than two years ago the public outcry over those plans forced RJR to shelve *Uptown*, a smoke targeted to blacks. Shortly afterward, RJR also succumbed to public pressure and dumped *Dakota*, a sort of female version of Marlboro designed to appeal to "virile females".

Philip Morris's effort - even as part of a far broader marketing mix - amounts to "the same thing," Mr. Ballin contended.

Yet the homosexual market may be too tempting to pass up, particularly for Benson & Hedges. The brand has been hemorrhaging share points in recent years, despite a switch in ad agencies and campaigns in an attempt to revive it. Currently, Benson & Hedges is the eight-largest brand in the US with a 3.2% share, according to the Maxwell Consumer Report. Among homosexual men, though, Benson & Hedges is the second most popular brand, with an 11% share, according to *Overlooked Opinions*, a Chicago consulting firm specializing in the homosexual and lesbian market.

"It might be an aggressive strategy to resuscitate the brand" by openly courting the homosexual market, suggested Edward Popper, dean of Aurora Illinois University's School of Business and Professional Studies. But he warned: "It is a risky strategy. There are enough homophobes out there that if they saw it as a "gay product: they wouldn't smoke the brand. Philip Morris is risking that franchise."

At Philip Morris, though, the spokeswoman scoffs at these concerns. "No marketing decisions were based on "gay affinity" for the Benson & Hedges brand" she said. "The whole thing is very simple, the only reason we're in this publication is because it reached young adult males, aspirational, with higher-than-average-income."

In any case, other broad-based marketers have taken the risk without any major backlash. Absolut vodka was one of the first advertisers to test the waters with ads in gay publications, and is now one of the biggest advertisers in the gay press. Other advertisers in the current issue of Genre - which features a cover story called "Mr. & Mr. Jackson-Paris," about a Mr. Universe and his model "husband," include Virgin Atlantic Airways, Hiram Walker & Son's Inc., Opal Nera Sambuca, Naya bottled water and Carillion Importers Bombay Sapphire gin.

Philip Morris's choice to advertise in the homosexual publication is another "sign that the tide is turning. Major marketers are beginning to understand the niche market mentality," says Genre's Mr. Tuthill. "It's a very significant turning point."

Mr. Tuthill full expects backlash from activists incensed that the tobacco giant would market a potentially lethal product to homosexuals. Already, the homosexual population appears to have a higher incidence of smoking than the general population. Just over 25% of adult's nationwide smoke, according to the Centers for Disease Control's Office on Smoking and Health. But about 27% of adult homosexuals smoke, estimates Overlooked Opinions. And Genre has already gotten complaints for taking so many liquor ads, which critics say contributes to alcoholism among homosexuals. But Mr. Tuthill - whose magazine - of course, relies on attracting national advertisers of any stripe for survival - defends the rights of so-called sin products to target homosexuals. It's the people not the products, that cause problems, he insisted. "We all have a choice; we can choose to smoke or not to smoke. We can't be everybody's keeper."