



Selling Tobacco to Women

For most of the past 500 years, during which tobacco, the sacred plant of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, has been commercialized, smoking has been primarily associated with men. Public opinion discouraged women from smoking. Women who smoked were assumed to have loose morals and this reduced their chances of marriage at a time when marriage was regarded as the primary objective of women. Apparently, some suggested tobacco could put a moustache on a woman or cause insanity among women. A woman could even be arrested for smoking in public.

All of this changed during the 20th century. First, the development of machine made cigarettes and new ways of processing tobacco made cigarettes more palatable (and more addictive). Their wide distribution to soldiers in World War I, greatly expanded the number of smokers, and tobacco companies spent millions in advertising aimed at exploiting the image of the brave, smoking soldier. It worked – sales to men went through the roof. If advertising could work on men, why not on women?

The tobacco companies hired a psychoanalyst named Dr. Brill to help them change the social attitudes about women and smoking. He suggested freedom and liberation as central themes that would appeal to women. The companies hired celebrities to endorse these themes and to smoke in public. Later they added a focus on beauty (particularly weight control) and sexual appeal. Again the advertising hit the mark – cigarette sales to women increased dramatically.

The following images all come from marketing campaigns designed to increase smoking among women. Similar images are viewable online at

