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Industry watch

The alchemy of Marlboro: transforming 'light' into 'gold' in Mexico

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In fulfilling its obligations under Article 11 of the FCTC treaty, Mexico has passed federal regulations and joined a growing list of over 50 countries that have prohibited 'light' and 'mild' brand descriptors on cigarette packaging. Starting in September, the regulations will also require pictorial warning labels on the upper 30% of the cigarette package and text-only warnings on 100% of both one side and the back of the package. This legislation also prohibited outdoor and point of purchase advertising, which has led to cigarette pack displays in areas previously dedicated to other point-of-sale advertising (see figure 1).



Figure 1 Point-of-sale display in Mexico City, January 2010.

Marlboro, which controls more than half of the Mexican tobacco market,¹ has removed 'light', 'medium' and 'mild' descriptors from its cigarette packaging in response to this legislation. Anecdotal evidence from tobacco vendors in Mexico City indicates that Marlboro distributors have instructed vendors to inform consumers about the white space around the Marlboro chevron as signifying the now-removed brand descriptors. The new Marlboro lights package has even eliminated the Philip Morris symbol and de-emphasised the distinctive Marlboro chevron. The descriptor 'Gold' has replaced 'Lights' and now serves as the link to the gold chevron, which is now only faintly echoes its previous presence. In early 2010, 'transitional' packages began circulating, wherein the original graphic presentation is printed on the cellophane packaging, without the Light descriptor, and with a transparent earmark in the upper right corner to show the new package (see figure 2). This new packaging design in Mexico may signal a new strategy for Marlboro lights in countries that ban misleading descriptors.

As descriptive terms are eliminated, the industry appears to be using colours and dedicating more white space to cigarette packaging in order to continue misleading consumers about the risks of their products.^{2,3} A 1990 internal document from Philip Morris states as much: "as one moves down the delivery sector, then the closer to white a pack tends to become. This is because white is generally held to convey a clean healthy association".⁴ In the last few years, major, new and repackaged brand families in Mexico have introduced many 'middle range' sub-brands (eg, medium, mild, blue, smooth, silver) to occupy the space between regular and light



Figure 2 Marlboro Lights, 'transitional' Marlboros and the new Marlboro Gold, Mexico 2010.

cigarettes. In the absence of linguistic descriptors, point-of-sale visual displays across the colour range of a brand family probably bolsters the misleading connotation of lower risk associated with brands at the extreme end of the whiter packaging continuum.

The importance of tobacco packaging as a marketing vehicle only grows as countries ban marketing through other channels. Standardised, plain packaging without colours, numerical descriptors or brand imagery reduces false beliefs about relative product risk,⁵ increases the noticeability, recall and believability of health warnings^{6 7} and reduces brand appeal among both adults⁸ and youths.⁹ Countries like Australia, UK and Uruguay are moving in the direction of plain packaging; other countries will need to follow suit to remove misleading information from packages, as the FCTC treaty requires.

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