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Campaign to counter a deteriorating consumer market: Philip Morris's Project Sunrise

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SUMMARY

Objectives: From 1997 to 2000, Philip Morris implemented Project Sunrise. This paper discusses the impact of this project on national and Philip Morris's cigarette unit sales, public opinion about smoking and secondhand tobacco smoke, and national prevalence trends for tobacco use.

Study design: A qualitative archival content analysis of Project Sunrise from 1997 to 2000, and a descriptive statistical analysis of cigarette unit sales and operating profits, acceptability of smoking and secondhand tobacco smoke, and national prevalence trends for tobacco use from 1996 to 2006.

Methods: Qualitative data sources related to Project Sunrise found on WebCat, [Pubmed.com](http://pubmed.com), LexisNexis Academic and Philip Morris's website, and archived tobacco industry documents were analysed using NVivo Version 9.0. A descriptive statistical analysis of cigarette unit sales, public opinion about smoking and secondhand tobacco smoke, and national prevalence trends for tobacco use was undertaken.

Results: Project Sunrise was a high-level strategic corporate plan to maintain profits that included four possible scenarios resulting in seven interwoven strategies. However, national prevalence rates for tobacco use declined, sales of national and Philip Morris cigarettes declined, operating profits remained at substantially lower levels after 2000 from 2001 to 2006, and a large majority of Americans agreed that there were significant health dangers associated with smoking and secondhand tobacco smoke.

Conclusion: The impact of Project Sunrise, including countering the anti-tobacco movement, was less than successful in the USA.

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Introduction

Commencing in the mid-1990s, Philip Morris, Inc., ranked as one of the world's 500 largest companies by CNNMoney.com and *Fortune* in 2011, developed a secret high-level strategic

plan called 'Project Sunrise' to bolster its commercial profits and sale of tobacco products.^{1–3} In 2006, the only peer-reviewed article, published in *Tobacco Control* by McDaniels et al., to comprehensively cover Project Sunrise provided a central conclusion that Project Sunrise was primarily a plan

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to ‘divide-and-conquer’ the tobacco control movement, and repackage Philip Morris’s image as a responsible corporation.⁴ The division of anti-tobacco control advocates was to be accomplished by dividing the ‘moderates’ from the more radical elements.⁴ McDaniels et al. concluded:

This review of PM [Philip Morris] documents shows that PM initiated in 1995 a plan to undermine tobacco control by creating and/or exploiting divisions among its tobacco control opponents. We do not know whether the plan is currently in operation, although the project was intended to continue until 2006. Documents specifically mentioning Fair Play or Project Sunrise end in 2000. Other initiatives, such as PM’s corporate social responsibility efforts, launched in 2000, may have expanded upon or superseded some or all of Project Sunrise’s strategies.⁴

In the article, the other possible initiatives included: expanding the smoking experience; assuring public places to smoke; creating communication connections to smokers; minimizing environmental tobacco smoke through purported technological approaches such as ventilation; and creating values to promote smoking such as ‘de-demonizing’ smokers.⁴ The 2006 paper also concluded that some, possibly many, of these strategies were implemented, from 1997 to 2007, including countering the anti-tobacco movement and repackaging Philip Morris as a reasonable firm.⁴

Implementation strategies, however, are not necessarily congruent with actual action plans linked to impacts or organizational outcomes. Organizational impacts or outcomes are defined in this paper as organizational action plans linked to actual impacts due to the implementation of strategies. In order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the nature, scope and impact of Project Sunrise, research for this paper first analysed Project Sunrise’s primary purpose linked to four possible scenarios: Mostly Sunny, Avalanche, New Game and Bladerunner.^{5,6} Also analysed, in turn, were the relationships between Project Sunrise’s four possible scenarios and seven implementation strategies, and ultimately a final implementation action plan. Finally, this study analysed the impact of the action plan, including elements such as undermining the anti-tobacco movement, by assessing, from 1996 to 2006, national prevalence trends for cigarette use, national and Philip Morris’s annual cigarette unit sales, annual operating profits, and national opinion polls on the acceptability of tobacco use.

Methods

Standard archival and historical research protocol assumes that multiple explanations explain history, historical events must be highly contextualized and based on chronological events in time periods, various primary data sources are utilized, specific units of analysis are applied in chronological order, causal arguments are linked to events and dates, and data are triangulated and cross-checked with several primary data sources.^{7–11} While the first tobacco document mentioning Project Sunrise appeared in 1993 and the last was in 2000, Project Sunrise did not officially commence until 1997.^{2,12,13} Another tobacco document dated 1995 suggested

that Project Sunrise was a ‘10–20 year strategy’.¹⁴ However, with no tobacco documents dated after 2000 mentioning Project Sunrise, there is no other corroborating evidence confirming that Project Sunrise continued after 2000. Hence, one limitation of this analysis is that other primary source data, if available, could further refine and confirm the findings in this paper.

This study examined the scope, nature and impact of the confirmed operation period for Project Sunrise from 1997 to 2000. In order to assess the possible impact of Project Sunrise’s implementation action plan, an analysis was also conducted from 1996 to 2006 examining national prevalence trends for smoking, national and Philip Morris’s annual cigarette unit sales, annual operating profits, and national opinion polls on the acceptability of tobacco use. Operating profit, also known as earnings before interest and taxes, is defined as operating profit that equals operating revenues minus operating expenses.

Based on these indicators, an examination was conducted regarding the possible impact of the implementation of Project Sunrise’s strategies, such as countering the anti-tobacco movement, and action plan in comparison with trends on public acceptability of tobacco use, impact on national and Philip Morris’s annual cigarette unit sales, annual operating profits and national prevalence trends for tobacco use. The period 1996–2006 represents 1 year prior to the official implementation of Project Sunrise. This is followed by the known years (1997–2000) that Project Sunrise was operating. This is then followed by a post-Project Sunrise period from 2001 to 2006.

Data to place Project Sunrise’s four scenarios in historical context from 1997 to 2000, by reviewing the general nature and scope of US federal tobacco use regulation, were derived from several corroborated peer-reviewed historical analyses of this period. Data searches on Project Sunrise were conducted from all known primary and authoritative data sources from 1990 to 2012 related to the general nature and scope of Project Sunrise. Included in this data search were document searches on WebCat, [Pubmed.com](http://pubmed.com), LexisNexis Academic and Philip Morris’s website. Also included in this analysis was a content analysis of more than 50 million pages of previously secret and now archived tobacco industry documents obtained in the settlement of the legal case of *State of Minnesota et al. v. Phillip Morris et al.* (No.C1-94-8565, 2nd District, Minnesota) and subsequent litigation against the tobacco industry. Under the terms of the legal settlement, five tobacco companies, a tobacco trade association and a tobacco company research association have established searchable websites for documents produced during litigation. The material directly utilized in this paper, which can be retrieved and replicated, was accessed on the Internet at the University of California, San Francisco Legacy Tobacco Documents website, which has integrated the tobacco industry websites, located at: <http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu>. Using the search terms, ‘Project Sunrise’, ‘sunrise’, ‘avalanche and scenario’, ‘new game and scenario’, ‘bladerunner and scenario’, ‘mostly sunny and scenario’, ‘measurement, scenario and sunrise’ and ‘index of social acceptability’, 370 hits occurred. These search terms were selected so the search engine would identify all available documents from the entire text of the tobacco documents related to Project Sunrise. Although all tobacco

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