



how ride counters tobacco marketing tactics

Background about RIDE and import car scene

Project RIDE mobilizes the “import car” culture against tobacco industry takeover through leadership development, policy adoption and education campaigns. RIDE is a highly visible program with over 300 volunteers, most of whom are male and ages 18-29 from California. The import scene, once an exclusive, ethnic subculture, has become mainstream, attracting a huge demographic of young adults of all ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, it has become a billion dollar industry with commercial appeals to corporate interests. At the heart of the import scene are “car shows or expos,” which, according to one New York Times report, attract up to 20,000 visitors per location. In California, there are over 20 car shows per year. Young female models in bikini, loud music, free alcohol and tobacco sampling booths, and online casino gambling tables are few examples of how corporate interests target young people. With its Las Vegas atmosphere and relative position off-radar from regulatory oversight, car shows have become a modern-day ‘wild wild west’ The import car scene’s mix of automotive tie-ins, underground appeal, and wide young adult market make it an ideal tobacco industry target. Increasingly, reports from the RIDE network frontlines have exposed the full arsenal of popular media tactics Big Tobacco is using to recruit car show attendees, show organizers, and shop owners. Following are some disturbing reports from the extensive RIDE network.

Reports from the Frontline

Case #1: Interview with Camel Car Culture Representative: “We pretty much had free reign to go wherever we wanted to attract current Adult Smokers to try the product and to invite AS to attend our events... we were to try and get people who were in the [import] industry who were of legal age and already smokers to switch to our brand... i had a dream job. i love the import scene and i got paid to go to car meets, cruise nights, car shows, races and drift events. i had an expense account, gas card, digital camera, laptop and all the smokes that i wanted. i got to meet people in the industry that we love and get paid for it. they even flew us to vegas, put us up in a hotel and sent us to sema.”

“we basically threw a party there [at a car shop rented by Camel]. we rented out dromo 1, we took AS to drift events, we had events where we paid for anyone who wanted to to get their car dynoed, basically held car shows. at the events we would have a smokers lounge that was tented so the public eye could not see inside of it... we would sign AS up with the brand, give them complimentary cigarettes ... we raffled off 100 dollar gas cards, car parts etc. inside the smokers lounge it was totally air conditioned, there were massage chairs and free massages were given out, couches, plasma screens with drifting videos on etc.”

– Young male import scene insider, and former recruiter for the Camel Car Culture program in a February 27 and February 29, 2008 email communications with RIDE

As these stunning email correspondences confirm, without any doubt the import community is squarely in the crosshairs of Big Tobacco.

Case #2 - Special car-related social events: RIDE network members received an invitation by Camel Cigarettes for a special event including free movie passes to *Fast and the Furious 3:Tokyo Drift*, free drinks, and cigarettes. Recipients were asked to bring smokers and friends. Camel representatives from BFG marketing firm, which also created Camel's Speakeasy Tour 2004, invited import car tuners to complimentary go-carting.

RIDE Response: RIDE has alerted all networks about these new tobacco social marketing tactics, sent observation teams and initiated ongoing documentation of similar events. RIDE is recasting Big Tobacco's free events as disingenuous bids for entry into the car scene, to heighten the import community's distrust of these events. Ironically, Project RIDE hosted a free go-carting event as volunteer-appreciation. It was the most popular incentive item for RIDE members. Due to the high cost, we no longer provide this incentive. Tobacco companies can afford to spend mega bucks to promote their brand and cigarettes.

Case #3 - Marketing and sampling at secretive adult-only facility: A RIDE member reported an Adult-only facility by Camel at a popular drifting event in Orange, California in Summer 2006. This free tent was advertised on the popular drifting.com online forum, and generated huge traffic with its exclusive environment, free screening room with video games, cigarette girls, raffles, as well as many giveaways and free cigarette samples.

RIDE Response: Network members forwarded to RIDE offices documentation of a spontaneous guerrilla action against the Camel tent - hundreds of flyers posted in venue bathrooms slamming Camel's attempts to buy people's respect while ultimately vending a deadly product.

Case #4: Collection and use of personal information: At the adult-only facility, Camel representatives collect personal information including email addresses and cigarette brand preferences. One volunteer reported receiving in the mail a Camel calendar and cigarette case along with freebie coupons one year after he attended an Adult-only Camel tobacco facility.

RIDE Response: For Cases #1-#3, RIDE has also developed print materials directly exposing Camel's tactics with a broader message to withhold personal information from tobacco companies. RIDE has distributed over 3,000 of these cards at major car shows.

Case #5: Online Infiltration: Online forum sites, such as drifting.com are popular, membership-based places to exchange information about the import scene. The Tobacco Company has already infiltrated these spaces, either through recruitment of members or posing as imposters, to advertise adult-only facilities.

RIDE Response: RIDE has directly gone head to head with the tobacco industry in the world of MySpace, the most popular arena for social networking and viral marketing. A tobacco representative, posing as an insider, developed a MySpace page to promote tobacco car-related events. As a testament to RIDE's reach online, this tobacco marketing front person also posted

messages attacking the RIDE campaign and claimed that tobacco companies only market to smokers. He called RIDE a naïve program and proudly said that he has “the whole [tobacco] industry behind him.” RIDE’s effectiveness in these popular media has definitely made it to Big Tobacco’s radar. Further, RIDE’s Street Team has begun surveillance of tobacco presence on MySpace and car forums, prepared network members for the tobacco industry messages in the online space, and started documentation of all activities and connections to marketing firms. RIDE initiated its own online marketing with a PSA in heavy rotation on YouTube, Google Video, as well as major cable stations. This PSA quickly became one of the top-ranked videos on YouTube.

Case #6: Business sponsorship: Show organizers have already been approached with sponsorship offers from tobacco companies, including D1GP, the premier drifting event in the country, regularly drawing huge international audiences. In conversations with RIDE staff, show organizers have shown reluctance to outright forego tobacco dollars, citing economic pressures and car show’s free for all spirit.

RIDE Response: RIDE began its own sponsorship program and successfully recruited major players from within the scene: over 20 award-winning car teams profiled in magazines, custom body shop owners, Websites such as streetracing.org, and major event organizers such as JDM Theory. Sponsorship recipients conduct outreach at shows, schools, and in the media on rejecting tobacco dollars.

Case #7: Free fruit-flavored blunt samples to minors: RIDE’s earliest direct encounters with Big Tobacco occurred when Royal Blunts set up a booth at a car show to hand out free blunts, which are tobacco-based wrappers resembling fruit rollups, to minors without ID checks.

RIDE Response: RIDE photo-documented the Royal Blunts booth and the activities and directly confronted the Royal Blunt representatives about the legality of their actions. They subsequently abandoned their booth. Since then and as part of the “Caught in the Act” campaign, RIDE’s Street Team have videotaped free tobacco sampling to RIDE network minors without ID checks and requesting direct mailing information. RIDE has also developed “Trick or Treat” print materials exposing fruit and candy flavored marketing to young smokers and minors.

RIDE counters

There has been little monitoring let alone countering of the tobacco industry’s encroachment in the import scene. Big Tobacco’s fervent activity around the import scene makes sense, given the incredibly focused and enormous market of young men identified as import car enthusiasts, and the niche lifestyle which has become mainstream by Hollywood’s marketing in movies and reality shows.

After 6 years of building (1) an extensive network of online and offline volunteers, car teams, shops, and business allies, (2) a growing reputation within the scene and (3) dynamic counter marketing in the same spaces where tobacco is present such as MySpace, YouTube and car shows, Project RIDE is taking on the tobacco industry in the import scene.