

Tobacco companies use corporate social responsibility for political purposes

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Corporations may use corporate social responsibility programmes not only to improve their public image, but also to gain access to politicians, influence agendas, and shape public health policy to best suit their own interests. In a research article led by Gary Fooks from the University of Bath's Tobacco Control Research Group in the UK and published in this week's *PLoS Medicine*, these programmes are revealed as "an innovative form of corporate political activity".

The authors document the persistent efforts of British American Tobacco (BAT, the world's second largest publicly traded tobacco company, which has won several awards for its social and environmental programmes) to re-establish access with the UK Department of Health, following the Government's decision to restrict contact with major [tobacco companies](#).

In a detailed case study that involved searching BAT documents made publicly available as a result of litigation in the US (for the period, 1998-2000), the authors illustrate how the company used its [corporate social responsibility](#) programme in its dialogue with policymakers to influence the priorities of public and elected officials in the UK, encourage them to take notice of proposals that best suited the company (for example, to make regulation voluntary), and to revise the Government's concerns about whether the industry could be trusted to work in partnership.

The authors document examples of correspondence from Martin

Broughton (BAT's chair between 1998 and 2004) and notes from meeting with politicians, including former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, to show how BAT was able to link its preferred policies to political and societal values, such as harm reduction, child health, and cooperation between business and government.

The authors argue that their findings underline the need for broad implementation of Article 5.3 of the World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (an international treaty that aims to reduce the harm associated with tobacco use) which aims to protect public-health policies on tobacco control from tobacco industry influence. Successful implementation will require measures to ensure transparency in all interactions between all parts of government and the tobacco industry and to increase awareness across government of what tobacco companies hope to achieve through corporate social responsibility, report the authors.

The authors say: "our case study underlines the value of understanding BAT's [corporate social responsibility programme] as an innovative form of corporate political activity. This approach to conceptualising [corporate social responsibility] has potentially important implications for public health given the widely documented impact of tobacco companies' political activity in delaying and blocking health related policies."

They continue: "More generally, it is likely to be relevant to understanding the impact of [corporate social responsibility] in other industrial sectors, such as alcohol and food, where corporate social responsibility also seems to have been used to shape government policy."

The authors add: "we suggest that our findings—and the absence of strong evidence suggesting that co-regulation is capable of aligning the business models of big food and drinks companies with the demands of

public health—suggest that the role of corporate social responsibility in the [UK Government's Public Health Responsibility] Deal needs to be subjected to closer scrutiny."

More information: Fooks GJ, Gilmore AB, Smith KE, Collin J, Holden C, et al. (2011) Corporate Social Responsibility and Access to Policy Élites: An Analysis of Tobacco Industry Documents. PLoS Med 8(8): e1001076. [doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1001076](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1001076)

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