

Waste and Hypocrisy

James S. Calvin, President
New York Association of Convenience Stores



Right in the middle of the intense two-week lobbying battle in Albany over the cigarette tax hike that ultimately passed April 9, I opened the morning paper to find a full-page ad urging supermarkets to stop selling cigarettes.

Surrounding a pile of cigarettes were pictures of strawberries, onions, cheese, eggs and various other fresh foods found in grocery stores, and below was the headline “Which item doesn’t belong?”

Scrolling to the bottom, my jaw dropped when I saw that the ad was paid for with taxpayer dollars by our New York State Department of Health. Steam emanated from my ears.

Exemplifying how carried away the anti-tobacco crusade has become, and the excessive degree to which the tobacco category is under siege, this ad is wasteful and hypocritical on so many levels that I don’t know even where to begin.

- The supposed justification for the cigarette tax increase was that the state needed additional revenue to fund vital programs, yet this is what a state agency is spending money on?

- The Health Department is asking tax-collecting businesses to stop selling a legal product that they have been licensed by another agency, the Department of Taxation and Finance, to sell to adult customers.

- The continued sale of that legal product is supposed to generate all that new revenue – \$265 million – in order to balance next year’s budget. If stores stop selling it, there will be a budget shortfall.

Health advocates have seized on the recent decision by Wegman’s, a major supermarket chain based in Rochester NY, to voluntarily discontinue tobacco sales, and used it as a springboard to badger, charm or bribe other supermarkets into following suit, to create the illusion that it’s the latest trend in retailing.

Convenience stores weren’t targeted by this ad – it’s only a matter of time – but we are besieged by a parade of Health Department-funded community advocates demanding removal or repositioning of cigarette signs inside our stores.

I certainly respect Wegman’s decision. But let’s face it – it’s a lot easier to be magnanimous when cigarettes are only 1 or 2 percent of your total merchandise sales.

And I certainly respect the state Health Department’s efforts to reduce tobacco consumption. But the virtue of that cause doesn’t justify wasting hundreds of thousands of tax dollars on ads of this nature.

As parents, citizens, and responsible retailers, we share the New York State’s commitment to preventing youth access to tobacco. But we could do without the mixed signals, browbeating and hypocrisy.

May 2008