

Did Big Tobacco Create the Processed Food Industry?

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Big Tobacco companies like Philip Morris and R.J. Reynolds strategically acquired major food companies in the 1980s, dominating the U.S. food system for over 20 years and shaping processed food formulations
- › Tobacco-owned foods were more likely to be "hyper-palatable," engineered with specific combinations of fat, sugar, salt and carbohydrates that excessively activate brain reward circuits, leading to addictive-like eating behaviors
- › While the processed food industry predates Big Tobacco's involvement, tobacco companies applied their expertise in flavor enhancement and marketing strategies to food products, influencing the broader industry
- › Tobacco companies also shaped the sugary drinks market, developing and marketing popular children's beverages like Hawaiian Punch, Kool-Aid and Capri Sun using tactics like cigarette advertising
- › The tobacco industry's influence on food formulation and marketing persists today, with researchers arguing that the current food environment is like the unregulated tobacco landscape of the 1950s

Imagine walking down the grocery store aisle, reaching for your favorite snack or convenience meal. Now, picture the same scene, but with an unexpected twist: the masterminds behind those tempting, perfectly engineered flavors aren't food scientists, but tobacco executives. It sounds like the plot of a far-fetched conspiracy theory, doesn't it?

Yet, a study from the University of Kansas suggests this scene isn't just plausible – it's really what happened.¹ For decades, we've known about Big Tobacco's insidious tactics to hook smokers. But what if those same strategies were applied to the food on your plate? The research reveals a startling connection between tobacco giants and the processed food industry that dominated American eating habits for over two decades.

From the late 1980s to the early 2000s, tobacco companies like Philip Morris and R.J. Reynolds weren't just selling cigarettes – they were quietly shaping the very landscape of the U.S. food system. As you read on, prepare to have your perspective on processed foods forever altered. The story that unfolds is one of corporate strategy, scientific manipulation and a calculated effort to make certain foods irresistible – even addictive.

It's a tale that challenges our understanding of the forces behind our daily food choices and raises urgent questions about the need for regulation in our modern food environment. Are you ready to uncover the tobacco-laced truth behind many of your pantry staples?

The Shocking Tobacco-Food Connection Hidden in Your Pantry

You may think Big Tobacco and Big Food are separate industries, but the University of Kansas study, published in the journal *Addiction*, reveals how deeply intertwined they were for decades.² The researchers found that tobacco giants Philip Morris and R.J. Reynolds strategically acquired major food companies in the 1980s, dominating the U.S. food system for over 20 years.

During this time, they deliberately formulated and promoted "hyper-palatable" processed foods designed to maximize consumption and profits – much like they did with cigarettes. The study examined food products from 1988 to 2001, when tobacco companies led the food industry.

Foods owned by tobacco companies were 29% more likely to be classified as "fat and sodium hyper-palatable" and 80% more likely to be "carbohydrate and sodium hyper-palatable" compared to foods not owned by tobacco companies.³

Recognize that the primary reason this was so destructive to your biology was that they used the wrong fats. If they had used saturated fats, which were vilified at the time, instead of the exalted but pernicious mitochondrial poisons, PUFAs, we would be in good shape from a health perspective.

But these hyper-palatable foods were engineered with specific combinations of pernicious omega-6 fats, and additives that don't occur in nature. They excessively activate brain reward circuits, facilitating overconsumption and leading to addictive-like eating behaviors.

How Big Tobacco Shaped Your Grocery Store Shelves

When you walk down the supermarket aisles today, you're seeing the long-term consequences of Big Tobacco's foray into food. The study found that as of 2018, over 75% of branded food products qualify as hyper-palatable, regardless of previous tobacco company ownership. However, foods that were once tobacco-owned still showed a slightly higher prevalence of being classified as omega-6 LA loaded fat and artificial ingredient hyper-palatable.

This suggests that tobacco companies' strategies for formulating hyper-palatable foods have influenced the broader food industry. Other food companies likely observed the market success of tobacco-owned brands and began producing similar hyper-palatable products to remain competitive.

It's a stark reminder of how corporate strategies in one industry have far-reaching effects on public health through unexpected channels. The tobacco companies focused particularly on increasing fat and artificial ingredient content, as well as carbohydrates and sodium. Interestingly, they seemed to avoid promoting foods high in both fat and sugar.

The researchers speculate this was to avoid scrutiny, as there was growing concern in the 1990s about sugar's role in obesity. By focusing on sodium instead, tobacco-owned

food companies could enhance palatability while staying under the radar of most nutritional advice at the time.⁴

The Timeline: Processed Foods Before Big Tobacco

It's often claimed that the processed food industry was created by the cigarette industry in the 1990s, but the processed food industry has a complex history that reaches back to the Industrial Revolution. The origins of industrial food processing can be traced to the late 18th and early 19th centuries.⁵ Nicolas Appert's invention of canning in 1810 marked a significant milestone, allowing foods to be preserved for long periods.⁶

The canning process is not the issue. If it is done with glass jars it works just fine to preserve food. But when actual cans are used they must have a liner, so the food does not come in contact with the metal. That liner is plastic that is loaded with endocrine-disrupting chemicals that activate your estrogen receptors which help destroy your mitochondria and kill you prematurely.

The following decades saw rapid advancements in food technology, including the development of refrigeration, pasteurization and industrial milling. By the early 20th century, companies like Kellogg's, Nabisco and Heinz were already well-established, producing a variety of processed foods. The post-World War II era saw a boom in convenience foods, with TV dinners, instant coffee and boxed cake mixes becoming household staples.

This history demonstrates that the processed food industry was already mature and thriving long before tobacco companies began to diversify their portfolios in the 1980s and 1990s. But while tobacco companies didn't create the processed food industry, they did make significant investments in it during the late 20th century.

Big Tobacco's Foray Into Processed Foods

In 1985, R.J. Reynolds acquired Nabisco for \$4.9 billion, creating R.J.R Nabisco.⁷ This move was part of a larger trend of tobacco companies diversifying their holdings in the

face of declining cigarette sales and increasing public health concerns – a long-term strategic approach to mitigate potential risks to their core business.

Tobacco companies began diversifying as early as the 1950s, following initial scientific reports linking smoking to lung cancer.⁸ Philip Morris, another major tobacco player, purchased General Foods in 1985 for \$5.6 billion⁹ and Kraft in 1988 for \$12.9 billion.¹⁰ These acquisitions gave tobacco companies control over some of the largest food manufacturers in the U.S.

The tobacco industry's interest in food companies was strategic: they saw an opportunity to leverage their marketing expertise and distribution networks in a new sector. Additionally, the stable cash flow from food products could help offset potential losses in the tobacco market. It's worth noting that while these acquisitions were significant, they represented a shift in ownership rather than the creation of a new industry.

Big Tobacco's Notable Impact on Food Marketing and Product Development

The tobacco industry's involvement in the food sector did have notable impacts, particularly in the areas of marketing and product development. Tobacco companies brought with them sophisticated marketing techniques honed over decades of selling cigarettes. These included targeted advertising, brand loyalty programs and the use of psychology in product packaging and placement.

For example, Philip Morris applied its expertise in flavor enhancement, developed for cigarettes, to food products. The tobacco giant conducted research on flavor appeal, finding that participants were more excited and curious about tobacco products with characterizing flavors.¹¹ This focus on flavor appeal could have easily translated to their food products strategy, leading to the creation of more intensely flavored snacks and convenience foods.

After all, tobacco companies invested heavily in understanding how flavors "worked" and how they could enhance user experience. The tobacco industry also used the concept of "brand stretching," where a popular brand name is used to sell a wide range of products.

Additionally, their experience in dealing with health-related regulations and public scrutiny influenced how food companies approached similar challenges. While these strategies didn't create the processed food industry outright, they did contribute to its evolution and the ways in which processed foods are marketed and developed today.

Big Tobacco's Sweet Tooth: How Cigarette Companies Shaped the Sugary Drinks Market

Remember those colorful, sweet drinks from your childhood – the ones with cartoon characters on the packaging and fun, fruity flavors? It turns out there's a darker history behind these beverages than you might expect. A study published in the BMJ reveals that tobacco giants R.J. Reynolds and Philip Morris played a significant role in developing and marketing many popular children's sugary drinks.¹²

Brands like Hawaiian Punch, Kool-Aid, Capri Sun and Tang were once owned and crafted by these tobacco conglomerates. In the 1960s, as part of their efforts to diversify beyond cigarettes, these companies acquired and developed drink brands specifically targeting children.

They applied their extensive knowledge of flavors, colors and youth-focused marketing strategies – originally designed to sell cigarettes – to create and promote sugary beverages that would appeal to young consumers.

From Tobacco to Tang: Marketing Strategies That Hook Kids

The tobacco industry's playbook for selling sugary drinks to children was remarkably like their cigarette marketing tactics. They conducted extensive market research, testing various flavors, colors and packaging designs on children to determine what would be

most appealing. Cartoon mascots like Kool-Aid's smiling pitcher and Hawaiian Punch's Punchy became central figures in advertising campaigns.¹³

These companies introduced child-sized packaging, such as R.J. Reynolds' 8-ounce cans of Hawaiian Punch, marketed as "perfect for children" and "easy to hold, easy to open."¹⁴ They also developed innovative product forms like fizz tablets, powders and "magic" color-changing drinks to capture children's imagination.¹⁵

Philip Morris even repurposed its "Marlboro Country Store" loyalty program concept for Kool-Aid, creating the "Wacky Warehouse" where kids could redeem purchases for toys and enter sweepstakes.¹⁶ These integrated marketing strategies surrounded children with consistent product messages across multiple platforms – from television commercials and comic books to school supplies and theme park sponsorships.

Were R.J. Reynolds and Philip Morris Once the Two Largest Food Companies?

While these tobacco companies made major acquisitions in the food industry, they weren't primarily food companies themselves. They were diversifying their holdings by entering the food sector. It's worth noting, however, that these acquisitions made Philip Morris and R.J. Reynolds significant players in the food industry. As noted in the Addiction study:¹⁷

"In the early 1980s, PM [Philip Morris] bought major US food companies including Kraft and General Foods. By 1989, PM's combined Kraft–General Foods was the largest food company in the world.

R.J.R [R.J. Reynolds] had a slower trajectory of entry to the food industry and bought into the US beverage market in the 1960s and acquiring a limited number of specialty convenience food brands (e.g. puddings and maple syrup brands) throughout the 1970s.

However, in 1985 R.J.R purchased major cookie and cracker brand Nabisco, which doubled company food profits in a single year and solidified their status as a leader in the US food industry.

Collectively, PM- and R.J.R-owned companies dominated the US food system between the late 1980s to the early 2000s; thus, companies that specialized in creating addictive tobacco products led the development of the US food system for > 20 years."

Big Tobacco Merged with Big Food Using Cash Reserves from Cigarette Sales

Tobacco companies were able to make these large acquisitions because they were cash-rich from cigarette production and sales.¹⁸ This strategy allowed them to enter the food industry and gain control of major food brands and companies. By the 2000s, most tobacco companies had spun off or sold their food subsidiaries.

In 2007, for instance, Altria — formerly Philip Morris — spun off Kraft Foods, separating the tobacco and food businesses.¹⁹ However, Big Tobacco's influence on product development and marketing strategies in the food industry persisted.

Many of the marketing techniques developed by tobacco companies are still in use today. Despite voluntary industry agreements not to advertise unhealthy products to children, companies continue to use cartoon characters, branded toys and child-friendly packaging to promote junk foods and beverages.

As a consumer, you should be aware of these marketing tactics and their impact on individual and public health. By understanding the history behind these ultraprocessed food products, you can make more informed choices about what you bring into your home and help protect yourself and your family from the long-term consequences of ultraprocessed food consumption.

Further, despite mounting scientific evidence on the addictive properties of hyper-palatable foods, there are currently no federal regulations addressing their accessibility. The Addiction researchers argue that the current state of the U.S. food environment is eerily like the 1950s tobacco landscape, before the government stepped in to regulate cigarettes.²⁰

Nearly all grocery store shelves are saturated with products engineered to override your body's natural satiety signals and keep you coming back for more. Just as with tobacco, public health is at risk due to corporate strategies designed to prioritize profits over wellbeing.

Big Tobacco's ties to the processed food industry serve as a wake-up call about the interconnected nature of commercial influences on health. It demonstrates how one industry's tactics have profound and lasting impacts in seemingly unrelated areas. As you navigate the modern food environment, being aware of these historical connections will help you make more informed choices and advocate for a healthier food system.

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