

Big Tobacco Planned Big Marijuana Sales in the 1970s

Dan Kedmey

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Documents buried deep in tobacco company archives reveal a hope and a plan to sell marijuana as soon as legally possible

Tobacco executives anticipated the legalization of marijuana as early as the 1970's — and they wanted a piece of the action, according to newly discovered documents from tobacco company archives.

Public health researchers scanned 80 million pages of digitized company documents for keywords such as, “marijuana,” “cannabis,” “reefer,” “weed,” “spliffs,” and “blunts.” The results, published Tuesday in the *Milbank Quarterly*, reveal a long history of maneuvers toward marijuana-laced products.

“The starting point must be to learn how to produce in quantity cigarettes loaded uniformly with a known amount of either ground cannabis or dried and cut cannabis rag,” read one memorandum from British American Tobacco’s adviser on technical research, Charles Ellis.

A hand-written letter from Philip Morris president George Weissman read, “While I am opposed to its use, I recognize that it may be legalized in the near future... Thus, with these great auspices, we should be in a position to examine: 1. A potential competition, 2. A possible product, 3. At this time, cooperate with the government.”

Philip Morris even went so far as to request a marijuana sample from the Department of Justice for research purposes, promising to share its findings with the government so long as the company’s involvement remained strictly confidential. “We request that there be no publicity whatsoever,” wrote a Philip Morris executive. The Justice Department drug science’s chief Milton Joffe obliged with a promise to deliver “good quality” marijuana.

While tobacco executives missed the mark on legalization by several decades, they did lay out a persuasive case for vigilance. In early 1970, an unsigned memorandum distributed to Philip Morris’ top management read, “We are in the business of relaxing people who are tense and providing a pick up for people who are bored or depressed. The human needs that our product fills will not go away. Thus, the only real threat to our business is that society will find other means of satisfying these needs.”

The study authors said the documents provide proof of tobacco companies’ intent to enter the marijuana trade, despite their claims to the contrary. They urged policymakers to prevent tobacco makers from entering the nascent market for legal marijuana “in a way that would replicate the smoking epidemic, which kills 480,000 Americans each year.”