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NATIONAL news

SMOKE SIGNALS

Creeping costs and health issues are not the only things
to ponder before lighting up by Gip Plaster

This past fall, tobacco companies and 46 states agreed to a deal that will force the companies to submit to advertising restrictions and spend \$1.5 billion over the next five years to fund anti-smoking education programs.

Given the recent headlines—and the reality that plenty of queer money goes up in smoke every year via the purchase of tobacco products—*Just Out* got to wondering about the gay-friendliness of the nation's major tobacco companies.

Philip Morris, the company that created the Marlboro Man, is the largest tobacco business in the United States and the world. It controls about half the U.S. market and produces Marlboro, as well as Virginia Slims and Benson and Hedges.

The company's empire grew immediately after the tobacco deal was announced in November. It agreed to buy L&M, Lark, and Chesterfield from Brooke Group Ltd.'s Liggett Group. Philip Morris has owned the international rights to the three brands for 20 years.

Philip Morris includes sexual orientation in its nondiscrimination policy, and company officials say they address gay and lesbian issues during diversity trainings.

"We continue to implement a comprehensive strategy to strengthen and promote diversity at all levels of our workforce and among vendors who serve us," says a Philip Morris statement prepared in response to a request for information. "Since differences can become a business asset and can create a more dynamic and productive working environment, our diversity education training sessions are intended to shape an environment that supports and respects such differences."

According to the missive, while Philip Morris does not offer domestic partner benefits, it is considering them and is currently conducting research to see how programs have been administered at other companies.

Philip Morris does not have a gay and lesbian employees group but would welcome one to join its "numerous other employee-run networks."

R.J. Reynolds, the nation's No. 2 cigarette maker, is held by RJR Nabisco Holdings Corp., whose other major subsidiary, the separately traded Nabisco Holdings, is the country's top cookie and cracker company.

R.J. Reynolds sells almost 100 tobacco brands, including Camel, Salem and Winston. RJR Nabisco provided a page from its management guide as proof that the company supports a diverse workforce.

Its "Workforce Diversity Leadership Statement" claims the company provides a climate that "values diversity based on sexual orientation and all other characteristics which make each person unique."

The company only offers benefits to the spouses of married heterosexual employees, and its human resources department is not aware of any queer employee group within the company.

Brown and Williamson Tobacco Corp., the makers of Kool and the discount brand GPC, is the No. 3 cigarette maker in the U.S. and is a subsidiary of British American Tobacco, the world's second largest cigarette maker. Brown and Williamson, which also makes Carlton and Lucky Strike, controls about 16 percent of the U.S. market.

A company representative left a telephone message saying the company does not provide information to reporters about its policies. Requests for additional information were unanswered.



D.C. DOOBIE

The fight to gain access to medical marijuana is playing out in a federal courtroom in Washington, D.C.

ACT UP members Wayne Turner and the late Steve Michael were the forces behind Initiative 59, a ballot measure designed to decriminalize and regulate medical use of marijuana in the District of Columbia.

Last October—less than two weeks before the general election—U.S. Rep. Bob Barr, a Republican from Georgia, proposed an amendment to an appropriations bill, which passed Congress without debate. The amendment prevented the local board of elections from spending money on the initiative. The ballot was already printed, so the practical effect of the amendment was to prevent counting the citizens' votes on the issue.

In a Dec. 18 court hearing, Graham Boyd argued for Turner and other plaintiffs, including the American Civil Liberties Union, say-

ing the amendment was unconstitutional because it undermines a public discourse and First Amendment protections.

He charged Congress acted out of hostility toward Initiative 59 and, in doing so, canceled an election—a move for which there is "literally no [legal] precedent," he said.

U.S. Justice Department attorney David Anderson defended Congress, saying it "is the supreme political authority in the District of Columbia."

Judge Richard Roberts took the case under advisement.

Speaking outside the courthouse, Turner said he was "outraged that the U.S. Department of Justice is defending the plantation status that the residents of the District of Columbia have."

He added, "As someone who watched the person I loved die of AIDS wasting syndrome, I will fight tooth and nail so that the terminally ill can be comfortable in their last days."

■ Reported by BOB ROEHR

