

No butts about it: Newport appeals to blacks in battle against menthol cigarette ban

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By **Star-Ledger Editorial Board**

NJNP Photo/Scott LituchyA billboard for Newport cigarettes stands by Route 21 in Newark.

Newport cigarettes has a long-standing, deep-rooted tradition of sleaze. It dates back to the 1950s, when the company deliberately tried to entice black children into smoking by handing them free samples.

And it continues today. Lorillard, which makes Newport — the country’s most popular brand of menthol cigarettes — is engaged in an all-out war to prevent the feds from banning menthol cigarettes.

The company has already bought up Internet domain names like MentholKillsMinorities.com, in an effort to preempt health advocates. Even sneakier is its use of an African-American public-relations consultant, Charlotte Roy. Her firm is paid by Lorillard, but she doesn’t feel a need to mention that when she contacts media outlets, the Wall Street Journal reported.

Roy arranged for Niger Innis, national spokesman for the Congress of Racial Equality, to speak out against a menthol ban. He told Chicago radio listeners it could result in an underground market and would be “taking away a legal preference and choice for African Americans.”

What bunk, says Reginald Jackson, executive director of the Black Ministers Council of New Jersey. “The fact that they’re marketing this to our community raises alarm bells — it’s manipulative and deceptive,” Jackson said. “I would think we’d be strongly united in seeking to ban these cigarettes.”

About 75 percent of black smokers use menthol brands, heavily advertised in black communities. African-Americans smoke fewer cigarettes than whites, but have higher rates of lung cancer and other tobacco-related diseases.

With a brazen slogan like “Alive with pleasure,” it’s not hard to believe Newport would fight this life-saving ban with lies.

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