Chain drug keeps on smokin'

Cigarettes and tobacco products would be removed from chain drug store shelves tomorrow if morality were the sole criterion on which merchandising decisions were made.

There's no disputing the facts on the emotional issue of smoking. About 46 million Americans smoke; 70 percent of those say they want to quit. More than 416,000 smokers quit the hard way last year—by dying.

The cost of smoking-related medical care, lost productivity and forfeited earnings as a result of smoking-related disability was estimated at about $100 billion in 1993, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Statistics on the negative impact of smoking can be quoted until one is blue in the face—or in this case, black in the lung. Chain drug operators are aware of the irony of selling cigarettes while being a health-oriented retail format that derives half of its sales from prescription drugs. The irony has become even more pronounced with the recent Rx-to-OTC switch and aggressive merchandising of smoking cessation products, such as NicoDerm CQ, Nicotrol and Nicorette.

One drug chain even went so far as to do what it thought was the right thing based on the standards of the community in which it was operating. Thrifty PayLess at one point discontinued the sale of cigarettes at its 27 stores in Utah. The retailer thought its decision would be a popular one, considering Utah's large Mormon population and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saint's stance on tobacco and alcohol abstention.

Despite the Mormon influence, Thrifty PayLess discovered that plenty of people in Utah smoke and they wanted to buy cigarettes at Thrifty PayLess stores. The numerous complaints store managers were getting from customers prompted the chain's decision recently to restock cigarettes.

A spokesman for the retailer said, "We thought we were doing the community a favor by not stocking cigarettes." What they were really doing was inconveniencing customers and losing sales. One store alone was losing $3,000 a week, according to the spokesman.

Thrifty PayLess deserves credit for attempting to do the right thing. If such an undertaking were going to work, Utah would be a state where the chances of succes would be apparently high. Imagine the consumer outrage in less puritan states were a retailer to discontinue cigarette sales.

For now, cigarettes are legal, one fourth of the nation's population smokes, and there is an expectation among consumers that chain drug stores sell cigarettes. Unfortunately, chain drug stores are easy targets for groups seeking to restrict consumer access. It has been said you can't legislate morality. Chain drug stores shouldn't be expected to merchandise it either.

Condom mktg. gets new focus, backing

By Barbara White Sax

In the 1980s, amidst the tide of AIDS awareness, fear was a major motivator for condom use. Advertising and public education campaigns drove 1993, all leading brands of condoms together spent only about $1 million in advertising, according to London International U.S. Holdings Inc., makers of Durex and Sheik. Total spending summed to $6.3 million last year category sales. The company's total sales last year were $143.1 million.

Schmid Laboratories, the division of London International U.S. Holdings that markets Sheik, Ramzes and Avanti