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No butts: a case for reducing cigarette litter

John Byron

While the debate over branding on cigarette packaging hots up between the tobacco industry and federal government, John Byron reports that an interesting side issue regarding cigarette butt litter has been gaining interest behind the scenes, particularly in Canberra.

The disposal unit is simply a hinged opening of heat-resistant polymer affixed to the front of the carton. Behind the opening lies a thin aluminium plate, and behind that, a foil bladder for storing the butts, nested between the cardboard carton and the cigarettes.
Credit: Barry Ross

Despite widespread health warnings, many Australians continue to smoke. While they may have ignored the health risks, their decision unfortunately also means the nation's waterways, beaches and public spaces will continue to be littered by cigarette butts.

According to the Keep Australia Beautiful National Litter Index, smokers left an average of 32 cigarette butts per 1000 square metres around the country during 2009–10. This equates to about seven billion butts annually. Of these, around 1 in 10 ends up in our waterways – despite the introduction of smoker poles (metal cigarette butt receptacles) outside many public buildings.

Inventor Mr Barry Ross has come up with an innovative packaging concept to potentially reduce butt litter. The invention – variously called 'Butt it and Box it®', the Cigarette Butt Disposer, or CBD – is, I think, a typically simple yet brilliant solution to a huge problem.

Mr Ross' invention is a modification to a conventional cigarette flip-top carton, and can be applied to any pack size. It is simply a hinged opening made of a heat-resistant polymer on the front panel of the carton. Behind the opening lies a thin aluminium plate with a hole slightly larger than the diameter of a standard cigarette. Behind this plate, inside the carton, is a foil bladder nested between the cardboard carton and the cigarettes. The bladder is vacuum-packed and sized to comfortably contain all the butts from the carton.

The invention allows the smoker to easily extinguish the butt on the aluminium plate and then squeeze it through the hole into the bladder, where any residual embers are extinguished due to the lack of oxygen. One butt occupies about one-third the space left by the full cigarette; so, as the smoker continues their way through the cigarettes, more space is freed up for the butts making the storage procedure easier. When all the cigarettes have been smoked, the carton can simply be thrown in the bin.

Keep Australia Beautiful is well known for its efforts in encouraging behavioural change to prevent excessive littering. Chairman Mr Don Chambers is concerned about cigarette butt litter, and the Keep Australia Beautiful national board supports the idea of trialling the CBD, a proposal that has been put to Sustainability Victoria.

Keep Australia Beautiful has also requested Mr Tony Burke, Federal Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, to support a trial of butt-disposal packaging. A similar request has been made to Mr Ryan Smith, Victorian Minister for Environment and Climate Change.

The issue of cigarette butt litter has been tabled at recent meetings of the Australian Packaging Covenant Council. The council has asked the tobacco industry Australian Packing Covenant signatories[1] to look at innovative ways to substantially reduce butt litter by changing packaging design.

Perhaps our state or federal governments are preparing to persuade the tobacco and packaging industries to proactively research and develop Mr Ross' invention. As a packaging designer, I think that the invention will work. The idea should be further explored to ascertain costs, which could perhaps be offset by the reduced cost of cleaning up butt litter.

While the plain packaging debate has dominated recent headlines, it is unclear if the legislation would lead more smokers to kick the habit. Meanwhile, the butts continue to pollute. It seems to me that Barry's Butt it and Box it® invention is timely – and in politics, timing is everything.

John Byron is CAD Manager at Niche Packaging Specialties in Bayswater, Victoria. He has been following the progress of Butt it and Box it®, with great interest, for some years.

1 The Australian Packaging Covenant (APC) is a voluntary initiative, involving government and industry, to reduce the environmental effects of packaging on the environment. Its scope includes disposal of used packaging, conservation of resources through better design and production processes, and facilitating re-use and recycling of used packaging materials.

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