

[CITY / COUNTY LETTERHEAD]

[DRAFT LETTER TO MAJOR STUDIOS; cc: PARENT CORPORATIONS]

Dear [EXECUTIVE]:

On [DATE], the [COUNCIL] resolved unanimously to support voluntary efforts to sharply reduce adolescent exposure to smoking in films rated G, PG and PG-13. Researchers have concluded that exposure to on-screen smoking recruits half of all new U.S. smokers: 390,000 teens a year, of whom 120,000 will ultimately die from tobacco-caused cancers and heart and lung disease.

These published studies have convinced science-based health organizations* to endorse policies, including an R-rating for smoking content (with certain defined exceptions), that will cut adolescent exposure in half, avert almost 200,000 new tobacco addictions annually, and prevent 60,000 deaths a year in future years.

As a producer and distributor of motion pictures, you are primarily responsible for their content. In fact, in recent years, several major media companies that own Hollywood studios have argued to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission that corporate management routinely makes decisions about the content of their movies — including tobacco content — and that such decisions constitute “ordinary business” for the company.

To substantially reduce adolescent exposure, health advocates nationwide have proposed that the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), which administers the film industry’s voluntary age-classification system and on whose board your company is represented, should give future movies with tobacco content an R rating. Because your industry already routinely calibrates such content as language, sexuality and violence to achieve desired ratings, this is a reasonable proposal, as respectful of creative choices as the current system.

While the R would — in itself — limit adolescent exposure to much smoking content, it is only about 50% efficient at keeping young people under 17 out of shows rated R or away from videos rated R. The main effect of an R-rating for tobacco content would be that producers, pursuing the larger audiences afforded by a PG-13 rating, would tend to keep tobacco out of movies that would otherwise qualify to be rated PG-13. As of 2004, 57 percent of all U.S. live action movies with smoking were rated less than R.

The alternatives? A PG-13 “warning” that merely keeps smoking out of G and PG films, would reduce adolescents’ exposure by less than 5 percent, researchers estimate. Clearing smoking from 100 percent of films would require official censorship, which nobody supports. We therefore urge your company to make it corporate policy, domestically and internationally, no longer to distribute youth-rated movies with smoking. We also encourage you to work with other members of the MPAA to update the ratings to reflect the scientific consensus on a major health challenge — and to treat smoking, which kills 453,000 Americans a year, as seriously as the MPAA now treats offensive but legally-protected language that kills no one.

* American Medical Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Legacy Foundation, American Heart Association, American Lung Association, the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology, the Society for Adolescent Medicine and others, including the L.A. County Dept. of Health Services.

Specifically, the R-rating policy endorsed by the [COUNCIL] on [DATE] reads:

Any film that shows or implies tobacco should be rated R. The only exceptions should be when the presentation of tobacco clearly and unambiguously reflects the dangers and consequences of tobacco use or is necessary to represent smoking of a real historical figure;

The [COUNCIL] also endorses and recommends to your company three other policy proposals:

Certify No Pay-Offs: The producers should post a certificate in the credits at the end of the movie declaring that nobody on the production received anything of value (cash money, free cigarettes or other gifts, free publicity, interest-free loans or anything else) from anyone in exchange for using or displaying tobacco;

Require Strong Anti-Smoking Ads: Studios and theaters should require a genuinely strong anti-smoking ad (not one produced by a tobacco company) to run before any film with any tobacco presence, regardless of its MPAA rating;

Stop Identifying Tobacco Brands: There should be no tobacco brand identification nor the presence of tobacco brand imagery (such as billboards) in the background of any movie scene;

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control cite adolescent exposure to on-screen smoking as a primary reason the national decline in teen smoking has stalled in recent years. Won't you help stop tobacco addiction and death taking hold in another generation? Your participation is purely voluntary, but it can make a tremendous difference — preventing hundreds of thousands of deaths around the world.

The 120,000 annual deaths projected from population studies of adolescent exposure to smoking in movies and subsequent smoking initiation are more than all current U.S. deaths from preventable causes such as drunk driving, violent crime, illicit drug use and unsafe sex combined. You and half a dozen other industry leaders can cut that death toll by half at inconsequential cost and without government intervention. As public officials, we know how very rare such opportunities are. We urge you to take substantive, positive action as soon as possible.

To learn more about this issue — and the epidemiological evidence behind the growing public concern — we suggest this online resource maintained by the University of California-San Francisco Center for Tobacco Control Research and Education: smokefreemovies.ucsf.edu.

Cordially,