How many people did it take to put Marlboros In the Bedroom?

Widely praised for its artful depiction of family tragedy, Todd Field’s In the Bedroom is equally remarkable for gratuitously promoting Marlboro brand cigarettes on screen and in dialogue. Why would a cash-strapped independent do a favor for Philip Morris, which made $10 billion off tobacco sales last year?

Product placement is no secret in the movie industry, but even savvy ticket-buyers aren’t privy to the details. So if the stars of In the Bedroom (Greenstreet/Good Machine/Miramax) chat about whether a “comfortable” new Subaru is a four-wheel-drive or an SUV, and the vehicle shows up in the next scene, all we can do is ask if somebody on the production made a deal. And if a student hawking Kit Kat bars, shown in close-up, interrupts a ferocious scene between husband and wife, audiences can only wonder if it’s paid advertising or a red herring.

But when star Sissy Spacek puffs the Marlboro brand on screen, and Miramax distributes a publicity still of Spacek’s stature each time this “independent” labor of love hits a movie or video screen for decades to come.

With TV ads banned, Big Tobacco kills for this kind of promotional coup. The industry’s 2001 death toll: 480,000 Americans, 4 million worldwide.

If filmmakers believe smoking is essential to tell a story, so be it. This isn’t about censorship. But what a shame this otherwise admirable film poses moral questions it never intended. We urge U.S. filmmakers who portray smoking to:

1. Roll on-screen credits certifying that nobody on a production accepted anything of value from any tobacco company, its agents or fronts.
2. Run strong anti-tobacco ads in front of smoking movies. Put them on tapes and DVDs, too. Strong spots are proven to immunize audiences.
3. Quit identifying tobacco brands in the background or in action. Brand names are unnecessary.
4. Rate every smoking movie “R.” While this may identify smoking with maturity, it should give producers pause.

Get the whole story at SmokeFreeMovies.ucsf.edu

Smoke Free Movies aims to sharply reduce the film industry’s usefulness to Big Tobacco’s domestic and global marketing — a leading cause of disability and premature death. This initiative by Stanton Glantz, PhD (coauthor of The Cigarette Papers and Tobacco War), of the UCSF School of Medicine is supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund. To learn how you can help, visit our website or write to us: Smoke Free Movies, UCSF School of Medicine, Box 0130, San Francisco, CA 94143-0130.