

BUGA UP – You’ve come a long way baby

By [Frances van Zinnen](#), 23 August 2012



Over 50 years ago it was normal to smoke in airplanes, cinemas, workplaces and restaurants, and we were surrounded by cigarette advertising. Tobacco companies wooed us into believing that smoking made us look suave and sexy, or rugged and handsome, and that their products were not a health hazard. Overall, governments were complicit and a lack of political will left tobacco companies unchallenged for a long time. Baby boomer kids would sing along to the jingle for Escort cigarettes – *join the club, join the club, join the Escort club* (only 35c to join) – and watch the Flintstones on TV ('brought to you by Winston cigarettes'). Watching young teens smoking was as normal as buying Redskins or Choo Choo bars on the way home from school during the 1960s. After all, teenagers thought it was pretty cool to smoke and the tobacco industry had a vested interest in recruiting smokers.

It now seems unbelievable that tobacco companies could advertise as widely as they did, often targeting children and young people through television advertising and sports sponsorship. The bans on cigarette advertising were incremental and direct tobacco advertising on radio and television was phased out between 1973 and 1976. Billboard tobacco advertising was banned across Australia in 1993 and tobacco advertising through sports sponsorship was banned as recently as 2006. The Tobacco Plain Packaging Act was

legislated by the Australian Government in late 2011 with the clear objective to improve public health by actively discouraging people from taking up smoking and encouraging smokers to stop. Even more recently, to coincide with World No Tobacco Day, smoking outdoors in public places was banned in South Australia. This action aligns South Australia with other states, although NSW is lagging behind, with a delay on the enforcement of outdoor smoking until 2015.



A number of forces contributed to the eventual ban on cigarette advertising and one of the more interesting episodes in this history is the part that the unorthodox movement BUGA UP played.

The group started with three people – Ric Bolzan, Bill Snow and Geoff Coleman – and officially came into existence about one year after the first billboard was ‘refaced’ in October 1979. A meeting in the home of one of the founding members occurred one rainy night (the rain making it impossible to reface more billboards that night). The discussion focused on strategies and improved coordination to underpin activity and send out the message that cigarette advertising needs to stop and *stop now*. Rather than

continuing with the random billboard refacing, a decision was made to name the group and get organised.

The name BUGA UP was a play on the uniquely Australian ‘bugger up’ and linked the idea of using satirical messages to communicate anti-smoking messages. The very next refaced billboards were located on Parramatta Road opposite Sydney University and were signed using the full name BILLBOARD UTILISING GRAFFITISTS AGAINST UNHEALTHY PROMOTIONS. From then on, billboards were signed using only the BUGA UP acronym. Strong media interest followed and the BUGA UP movement was born.



In October 1980, BUGA UP held its first public meeting and launched the *BUGA-UP Summer Offensive*. Hundreds of tobacco and alcohol billboards were refaced during the offensive and growing public support prompted the establishment of a post office box and fighting fund to enable supporters to lend financial support. Funds did flow in and these were used to publish material and pay, where possible, fifty per cent of the fines for the BUGs who were caught.

The group was unstructured with no formal membership or office bearers, but during its peak, the Sydney-based movement spread to Melbourne, Adelaide, Hobart and Perth. Those active in BUGA UP included people aged 8 to 71 years of age, from a variety of professions and backgrounds. BUGA UP inspired similar movements in the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States. The London-based group COUGH UP even modelled themselves on BUGA UP. The spread and breadth of the campaign were much greater than many people realised.

It was not only a lack of social responsibility and total disregard for health displayed by the tobacco and advertising industries that drove founding members to action, it was also the visual assault of the billboards which they saw as a blot on the landscape.

BUGA UP attracted a number of professionals including doctors and academics to its activities. Dr Arthur Chesterfield-Evans was fighting the tobacco industry and raising awareness through the Non Smokers Movement Australia and the radio program 'Puff Off'. As a surgeon, Chesterfield-Evans saw firsthand the destructive properties of tobacco as he treated patients dying from tobacco-caused cancer. He saw refacing billboards as a moral rather than an illegal act.



Those active in BUGA UP were motivated to fight against the brazen right that wealthy corporations enjoyed: pushing carcinogenic products through seductive advertising. BUGA UP saw tobacco advertising as drug pushing and turned to civil disobedience as a way to redress the social irresponsibility that the governments of the day permitted.

BUGA UP successfully used humour and satire to drive its message through careful and often minimal billboard 'refacing'. Blocking out several letters of 'Benson and Hedges', for example, produced 'Be on edge', while 'John Player Special' could be changed to 'Lung Slayer Special'. The altered names were far from the original message that the tobacco companies intended and effectively turned the message on its head. BUGA UP correctly figured that humor was the best way to send their anti-tobacco messages.



Even though BUGA UP is best remembered for 'refacing' billboards, they were also involved in many other forms of consciousness-raising, such as publishing regular newsletters like *Billbored*, and producing anti-smoking merchandise, such as tee-shirts, postcards and posters. These 'products' made it easier for concerned health-care professional to support and promote the illegal activities and apply pressure on state governments. BUGA UP also used stalls at street fairs as part of their arsenal in their quest to educate the public and shame the tobacco industry. BUGA UP was involved in several elaborate media events, sabotages and spontaneous activism directed against the tobacco industry.

A fine example of spontaneous direct action and a quick win for BUGA UP occurred in a supermarket at Chatswood that was trialling plastic bags carrying cigarette advertisements. A BUGA UP activist who happened to be shopping that day refused to have his groceries packed in bags emblazoned with the advertising. He called a fellow activist who also came to the store, filled his trolley to overflowing and proceeded to cause havoc at the cash register by refusing the plastic bags. The store manager was called. Shortly thereafter, 'poor customer acceptance' was cited as the reason for aborting the trial. The sabotage was a success!

BUGA UP was involved in a number of media stunts too, including entering the Philip Morris competition in 1982 to find the new 'Marlboro Man'. The Marlboro Man campaign is cited as one of the most successful campaigns of all time, quadrupling sales of the brand within two years. Never shy of a challenge, BUGA UP found the perfect new Marlboro Man entrant in Frank, an elderly man in a wheelchair who smoked through his tracheotomy. Posters of Frank as the Marlboro Man were pasted across Sydney successfully tainting the Philip Morris campaign. In the spoof, *Marlboro Man* was changed to *Marble Row Man*, providing witty comment on the long-term effects of smoking on the lungs. The Philip Morris organisers were pretty unhappy as their prime media event had to be held at a secret location under tight security through fear of a visit by the activists.

SEWER SIZE

\$25,000 REWARD For the MarbleRow Man.

MarbleRow



Mr. Frank C. of Darlinghurst in Sydney is a lifetime smoker. Due to an operation (tracheotomy) he now smokes through a hole in his neck. Frank is B.U.G.A. U.P.'s entrant in the \$25,000 Philip Morris' Marlboro Man Competition, someone they describe as having 'a strong and distinctly individual masculinity - that unique difference that personifies the flavour of Marlboro'.

DO YOU THINK FRANK WILL WIN?

If you want to help B.U.G.A. U.P.'s fight against the tobacco companies write to: B.U.G.A. U.P.; BOX 78 WENTWORTH BLDG; UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY; 2006 N.S.W. AUSTRALIA.

Another stunt was the BUGA UP Logies, known as the 'Bogies'. With some of the glamour and many times the humour, this was the staging of an alternative advertising extravaganza. BUGA UP held seminars and entertainment at the former NSW Institute of Technology at Broadway NSW. Awards were presented in categories such as the most misleading advertisement, the most inane jingle, the advertisement breaking the most regulations and the ugliest billboard.

Tobacco-sponsored events were often 'visited' by BUGA UP activists in a number of well-orchestrated manoeuvres, such as the demonstration at the Art Gallery of NSW, which was hosting a Phillip Morris exhibition. A Marlboro Formula 1 racing car was placed in the foyer as a 'technology as art' exhibition. BUGA UP saw this as insidious advertising and in an

elaborate performance piece, Ric Bolzan chained himself to the Marlboro racing car before reading a piece on the abuse of art and exploitation of the Art Gallery by the tobacco industry. BUGA UP activists handed out plastic cups full of cigarette butts and oil, and encouraged the willing audience to drop them over the car. Fortunately for Bolzan, in the ensuing court case the charges of 'serious alarm or affront' were dismissed.



BUGA UP had plenty of colourful characters, but two of the more eccentric BUGS are now fondly remembered in their obituaries on the BUGA UP website: Lord Bloody Wog Rolo and fred cole (he insisted on small letters). Lord Bloody Wog Rolo changed his name from Rolando Mestman Tapier by deed poll reasoning that he had been called a 'wog' so often that he best make it official. Bill Snow, another founding member often engaged the police by calling in at local police stations to talk about the evils of the tobacco industry and BUGA UP's counter attacks. Snow was also the ambassador at the 1984 BUGA UP embassy, strategically positioned opposite a leading advertising agency in North Sydney.

BUGA UP also attracted women to the cause. Lord Bloody Wog Rolo and his future wife Ros met in 1983 at a billboard they were both about to 'reface'. Marge, a driving force of the BUGA UP movement in Melbourne, was a mature woman then, who is now in her eighties. Marge would conceal her spray cans inside her cape and discreetly reface billboards and the cigarette advertisements on trams as they passed through central Melbourne. Often dressed in a houndstooth check, she looked the archetypal aunt rather than an activist. Other women included Sydney-based activist Daniele; her modus operandi was refacing using prefabricated stickers (a method also favoured by others such as Brian Robson and fred cole).



BUGA UP was active from 1979 to the mid-90s and their accomplishments can be attributed to the passion and tenacity of not just the older and founding members, but also their success in attracting new talent which reinvigorated the cause. Peter Vogel, businessman and inventor of the Fairlight synthesiser, and Lachlann Partridge were among the early recruits. Their call to action included taking up the invitation 'So if an advertisement bothers you, bother us' by the former Advertising Standards Council (ASC) (self-regulation of the advertising industry was at that time administered through them). Lachlann and Peter established the Advertising Double Standards Council (ADSC) with the satirical motto: 'If advertising standards are good, then double standards are TWICE as good' and went into overdrive 'bothering' the ASC with witty letters of complaint against tobacco advertisements. Although the ASC alleged the complaints to be frivolous, the ADSC often

pointed to clear breaches by the tobacco companies. In July 1985, Vogel was declared a vexatious litigant by the ASC and was informed that his complaints would no longer be investigated regardless of their merit.

In 2013 it will be twenty years since tobacco advertising on billboards was banned. Because of their unorthodoxy, BUGA UP were largely unsung heroes of the fight, however Nigel Gray (head of the Anti-Cancer Council of Victoria 1968—1995) has since publicly commented on the decisive role they played in the history of tobacco control.



In preparation for this significant anniversary, a sizeable amount of content has been uploaded to [the official BUGA UP website](#) to capture this important and unique chapter of

Australian history. Many Sydney dwellers over the age of 45 will recollect BUGA UP's *greatest hits* (billboards were often *hit* by paintballs). For everyone else, the website presents a comprehensive history of the world of tobacco advertising during that era and a struggle where David finally beats Goliath. A comprehensive collection of more than 120 press clippings taken from articles from Australian, Canadian, American and British newspapers and journals involving BUGA UP are now available on the website.

While BUGA UP is essentially in hibernation, it is a long way from forgotten. BUGA UP is still approached from time to time with requests for interviews and information. The group is often referenced in literature as being possibly the first example in Australia of culture jamming – in fact the term 'culture jamming' was coined in 1984, well after the formation of BUGA UP.

Recently an activist group targeting the use of plastics requested the use of the BUGA UP brand. Although BUGA UP would most certainly support the campaign against plastics, a decision was made not to dilute BUGA UP's strong association with the anti-tobacco push and the request was declined.

Interestingly, the use of word 'UP' in modern activist groups is likely an acknowledgement of the campaign and its place in modern activism.

BUGA UP would love to hear from supporters and especially from those who were moved to take direct action with spray can in hand against the tobacco industry. Use the contact page at bugaup.org and share your story.

Frances van Zinnen is a Sydney based public servant making her writing debut. Frances' interests include social justice and sustainability. She strives towards the Aristotelian ideal of living the 'eudaimonic' (flourishing) life.