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TALK OF THE TOWN

Dept. of Puffery

*If it hadn't gone down, the Titanic
might have gone up in smoke.*

by Malcolm Gladwell

If you were, say, the president of Philip Morris and you were fantasizing about how to sell more cigarettes, you'd probably start with the movies. A love story, perhaps, because adolescent girls--who are your target audience--love love stories. The male lead would be a teen idol. He would smoke while lying on a bench, gazing up at the night sky. The young heroine would rebelliously blow smoke in her mother's face. In a spirited moment at a party, she might snatch a cigarette from the mouth of a stranger and draw deeply, staring into her lover's eyes. You'd put them on a boat. A big, romantic boat. The boat would sink. The film would be a blockbuster, a movie that teen-age girls would see three and four and five times, until they could mime every line and gesture.

Obviously, this is only a dream, since no self-respecting teen idol would

work for a cigarette company, and no cigarette company could ever get away with so blatantly targeting an adolescent audience. But this is the wonderful thing about being in the cigarette business right now: Whatever you cannot do for yourself, Hollywood, apparently, will do for you. "If I were the head of a tobacco company, I'd say, 'God bless "Titanic," ' " Bruce Silverman, a California ad executive, who directed that state's antismoking media campaign, says.

What makes "Titanic" perfect as a smoking movie is that it transcends the smoking-movie cliché. Most movies are, in some way, linked to a specific brand. Last summer's "My Best Friend's Wedding," for example, in which Julia Roberts smoked one cigarette after another as she schemed to defeat a romantic rival, was clearly a Newport movie. In Newport ads, the media critic Mark Crispin Miller has written, "there is always an

aggressor acting on a victim--whose expression has, deliberately, been made ambiguous, a look at once of 'pleasure' and of terror." (The gray area between pleasure and terror, it can safely be said, is the subtext of all Julia Roberts movies.) Bruce Willis's chain-smoking loner hero in the "Die Hard" series, on the other hand, is pure Marlboro Man. "The Marlboro Man is almost always alone and is never subject to any authority whatsoever," the marketing expert Richard Pollay wrote in 1995. "There are no parents, no older brothers, no foreman . . . in Marlboro Country."

But what is "Titanic"? Leonardo DiCaprio smoking pensively on the Titanic deck is classic Marlboro Man. The swells in first class trading cigarettes are Dunhill. The rough-and-tumble crowd in steerage rolling their own could be

taken as a coded reference to the no-frills, no-additive, no-bull Winston, while Kate Winslet blowing smoke in her mother's face is very much "You've come a long way, baby"--Virginia Slims. As for the climactic smoking scene, in which Winslet coquettishly snatches a cigarette from a man's mouth, that's pure Joe Camel. As Camel's former ad agency, Young and Rubicam, said of the brand's archetypal smoker, "Always the winner, on top of the situation, beating the system, and covering the scene, whatever he does he does with a style and joie de vivre all his own." In "Titanic," smoking is sexy and social and sophisticated and genuine and rebellious, and in the end virtually everybody dies--which is the most perfect touch of all.

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