

# Markstein Cartoon Speaks to a Little-Known Critical Health Issue

Michael H. Crosby

It's not often that a cartoon catches my eye as did Gary Markstein's latest (03.07.11). A man reads a newspaper with the headline: "Animated Movie 'Rango' Contains Numerous Smoking Scenes: Anti-Smoking Groups Angered." He says to a little boy walking down the stairs puffing on more than 20 cigarettes: "Billy, did you see the new Rango movie yet?" All "Billy" can muffle out is "MGLPMH!"

My Province is one of those "anti-smoking groups" noted in his cartoon. Along with other faith-based shareholders connected to the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, we have engaged the major movie companies about the impact of tobacco images in youth-friendly movies for the past 10+ years.

Toward this end we actually talked with Paramount on a pre-arranged call on Friday, March 4. That same weekend its *Rango* opened on 3,900 screens, becoming the weekend's top film, grossing \$28,079,323. In those three days, *Rango* delivered nearly 300 million tobacco impressions to theater audiences across the U.S. and Canada. How many of these customers were impressionable children?

Even though the Motion Picture Association of American (MPAA) rated *Rango* PG because of its "rude humor, language, action and smoking," I don't think the many parents that took their "Billys" and his siblings to see this cartoon knew of the threat it might be to their children's health.

Markstein, fine cartoonist that he is, has captured in his one picture-worth-a-thousand-words a powerful, but little-known fact. Peer-reviewed, statistic-based, study after study have shown that, along with parental smoking and peer pressure, minors watching youth-friendly movies that have tobacco images in them are much more inclined to initiate tobacco use.

In our conversation with Paramount it became clear that cigarette smoking in *Rango* was not of its making. It came from the film's screen play writer, director and producer. Gore Verbinski. When such a well-known personage wants tobacco in a film, even it is supposed to be youth-friendly, it's less easy for a company to challenge. This makes it incumbent on such artists to recognize the fact that their artistic license involves a responsibility to be aware of the consequences of their artistic choices. If tobacco use is not *essential* to the story-line (as it would be in a film of FDR), let them show their real creativity by images for their characters that are not destructive to the health of their young audiences.

Ever since we first engaged Paramount and the other movie companies on this issue, it has made consistent progress in ridding its youth-friendly movies from tobacco impressions. For instance it reported to us that, while 20% of its PG-13 films had tobacco depictions during 1999-2006, 100% of its PG-13 films in 2010 were tobacco-free.

While, what Paramount now calls "The *Rango* Incident," has impacted its credibility, it has not ruined it. I hope it might be considered one of those "teachable moments" that comes now and then. To this end, Paramount already has said it has "re-invigorated" its attention to the issue and the need to

continued oversight of everything from all entities knowing its policy, its dissemination in its production hand books, the dailys and everything in between until final production. The brouhaha that has ensued has been instructive to all: not only Paramount but all the major movie studios and parents especially. Hopefully Billy won't be too damaged as a result.

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