

## Advocacy Groups Challenge Studios Over Smoking in Youth-Rated Movies

Brooks Barnes | Sept. 30, 2014

**LOS ANGELES** — The major media companies are coming under renewed attack by a group of faith-based shareholders who say they want more progress in limiting the cigarette smoking that young people see in movies.

At the urging of advocacy groups concerned about the power of movies to encourage young people to try cigarettes, Hollywood over the last decade has sharply reduced the amount of smoking imagery in youth-rated films. But the Motion Picture Association of America has resisted calls to give an automatic R rating to any movie that depicts smoking, citing the need for artistic license.

In response, the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility and the advocacy organization **As You Sow** have decided to step up the pressure by filing shareholder resolutions with the parent companies of the six major movie studios. “We think we’ve given the movie studios enough time,” said Sister Nora Nash of the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia, one of the advocates leading the effort.

The resolutions, so far filed with Viacom, which owns Paramount Pictures, and the Walt Disney Company, call for the studios to publish reports on the public health effects of any film they produce or distribute, “including an analysis of the company’s exposure to reputational, legal and financial risk based on the public health impact of smoking in its movies.”

Viacom, Disney and the motion picture association declined to comment.

Studios tend to dismiss these kinds of shareholder resolutions, which typically have a difficult time gaining enough votes to pass, as public relations stunts. Disney executives in particular believe their company has been unfairly singled out when it comes to smoking, especially since it has adopted what is regarded as Hollywood’s toughest anti-smoking policy: No cigarette has been allowed in Disney-labeled films since 2007 — period.

But people like Sister Nora and the Rev. Michael H. Crosby, a board member of the Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility, say Disney’s policy is not good enough. They want Disney to extend its restrictions to PG-13 films that it does not make but distributes under the Touchstone banner for Steven Spielberg’s DreamWorks Studios. DreamWorks films include period dramas like “The Help.”

In letters sent to Viacom and Disney, the shareholder groups base their requests on recent reports on smoking on screen from the surgeon general and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Last year, the C.D.C. concluded: “Giving an R rating to movies with smoking would be expected to reduce the number of teen smokers by nearly one in five and prevent one million deaths.”

“Since this is an industrywide problem that has not been resolved by the M.P.A.A., we need to go ask our fellow shareholders to send a message,” Mr. Crosby said. “This is not just a public health issue. It’s a basic moral issue as well.”