

## - ISSUE BRIEF -

# SHIFTING THE BLAME: THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY AND YOUTH SMOKING

*This issue brief is designed to support counter-marketing efforts by state tobacco control programs and tobacco control advocates. It sets forth a compelling topic and provides evidence from recently released tobacco industry documents to support its claims, concluding with statements that emphasize possible counter-marketing messages.*

### THE ISSUE

In an effort to push back against the impression that they purposely market their products to youth to replace their customers who have died from using their products, the tobacco companies have employed Corporate Social Responsibility tactics such as advertising campaigns that purportedly discourage youth smoking. Far from being a step in the direction of ethical corporate behavior, industry-sponsored youth smoking prevention programs are probably purposefully ineffective; they assign no actual responsibility for the cause and prevalence of youth smoking to the tobacco companies; and they might actually have the perverse effect of encouraging youth smoking.

### THE EVIDENCE

The tobacco companies' campaigns to curb youth smoking assign responsibility to parents to address the problem of youth smoking. It's never acknowledged that the tobacco companies' own advertising and product design is targeted to excite youth interest and gain new underage customers. In fact, the tobacco industry denies that advertising convinces anyone to start smoking, although in private it does acknowledge that its advertising cannot be targeted solely to adults.

- \* In a pamphlet distributed by R.J. Reynolds through their "Right Decisions, Right Now" program, the question "Why do kids smoke?" is answered with three factors: "peer pressure," "desire to appear more mature," and "family factors." There is nothing in the pamphlet that assigns any responsibility to the tobacco industry or R.J. Reynolds's own marketing.<sup>1</sup>
- \* Another factor in youth smoking, according to R.J. Reynolds's "Right Decisions Right Now" literature, is youth access to cigarettes.<sup>2</sup> This ignores the fact that the tobacco companies have a history of encouraging and fighting to protect self-service displays that have been proven to encourage youth access and shoplifting, a form of sampling the companies not only are well aware of but reimburse merchants through promotional allowances and reimbursement for pilferage to encourage them to support it.<sup>3</sup>
- \* In a draft of questions tobacco executives might receive, accompanied by suggested answers, to the question "do advertising bans reduce the incidence of smoking" the suggested answer given is "the answer appears to be no."<sup>4</sup> This gets things backwards and avoids the real issue. The real question is does tobacco advertising encourage youth smoking, and the answer by numerous scholars and studies is "yes."<sup>5</sup>
- \* Privately, Philip Morris has admitted that its marketing does appeal to youth smokers, even if the company takes no responsibility for that fact. In a 1999 memo about a range of issues that concerned Philip Morris, the unnamed author admitted: "So long as we continue to market our products to adults *in any way*, we will remain subject to this skepticism and distrust. It's fundamentally true that it is impossible for us to engage in marketing that is simultaneously appealing to a 21 year-old smoker, and repulsive to a 17 year-old smoker. As long as we market at all, we will stand accused of marketing to kids."<sup>6</sup>

The industry's youth smoking prevention programs misfire, possibly on purpose, and turn out to be perverse advertisements for the pleasure of smoking.

- \* In an R.J. Reynolds pamphlet on preventing youth smoking directed at parents who smoke, the parents are advised to give their kids a "do as I say, not as I do" lecture, which merely enhances smoking's allure as an "adult choice."
- \* The pamphlet reassures parents about the soundness of their decision to smoke, stating "If you are like most smokers, you smoke because you enjoy it," and then continues, "But you also believe that **SMOKING SHOULD NOT BE PART OF GROWING UP.**"<sup>7</sup> It reassures parents that there is no hypocrisy in the situation for them to continue smoking while telling their kids not to: "So talking to your child about not smoking presents you with a unique challenge, because you will be talking about not doing something your child sees you doing every day."<sup>8</sup>
- \* Parents are encouraged to tell children about the health risks smoking presents, yet the brochure admits that a governmental study has shown that despite youth awareness of the risks, smoking levels continue to increase.<sup>9</sup>
- \* Parents are also advised to explain to their kids just why their "decision to smoke is as an informed adult", and particularly to be honest about how much they enjoy smoking, thus falsely giving the impression that the parents made an adult and volitional choice to start and continue smoking (instead of getting hooked as children themselves as is the case for most smokers), and giving children yet another advertisement about why smoking is so desirable and attractive.<sup>10</sup>
- \* For parents who don't actually like to smoke and who would like to quit, the brochure advises them to quit and to tell the kids how hard it is to stop, another strategy that carries no weight because kids imagine they are immortal and are not swayed by arguments about what will happen to them someday.<sup>11</sup>
- \* A set of posters R.J. Reynolds promoted to supposedly deter youth smoking actually use words that appear to be aimed at promoting smoking to youth. They used words and phrases like "cool," "choice," "great idea," and "most of your friends."<sup>12</sup>

*"[I]t is impossible for us to engage in marketing that is simultaneously appealing to a 21 year-old smoker, and repulsive to a 17 year-old smoker." – Philip Morris*

Internally, tobacco companies judge their youth smoking prevention program to be successful even if they don't actually discourage youth from smoking.

- \* In an undated report, Lorillard's "Think. Don't Smoke." campaign was trumpeted as successful because the advertisement was "believable, attention getting, memorable and – most importantly - - generated universal understanding of the main message of "Don't Smoke" among kids."<sup>13</sup> The report did not measure or give any weight to whether the advertising campaign actually discouraged youth smoking.
- \* Studies have shown that the tobacco companies have employed purposely ineffective youth smoking prevention campaigns in order to create a better public image without jeopardizing their share of the youth smoking market.<sup>14</sup> These studies showed that the tobacco companies judge a campaign successful if it has youth recognition and comprehension, not if it actually discourages smoking.

There is a disconnect between the way the multinational tobacco companies market to American youth and those in other countries. In America, they are constrained by the Master Settlement Agreement and a more active litigation landscape. This has caused difficulties for their overseas public relations efforts and they have had to answer for it.

- \* In 1997, a draft of a set of talking points for Philip Morris addressed the accusation "You protect only American kids," by responding:

**"Philip Morris International's marketing code applies everywhere we sell our product, and we have youth access programs in many places. In each jurisdiction, we work within the framework of local laws and with our business partners to ensure that our marketing activities comply with our basic philosophy that our product is only for adults who choose to smoke."<sup>15</sup>**

## **THE MESSAGE**

**The tobacco companies take no responsibility for the prevalence of youth smoking and seek to shift the blame to youth smokers and their parents.**

**Industry-sponsored youth smoking prevention programs are not designed to stop youth smoking but rather to mislead the public into believing that the industry has changed the way it does business. These programs perversely encourage smoking by presenting it as a forbidden, sophisticated adult activity.**

**Despite their public denials, at least one tobacco company admits that its marketing is attractive to underage smokers.**

**Despite employing Corporate Social Responsibility window-dressing in the U.S., tobacco companies are getting flack for targeting youth in other countries.**

This study was conducted with the financial support of the American Legacy Foundation. This issue brief does not necessarily represent the views of the Foundation, Foundation staff, or its Board of Directors.

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1 RJ Reynolds Tobacco Company. How to talk to your kids about not smoking even if you do. Bates No. LIGS2507574. Available at <http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/ibo67a00>.

2 *Id.*

3 See, e.g., EC Feighery, KM Ribisl, PI Clark and HH Haladjian. How Tobacco Companies Ensure Prime Placement of Their Advertising and Products in Stores: Interviews With Retailers About Tobacco Company Incentive Programmes. *Tobacco Control*, 2003;12:184-188; Paul N. Bloom. Role of Slotting Fees and Trade Promotions in Shaping How Tobacco is Marketed in Retail Stores. *Tobacco Control*, 2001;10:340-344; Ellen Feighery, Kurt Ribisl, Nina Schleider, Sonia Halvorson. Tobacco Marketing in Stores and Tobacco Industry Incentives Paid to Retailers: What's the Connection?, Stanford Center for Research in Disease Prevention, Stanford University, 1999.

4 Marketing and Tobacco Use. Undated. Bates No. 293000157. Available at <http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/ecb77a00>.

5 See, e.g., National Cancer Institute. The Role of the Media in Promoting and Reducing Tobacco Use. Tobacco Control Monograph No. 19. Bethesda, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, National Cancer Institute. NIH Pub. No. 07-6242, June 2008; Slater, SJ, Frank J. Chaloupka, Melanie Wakefield, Lloyd D. Johnston, Patrick M. O'Malley. The Impact of Retail Cigarette Marketing Practices on Youth Smoking Uptake. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* 2007;161(5):440-445; Biener, L, Siegel M. Tobacco Marketing and Adolescent Smoking: More Support for a Causal Inference. *American Journal of Public Health* 2000;90(3):407-411.

6 Health Issues For Smokers Report. September 20, 1999. Bates No. 2076742783. Available at <http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/gpg77a00>. (emphasis in original)

7 RJ Reynolds Tobacco Company. How To Talk To Your Kids About Not Smoking Even If You Do. Bates No. LIGS2507573. Available at <http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/ibo67a00>. (capitals in the original)

8 *Id.* (underlining in the original)

9 *Id.* at LIGS2507574.

10 *Id.*

11 *Id.*

12 Osmon, HE. Order -- Youth Non-Smoking Materials. Available at <http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/eco67a00>.

13 Youth Smoking Prevention: Four Integrated Strategies. Undated. Bates No. 2074536502. Available at <http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/xyf77a00>.

14 See, e.g., Anne Landman, Pamela M. Ling, Stanton Glantz. Tobacco Industry Youth Smoking Prevention Programs: Protecting the Industry and Hurting Tobacco Control, *American Journal of Public Health*, 2002;92(6):917-930; Melanie Wakefield, Kim McLeod, Cheryl L. Perry. "Stay Away From Them Until You're Old Enough to Make a Decision": Tobacco Company Testimony About Youth Smoking Initiation. *Tobacco Control*, 2006;15(Suppl IV):iv44-iv53;

15 Smoking restriction notes. November 12, 1997. Bates No. 2075281415. Available at <http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/fhg77a00>.