

- ISSUE BRIEF -
TOBACCO INDUSTRY
“YOUTH SMOKING PREVENTION” PROGRAMS

This issue brief describes how cigarette companies’ own youth smoking prevention programs directly and indirectly assign blame for youth smoking on parents and youth themselves, rather than taking responsibility for marketing a deadly and addictive product in ways that appeal to youth.

THE ISSUE

The tobacco industry's “youth smoking prevention” programs focus largely on assigning blame to parents and children for youth smoking. This frames the issue around improving parental communication and youth self-esteem instead of recognizing that one of the most significant factors in youth smoking is tobacco industry marketing and targeting of youth. Moreover, by sponsoring youth smoking prevention programs, the tobacco companies attempt to claim credit for being better corporate citizens than in the past, even though the industry is still conducting business as usual when it comes to marketing its products in a way that makes them attractive to youth.

THE EVIDENCE

The Threat Posed by Concerns about Youth Smoking

* In the late 1990s, the tobacco industry began to recognize the power tobacco control advocates wielded by focusing on the industry’s marketing of its products to youth. Regulators and legislators took notice and a generally anti-tobacco sentiment began to build. In an effort to improve its corporate image and to preserve its viability as a legitimate and barely-regulated industry, it decided to try to co-opt the message that youth should not smoke. Even so, the industry followed its tradition of gearing its message towards personal responsibility and choice.

- In 1995, the Commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration, called smoking prevalence and the harm it causes a “pediatric disease,”¹ and attempted to claim authority for regulating cigarettes as drug delivery devices.² Recognizing that the issue of youth smoking left it vulnerable to regulation,³ R.J. Reynolds’s Chairman/CEO called Dr. Kessler’s move “tactical brilliance.”⁴
- A 1995 draft of a speech by a British American Tobacco Company solicitor asserted that the company needed to “seize the moral high ground on this issue” and preempt public health advocates, regulators and legislators by instituting policies and programs to prevent youth smoking. He stated: “The bottom line . . . is . . . if we don’t do something fast to project that sense of industry responsibility regarding the youth access issue, we are going to be looking at severe marketing restrictions . . . [which would] pave the way for equally severe legislation or regulation on where adults are allowed to smoke.”⁵
- In 1997, tobacco industry trade group the Tobacco Institute proposed the creation of the Institute for Youth Development, which would “focus[] on values, character, personal responsibility and decision making skills.”⁶ Another Tobacco Institute program called “Helping Youth Decide” echoed these themes of choice and personal responsibility, stating in a 1984 report that “Young people need opportunities to examine the potential consequences of choices, to choose and to accept the responsibility for the choices they make.”⁷

- By 1991, the Tobacco Institute had formulated a plan for dealing with youth smoking which the tobacco companies later used as a template for their youth smoking prevention programs.⁸ The plan called for the following “simple strategy:” “1. Heavily promote industry opposition to youth smoking. 2. Align industry with broader, more sophisticated view of the problem, i.e. parental inability to offset peer pressure. . . .”⁹ The report further emphasized that the strategy should “reinforce[e] the belief that peer pressure, – not advertising – is the cause of youth smoking.”¹⁰ This plan created a template that all of the major tobacco companies eventually followed in constructing their youth smoking prevention programs.
 - After the major tobacco companies signed the Master Settlement Agreement with state attorneys general who had sued to recover Medicaid expenses for smoking-related illnesses, most of the companies followed the Tobacco Institute’s directive and instituted youth smoking prevention programs.¹¹ Even though the Master Settlement Agreement did not call for the companies to engage in youth smoking prevention activities, the companies touted their voluntary efforts as proof that they were responsible corporations.¹²
- * The industry’s youth smoking prevention programs were geared towards projecting a better corporate image, and not towards actually preventing or discouraging youth smoking.
- In a year 2000 piece of company literature, Philip Morris described the reasoning behind its youth smoking prevention programs: “as responsible business executives, parents and citizens, we’re dedicated to the responsible use and marketing of our products.”¹³ But studies have found that the tobacco companies had more interest in improving their corporate image than discouraging youth tobacco consumption.^{14,15,16} To combat this corporate makeover attempt, tobacco control advocates and scholars have suggested “an aggressive national tobacco countermarketing campaign”¹⁷ and other denormalization activities.^{18,19,20}
 - Despite its pose of corporate social responsibility, the tobacco industry continues to market its products in a way that makes them attractive to youth.²¹

Industry Sponsored Youth Smoking Prevention Programs

* The tobacco industry’s youth smoking prevention programs were wrongheaded, ineffective and cynical attempts at garnering public approval for their efforts to discourage youth smoking, when effect, and possibly the goal, of its youth smoking prevention programs was to maintain the status quo of youth smoking levels and to stave off regulation.

- In an attempt to counteract and divert attention from their history of researching youth smoking behavior and marketing their products to youth, most of the American tobacco companies launched youth smoking prevention programs.²²
 - There are several themes which appeared repeatedly in connection with these programs. The programs all emphasized smoking as a choice with which youth are faced and which, when they are old enough, smoking is a legitimate avenue for expressing adulthood, while ignoring the adverse health consequences such a decision will yield.^{23,24,25,26}
 - All of the tobacco companies’ youth smoking prevention programs, to varying degrees, used both overt and subliminal messages which glamorize smoking, holding it out as an adult activity and creating a forbidden fruit image that attracts kids’ attention.²⁷
 - The existence of the programs allowed the tobacco companies to address youth directly and claim that they had a legitimate excuse for studying youth smoking behavior, which provided a pretense for gathering information that could also aid marketing efforts.^{28,29}
 - Studies have shown that the tobacco industry’s youth smoking prevention efforts actually created in youth a more favorable view of both the tobacco companies and smoking.^{30,31}
 - Scholars also have found that the industry’s youth smoking prevention programs were ineffective, possibly on purpose.^{32,33,34}
- * The industry’s youth smoking prevention programs portrayed youth smoking as a choice and a personal responsibility.
- In 2001, Philip Morris initiated its “Think. Don’t Smoke.” campaign aimed at children aged 10-14,³⁵ which included commercials aired on television,³⁶ in movie theaters and on the closed circuit Channel One, which is broadcast in schools.³⁷ The company boasted that its “Think. Don’t Smoke.” television and print ads had

“reached 97% of teens at least 33 times throughout the year. . .”³⁸ The company stated in an internal memo that one of the program’s stated purposes was to “[r]einforce each teen’s ability to make his or her own decisions.”³⁹ This seems to contradict the paternalistic tone of the slogan “Think. Don’t Smoke.”

- R.J. Reynolds’s “Right Decisions, Right Now” youth smoking prevention program uses a school curriculum aimed at youth which by 2000, according to an R.J. Reynolds internal document, had been provided to “approximately 94% of all middle and junior high school students in the United States”⁴⁰ The curriculum’s cover letter addressed to educators summarized: “This study guide . . . focuses on responsibility – defining it and giving students a solid foundation on which to form their own attitudes and actions. Too often, young people associate the concept of responsibility with blame . . .”⁴¹ The curriculum suggested as a topic for discussion “whether there should be rules about [] things or if they should be left up to the individual students to decide.”⁴² The teacher’s guide to the curriculum stated that “[b]y instilling a sense of responsibility and commitment in the students now, the program will assist students in developing into citizens who accept and act on their responsibilities to themselves, their families, their community, the work-place and society in general.”⁴³ This sounds like R.J. Reynolds is trying to develop future customers who won’t sue the company for their smoking-related injuries later because they will believe that their condition is solely their own personal responsibility.
- Lorillard Tobacco Company’s youth smoking prevention program ran “Tobacco is Whacko If You’re a Teen” commercials. In a 2000 Lorillard survey conducted to measure the efficacy of its commercials, the youths interviewed expressed the view that the commercials did not give them adequate reasons to choose not to smoke, since they did not explain the adverse health consequences of smoking, and some teens felt that by using a slogan that singled out teens as the target of the “don’t smoke” message, “it implicat[ed] permission to all non-teens” and felt that “it weakened the power of the message.”^{44,45}

* Applying its infamous Orwellian illogic, the tobacco industry said it was going to take responsibility for youth smoking by discouraging it, but in reality its goal was to deflect and divert attention from its true responsibility for creating a youth smoking epidemic. Incredibly, the industry denied that its marketing had anything to do with youth smoking. Instead it blamed peer pressure and bad parenting.

- Public health authorities and studies have concluded that tobacco industry marketing plays a central role in youth smoking initiation.^{46,47,48} Yet the tobacco industry insists that its advertising does not encourage youths to take up smoking.
- In 1999, Brown & Williamson’s Vice President for corporate affairs and youth smoking prevention stated in a press release: “Why do kids really smoke? It’s not because of what a tobacco company does, . . . but rather because of what kids’ friends do. . . [P]eer influence, the need to establish independence and lack of parental involvement are the main reasons kids smoke.”⁴⁹
- R.J. Reynolds’s current Right Decisions, Right Now guide for parents contains a long list of causes for “why adolescents try or use tobacco,” which includes “lacking parental support,” “having low self-esteem,” “linking smoking with a particular social image or being ‘grown up,’” and “wanting to bond with peers who use tobacco.”⁵⁰ Absent from the list is any reference to the relentless and pervasive marketing the company uses to sell its products.
- Privately, tobacco companies acknowledge the effect their advertising has on youth. For instance, in a 1999 memo about a range of issues that concerned Philip Morris, the 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. ⁵¹

By ascribing the prevalence of youth smoking to peer pressure and poor parental communication, the companies redirect the responsibility towards the youth themselves, their parents and teachers, while ascribing no responsibility to the corporation that manufactured, marketed and sold the cigarettes. ⁵²

* Industry youth smoking prevention programs use subliminal or overt messages which glamorize smoking or present it as forbidden fruit.

- Scholars have found that the “forbidden fruit” aspect of smoking cigarettes is a factor in youth smoking initiation.⁵³ An adult telling them not to smoke is often seen as an added attraction.⁵⁴ The tobacco industry

knows this and has incorporated such tactics into its youth smoking prevention programs.

- Lorillard's youth smoking prevention program's slogan was "Tobacco Is Whacko If You're a Teen," which the company continued to use even after receiving feedback from teens that this was confusing and alienating, and was viewed as a further inducement to smoke.^{55,56} The teens particularly objected to the "If You're a Teen" part of the slogan, which they complained singled them out since they believed that people of all ages should refrain from smoking.⁵⁷ In short, the teens surveyed responded that "The slogan sucks. It killed the commercial."⁵⁸ Further, the teens felt that the tobacco company's assertion that smoking is not cool rang a false note and was unrealistic and disingenuous.⁵⁹ Considering all the effort the tobacco industry has poured into making smoking seem attractive and cool to youth, this probably did not come as a surprise to either the surveyors or Lorillard.
- In an R.J. Reynolds pamphlet on preventing youth smoking directed at parents who smoke, the parents were essentially advised to tell their kids to "do as I say, not as I do," which might enhance smoking's allure as an adult choice.⁶⁰ The pamphlet reassured parents about the soundness of their decision to smoke, and reassured parents that there is no hypocrisy in continuing to smoke while telling their kids not to.⁶¹ Parents who followed this advice could end up abetting the tobacco industry in marketing smoking to youth, as well as themselves continuing to smoke when they might otherwise have considered quitting in order to set a good example for their children.
- The use of subliminal messaging is another trademark of tobacco industry youth smoking prevention programs. For instance, a 1997 set of posters R.J. Reynolds promoted to supposedly deter youth smoking used words that appeared to be aimed at promoting smoking to youth. The poster contained words and phrases like "cool,"⁶² "look attractive,"⁶³ "choice,"⁶⁴ "fit in,"⁶⁵ and "great idea."⁶⁶ Almost all of the posters depicted children smoking.
- In the spring of 2000, Philip Morris distributed 15 million book covers to children ages nine through fourteen years of age.⁶⁷ Philip Morris used the same advertising agency -- Young & Rubicam -- that it used to help study and promote its cigarettes to "young adult smokers"^{68,69} (a term which is an industry euphemism for underage and teenage smokers⁷⁰), and which also helped R.J. Reynolds to promote the notoriously youth-oriented Joe Camel cartoon advertising campaign.⁷¹ On the outside front of the book covers, there was a boy riding a snow board and the words "Don't Wipe Out." School officials denounced the book covers, asserting that they and their students detected subliminal images that resembled cigarettes, tobacco leaves and smoke clouds.^{72,73} They called the program a "promotional endeavor"⁷⁴ and a "marketing ploy to get the Philip Morris name in front of kids in grade school [and] the middle schools"⁷⁵ intended to improve the company's image rather than curb youth smoking.⁷⁶

Teachers and principals called Philip Morris's YSP book cover distribution program a "promotional endeavor" and a "marketing ploy to get the Philip Morris name in front of kids in grade school [and] the middle schools" intended to improve the company's image rather than curb youth smoking.

* Youth smoking prevention programs allowed the companies to address youth directly and study youth smoking behavior.

- Through its book covers and television ads, Philip Morris chose to directly speak to youth with its "don't smoke" message, even though the company's Chairman/CEO had written a letter to Health and Human Services Secretary Joseph Califano in 1979 refusing to take part in a similar program.⁷⁷ In the letter, he asserted that not only were ads ineffective in discouraging youth smoking behavior, but claimed that "attempts by authority figures to influence adolescents against adopting certain 'adult' customs are likely to have the reverse effect," and concluded that there was "no reasonable basis for believing that a special campaign by the tobacco industry aimed at teenagers and children is likely to dissuade those inclined to do so from smoking cigarettes."⁷⁸
- Two decades later, citing its "corporate commitment to the reduction of the use of cigarettes by youth," Philip Morris designed and distributed its book covers to school children.⁷⁹ The book covers had the company name Philip Morris printed on the inside, a decision the company said it made "to identify the source [of the book covers] while not calling undue attention to our name. We wanted to make sure that teachers, principals and parents who had questions about the covers would know who produced them."⁸⁰

Philip Morris also cited copyright concerns as another reason for the company name appearing on the book covers.⁸¹

- Philip Morris's book covers caused outrage and a strong reaction from schools that received the covers and from public health officials⁸² and tobacco control groups⁸³ around the country. They enlisted the aid of state attorneys general^{84,85,86} and other public officials^{87,88} and the press to discredit the company's youth smoking prevention effort. This put Philip Morris on the defensive^{89,90} and resulted in the cancellation of the book cover program.^{91,92}
 - Lorillard's efforts to sponsor youth smoking prevention events targeted at teens produced a similar public health response and as a direct result, the company decided to desist from these activities, stating later in trial testimony that "We've . . . gotten out of the business, if you will, of speaking directly to youth in this campaign."⁹³
 - Tobacco companies that surveyed youth to study the effect of their youth smoking prevention programs also had the opportunity to apply this knowledge to the marketing of their products to this demographic. Under cross-examination in the U.S. Department of Justice's racketeering case against the tobacco industry, Ronald Milstein, Lorillard's Vice President, General Counsel and Secretary admitted that the company had allowed its senior brand manager for Newport cigarettes to access and review the information gathered in a survey of youth who were providing feedback on the company's "Tobacco Is Whacko If You're a Teen" youth smoking prevention program, and that they also enlisted his help in developing the program's media campaign.⁹⁴ The survey information included "both quantitative and qualitative research on teen attitudes and behaviors."⁹⁵ In his sworn testimony, Milstein admitted that Newport was the second leading brand of cigarettes smoked by youth aged 12 to 17.⁹⁶
- * Tobacco industry youth smoking prevention programs are ineffective, probably on purpose.
- Several studies have observed that the industry's youth smoking prevention programs might have been designed to be purposely ineffective in curbing youth smoking.^{97,98,99} At the very least, the tobacco companies did not seem to be interested in evaluating whether they were in fact effective using that factor as a benchmark.
 - Philip Morris evaluated its "Think. Don't Smoke." program's effectiveness not on how much it helped to reduce youth smoking, but rather on whether the youths who saw the commercials understood that the slogan "Think. Don't Smoke." meant "don't smoke."^{100,101} A survey of this approach, contrasted with the American Legacy Foundation's more hard-hitting truth© countermarketing campaign, showed that not only did Philip Morris fail to evaluate its program for effectiveness in reducing youth smoking, but also found that Philip Morris's program was ineffective and might serve to dilute the truth© campaign's more successful approach.¹⁰² As a result of this study, Philip Morris stopped airing its "Think. Don't Smoke." advertisements.^{103,104,105,106}
 - R.J. Reynolds's Right Decisions, Right Now program advises parents to speak to their children about smoking. A recent study has shown that "The promotion of smoking by the tobacco industry appears to undermine the capability of authoritative parenting to prevent adolescents from starting to smoke."¹⁰⁷ The study singled out R.J. Reynolds's Joe Camel campaign as a specific example of how tobacco industry marketing made adolescents with more authoritative parents "more vulnerable to the pervasive effects of the campaign."¹⁰⁸
 - Ellen Merlo, Philip Morris's Vice President of Corporate Affairs, testified in a smoker's products liability case that Philip Morris recognized that hearing the "Think. Don't Smoke." message from an adult would not be effective.¹⁰⁹ She stated "The one thing we found out in our research is that kids don't want to be preached to and, you know, adults shaking their finger at them is not going to work. And what they tend to respond to is peer pressure and kids that might be slightly older than they are delivering the message."¹¹⁰ Yet from 1999-2006, Philip Morris sponsored a program called "Talk. They'll Listen," which advised parents to speak to their children about smoking.¹¹¹ And of course, the "Think. Don't Smoke." program ultimately originates from adults, even if it employs messages delivered by youth in its advertisements.

THE MESSAGE

- **The issue of youth smoking is a powerful weapon public health advocates, tobacco control advocates, and regulators wield against the tobacco industry, and the industry knows it. The industry's corporate social responsibility initiatives regarding youth have sprung from this fact.**
- **Though there is ample evidence that the tobacco companies want to use youth smoking prevention programs to improve their corporate image, there is no evidence that the initiatives either intend to actually prevent youth smoking or produce that result. In fact there is evidence that the programs do not prevent youth smoking, and even encourage it.**
- **The industry's youth smoking prevention programs employ strategies that help maintain the status quo of youth smoking levels with techniques intended to continue making smoking attractive to youth.**
- **Despite pretending that the tobacco industry wants to take responsibility for youth smoking, its youth smoking prevention programs shift responsibility and blame for the problem back onto children, their friends and their parents.**
- **Many of the youth smoking programs put a strong emphasis on personal responsibility, which undercuts the idea that the tobacco manufacturers should claim any responsibility for the problem.**

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