

Big Surprise: Tobacco Company Prevention Campaigns Don't Work



For decades, tobacco companies have launched their own so-called youth prevention campaigns virtually every time they are faced with legislation, regulation, or litigation that they know will reduce smoking. Their latest campaigns aimed at youth and parents are simply the latest incarnation of thinly disguised public relations efforts to influence public opinion and policy makers rather than smoking behavior. The 2012 Surgeon General's Report, *Preventing Tobacco Use Among Youth and Young Adults*, concluded, "The tobacco companies' activities and programs for the prevention of youth smoking have not demonstrated an impact on the initiation or prevalence of smoking among young people."¹

After decades of these efforts, three things are quite clear:

- No tobacco company campaign has **ever** produced any peer-reviewed evidence that it prevents kids from smoking or helps smokers quit. In fact, evidence from several recent studies confirms that these programs are ineffective at best and even work to **encourage** kids to smoke.
- The goals of the industry campaigns are not to reduce smoking, and the targets of the campaigns are not kids or smokers. The tobacco companies' own documents reveal that these campaigns are merely part of their ongoing efforts to convince policymakers not to enact those policies and programs that actually reduce tobacco use.
- While foisting these fake prevention campaigns on the public, the tobacco companies have increased their marketing expenditures that promote smoking, much of it in ways that influence youth to smoke. They spend additional untold millions to oppose tobacco taxes, smoke-free laws, funding for comprehensive tobacco prevention programs, and other tobacco control policies that are proven to reduce smoking among youth and adults and/or protect everyone from the harms of secondhand smoke.

Evidence that Tobacco Industry Funded Prevention Programs are Ineffective at Best, Harmful at Worst

Research studies show that tobacco companies' campaigns don't prevent youth from smoking. According to the CDC, "Because the presence of the tobacco industry in school settings may increase the likelihood of youth tobacco product initiation, it is critical that public health and school-based efforts to prevent youth tobacco product use remain independent of tobacco industry influences."²

- The 2012 Surgeon General's Report stated, "The tobacco industry's youth smoking prevention activities and programs have not provided evidence that they are effective at reducing youth smoking. Indeed, unpublished internal industry documents available to the public because of litigation, and published academic studies, indicate that they are ineffective or serve to promote smoking among youth."³
- JUUL Labs, maker of the most popular e-cigarette, began approaching schools throughout the country in 2018 with its own youth prevention program. A study in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* found that the JUUL curriculum was not evidence-based and failed to fully educate youth, such as adequately addressing the harms of e-cigarettes like JUUL or the role that targeted industry marketing plays in youth use of e-cigarettes.⁴ JUUL discontinued the program due to negative press and backlash from the public health community who saw it as a lesson out of the tobacco companies' playbook.
- A study published in 2009 found that youth who recalled Philip Morris' "Think. Don't Smoke" advertisements had more favorable beliefs and attitudes towards cigarette companies, and those beliefs increased even after that campaign went off-air. In addition, youth recalling the industry ads were less likely to say that they would not smoke within the next year.⁵ This newer study reinforced earlier findings that youth exposed to those advertisements had more favorable feelings toward the tobacco industry

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compared to youth who were not exposed to the ads, further supporting the assertion that the purpose of this campaign was not to prevent youth smoking, but rather to buy respectability and favor among youth.⁶

- A 2006 study published in the *American Journal of Public Health* found that the industry's "prevention" ads targeted at youth were ineffective and did not change smoking outcomes, while industry ads targeted at parents increased the likelihood that kids would smoke. Among 10th and 12th graders, higher exposure to the parent-targeted ads was associated with lower perceived harm of smoking, stronger approval of smoking, stronger intentions to smoke in the future, and a greater likelihood of having smoked in the past 30 days.⁷
- In an exhaustive review of relevant studies, a comprehensive report released in June 2008 by the National Cancer Institute, *The Role of the Media in Promoting and Reducing Tobacco Use*, confirmed that tobacco industry-sponsored youth smoking prevention programs are "generally ineffective" at reducing youth smoking and may have caused some youth to start smoking.⁸
- A systematic review of mass media campaigns on youth smoking published in 2008 found that tobacco industry-funded youth prevention campaigns had minimal impact on youth smoking because they avoided the most powerful anti-tobacco themes of health effects and industry manipulation.⁹ Industry youth prevention media campaigns that positioned smoking as an adult habit or as a "choice" and ignored the consequences of smoking were not effective, and in fact could undermine the effects of aggressive media campaigns.¹⁰ Industry ads that used a "choice" theme and focused on refusal messages appeared to have no effect on preventing smoking initiation, did not resonate with teens, and did not appear to offer any compelling reason not to smoke.¹¹ The 2008 review found that tobacco industry youth prevention campaigns could actually undermine tobacco control efforts because they improved the tobacco industry's public image.¹²
- Lorillard heavily promoted its "youth smoking prevention" campaign, "Tobacco is Whacko...If You're A Teen," despite lack of evidence that it has ever had any impact whatsoever on teens. The "Tobacco is Whacko...If You're A Teen," slogan framed smoking as an adult activity, which, as tobacco industry documents recognize, is an effective way to appeal to kids and can tempt teens to try smoking.
- Experts expressed serious concerns that the manner in which the "Tobacco is Whacko" campaign was framed encouraged young people to smoke as an act of rebellion rather than discouraging tobacco use.
- A 2000 study by the California Department of Health Services showed that the much publicized "We Card" program, promoted by the tobacco industry as a voluntary means to keep underage kids from purchasing tobacco products, had little or no effect on underage tobacco sales. The California data for 1998 and 1999 demonstrated that the rate of illegal underage sales for stores with "We Card" and other tobacco industry signs was much higher than stores with government signs prohibiting illegal sales to minors; compliance increased only when the tobacco industry signs were coupled with government signs.¹³
- A 1992 study broke down the elements of the Tobacco Institute's "Tobacco: Helping Youth Say No" program and concluded, "Given that programs with an emphasis on decision making stimulate tobacco use among children, given that tobacco use is portrayed as a forbidden fruit and badge of maturity, and given that the addictive and lethal properties of tobacco are not honestly presented...the...program will increase the likelihood of tobacco use among children who are exposed to it."¹⁴ [emphasis in original]

The Real Reason Tobacco Companies Have Youth Prevention Campaigns

Tobacco companies launch youth anti-smoking campaigns as public relations efforts to discourage regulation and public action to reduce smoking, such as litigation or legislation, with the goal to improve their public image and reduce opportunities for opponents to impose restraints on industry practices. Their targets, then, are not youth or parents of youth, but policymakers and the general public. The key motivation has been to discourage Congress and state legislatures from enacting measures such as tobacco

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taxes, smoke-free laws, funding for tobacco prevention and cessation programs, and other regulations that they know and that science tells us will reduce smoking among both youth and adults.¹⁵

- From Judge Kessler's Final Opinion: "Internal documents suggest that Defendants designed their YSP [youth smoking prevention] programs for public relations rather than efficacy in youth smoking prevention."¹⁶
- From the 2012 Surgeon General's Report: "The industry uses these efforts to convey to the public, policymakers, judges, and the members of juries that it is doing something substantial about the issue of youth's tobacco use. In this way, the programs serve to promote positive attitudes about the tobacco industry. Such positive attitudes could help to limit the industry's legal liability and make it easier for its views to be heard on legislative issues."¹⁷
- Internal tobacco industry documents, such as this 1991 Tobacco Institute discussion paper, highlight this strategy:
 - "The youth [anti-smoking] program and its individual parts support the Institute's objective of discouraging unfair and counterproductive federal, state, and local restrictions on cigarette advertising, by:
 - Providing on-going and persuasive evidence that the industry is actively discouraging youth smoking and independent verification that the industry's efforts are valid.
 - Reinforcing the belief that peer pressure -- not advertising -- is the cause of youth smoking.
 - Seizing the political center and forcing the anti-smokers to an extreme."¹⁸ (emphasis in original)
- In a 1995 draft speech, Philip Morris president and CEO Joseph J. Morgan stated, "The bottom line to all this is, I repeat, 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 in a very short time. Those restrictions will pave the way for equally severe legislation or regulation on where adults are allowed to smoke. We need to do something to demonstrate industry agreement, concern and action on the youth-access issue...."¹⁹

The Industry Continues to Market Its Products Aggressively

Tobacco companies continue to spend billions of dollars each year to market their deadly and addictive products. In 2022 (the most recent year for which data are available), tobacco companies spent \$8.6 billion – over \$23.5 million a day – on advertising and promotional expenditures for cigarettes and smokeless tobacco.²⁰ If tobacco companies really wanted to reduce youth smoking, they would stop their aggressive marketing tactics and stop opposing the policies and programs that actually work to reduce smoking.

- Kessler stated, "Philip Morris continues to increase its marketing expenditures in grossly disproportionate amounts to its spending on youth smoking prevention. Philip Morris's 2003 Financial Forecast Budget includes a budget of \$110 million for youth smoking prevention, \$8.9 million greater than its 2002 spending, 'primarily due to increased spending for adult cessation programs.' In contrast, in that year, Philip Morris spent more than \$7.1 billion on sales incentives and product promotions."²¹
- According to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), in 2021, cigarette companies spent 4,4500 times more on product marketing and promotions than on youth prevention advertisements (\$8.0 billion vs. \$1.8 million), which just shows where their priorities are.²²
- Even worse, the industry's youth smoking prevention programs could feed into their marketing activities. The 2012 Surgeon General's report stated, "Investment in these programs provides a venue for the industry to conduct research on determinants of smoking among youth for the stated purpose of developing its prevention programs. However, this information could inform the companies' tobacco marketing efforts to youth..."²³

Tobacco Companies Continue to Oppose Real Prevention Programs and Other Policies that Reduce Smoking

Tobacco companies continue to spend millions of dollars in each state and at the federal level to lobby legislators against tobacco control policies that have been proven to reduce tobacco use, especially among youth.²⁴ The 2008 NCI report on tobacco use and the media describes the great lengths the tobacco industry will go to influence tobacco control media interventions. They obstruct state anti-tobacco media campaigns by lobbying elected officials to reduce or eliminate funding for these programs, by attempting to weaken the campaign messages or reduce the size of their target audiences and by arguing that state anti-tobacco media campaigns are a waste of taxpayer dollars because they duplicate the industry's own tobacco prevention campaigns – which, as proven above, are ineffective.²⁵

A few examples of major efforts by tobacco companies to thwart tobacco control measures at the ballot:

- In 2017, the R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company funded a ballot initiative to overturn a local San Francisco ordinance to end the sale of flavored tobacco products, including menthol-flavored cigarettes. Reynolds contributed over \$1.3 million to the campaign committee.²⁶ R.J. Reynolds sells the menthol cigarette Newport, the second most popular cigarette among 12-17 year old smokers.²⁷
- In 2016, tobacco companies spent nearly \$100 million opposing ballot initiatives to increase state cigarette taxes, including more than \$70 million in California, more than \$17 million in Colorado, and more than \$3.8 million in North Dakota.²⁸
- In 2012, tobacco companies spent more than \$45 million in California to oppose a ballot initiative to increase the state cigarette tax.²⁹
- In 2007, tobacco industries spent \$12 million – or \$24 per vote – to defeat a ballot initiative to raise Oregon's tobacco tax and fund health care for uninsured children.³⁰
- According to state campaign contribution reports, in 2006, Philip Morris, R.J. Reynolds and other tobacco interests spent at least \$70 million in California and Missouri to oppose state ballot initiatives that would use revenues from a tobacco tax increase to fund proven-effective state youth prevention programs. The industry's money bought a barrage of deceptive television ads that misled voters about the impact of these initiatives, going so far as to claim that the initiatives did not provide enough money for tobacco prevention when in fact they would have given California and Missouri two of the best-funded tobacco prevention programs in the country.
- In 2006, tobacco companies launched a major effort to thwart a proposed \$1.00 per pack increase on the state cigarette tax in Texas. Philip Morris and R.J. Reynolds conducted an anti-tax campaign that consisted of radio commercials, newspaper ads and computer-generated phone calls to lawmakers. In addition, according to Texans for Public Justice, which monitors lobby influence in Austin, tobacco companies spent at least \$1.4 million lobbying the state legislature against the tax increase.³¹
- In 2006, R.J. Reynolds spent more than \$7 million in Arizona to deter voters from supporting a ballot initiative that would make bars smoke-free and another \$5 million towards defeating a similar ballot initiative in Ohio.³² Voters rejected these multi-million dollar campaigns by the tobacco industry and sent a loud and clear message to elected officials at all levels: Reject the special interests of the tobacco industry and protect the public interest by supporting proven measures to reduce tobacco use and exposure to secondhand smoke.

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