

Marketing Menthol: The History of Tobacco Industry Targeting of Black Americans



"We don't smoke that s_ _ _ . We just sell it. We reserve the right to smoke for the young, the poor, the black and stupid." -R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company Executive¹

"Menthols in general do better among the very young, and among very young blacks, almost the entire market is accounted for by Kool, Salem and Newport." -1974 research report prepared for Philip Morris²

The tobacco industry has a long history of going to great lengths to target the Black community. Decades of research and the tobacco industry's internal documents affirm that the industry has employed multiple campaigns and strategies to aggressively target and reach Black Americans. Dating back to the 1950s, the tobacco industry has targeted Black Americans with marketing for menthol cigarettes through sponsorship of community and music events, targeted magazine advertising, youthful imagery, price discounting and marketing in the retail environment.

This aggressive targeted marketing has paid off. Black smokers now overwhelmingly prefer menthol cigarettes. Overall, 88.1 percent of Black smokers smoke menthol cigarettes, compared to just 31.4% of white smokers.³ This preference for menthol cigarettes is the direct result of a decades-long marketing campaign by the tobacco industry.

The industry's targeted marketing of the Black community with marketing menthol cigarettes has had devastating consequences. The 2024 Surgeon General Report concluded that, **"Because menthol cigarettes are associated with increased tobacco initiation and more difficulty quitting, especially among African American people who smoke menthol cigarettes, the disproportionate distribution of menthol product-related advertising can further contribute to persistent racial and ethnic disparities in the use of such products."**⁴ Researchers estimate that prohibiting menthol cigarettes would prevent over 255,000 deaths in the Black community within forty years.⁵

The Early Days: Building a Market for Menthol

The marketing of menthol cigarettes to the Black community dates back to at least the 1950s.⁶ Salem led the menthol market in the 1950s and 1960s and is credited with establishing a popular market for menthols (menthols were initially a specialty cigarette, marketed for reducing throat irritability), but Kool overtook Salem in popularity in 1972.⁷ Brown & Williamson began targeting Black Americans with Kool cigarettes after a 1953 survey showed that five percent of Black Americans preferred Kool compared to two percent of White Americans. Brown & Williamson* seized the opportunity to capitalize upon this small preference margin, recognizing the marketing advantage of appealing to a newly urbanized and more concentrated population.⁸ The establishment of popular magazines like *Ebony* and *Jet* also provided marketing venues that had not previously existed for reaching Black Americans.



Kool advertisement, 1966
Image courtesy of Stanford Research into the Impact of Advertising (SRITA)

* Brown & Williamson merged with R.J. Reynolds in 2004, acquiring Kool. However, R.J. Reynolds and Lorillard merged in 2015, at which time R.J. Reynolds divested the Salem and Kool brands to ITG, while acquiring the Newport brand.

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Brown & Williamson took to the airwaves to market Kool, with an advertising budget exceeding that of the other tobacco companies in the 1960s. During this time, cigarette advertisements, many featuring famous black athletes, tripled in *Ebony*.⁹ The aggressive marketing campaign had a huge impact - from just 1968 to 1976, the percentage of Black Americans smoking Kool jumped from 14 percent to 38 percent, with even greater preference for Kool among young Black males.¹⁰ An R.J. Reynolds analyst noted that, “Kool became ‘cool’ and, by the early 1970s, had a 56% share among younger adult Blacks—it was the Black Marlboro.”¹¹ A 1974 industry report similarly noted that, “Young blacks have found their thing, and it’s menthol in general and Kool in particular.”¹² Salem’s successful initial promotion of the menthol category and Kool’s monopolization of the Black smoker market played a significant role in the exponential growth of the menthol market, which grew by nearly 50 percent from 1956 to 1971.¹³

The “Menthol Wars”

Tobacco companies used multiple strategies to attract new customers in predominantly Black neighborhoods. When other tobacco companies realized Kool’s growth initiated from targeting Black Americans, they began competing for this market share with targeted marketing for Kool, Newport, Salem and Benson & Hedges. The companies contracted with “ethnic marketing firms” to conduct at least eight distinct campaigns targeting Black communities: the Brown & Williamson Kool Van Program, the Brown & Williamson Kool Inner City Family Program, the Lorillard Inner City Sales Program, the Lorillard Newport Van Program, the Philip Morris Inner City Task Force, the Philip Morris Inner City Marketing Program, the R.J. Reynolds Black Market Program, and the R.J. Reynolds Black Young Adult Smoker Initiative (some of these programs continued into the 1990s).¹⁴

Sampling and Mobile Van Programs

The tobacco companies considered sampling to be an important strategy for attracting new customers, and they employed mobile van programs in across the country to reach Black Americans.

- Lorillard introduced the Newport Pleasure Van program in 1979 in New York, expanding to cities across the United States to distribute free samples and coupons. The Newport Pleasure Van program incorporated a plan to facilitate brand switching, by rewarding customers who provided the contact information of known competitive brand smokers. Newport continued the Pleasure Vans through 1994, by which time it had successfully gained dominance of the menthol market.¹⁵
- In the 1980s, as part of the Kool Market Development Program, vans (mimicking Lorillard’s strategy) traveled through Houston to distribute free cigarette samples, a program which later expanded to 50 cities.¹⁶

“A total of 1.9MM samples will be distributed to targeted smokers in 1983. Sample distribution will be targeted to: housing projects, clubs, community organizations and events where Kool’s black young adult target congregate.” – Kool Market Development Program¹⁷

- R.J. Reynolds launched a van sampling program in Chicago that targeted nightclubs and neighborhood events with the Salem brand.

Retailer Programs

The tobacco companies developed specific strategies and specially designed product displays to adapt their point-of-sale marketing to smaller retailers that were more common in cities. Philip Morris implemented promotional programs and paid retailers to exhibit product displays and grow their inventory. Brown & Williamson launched its Kool Inner City Point of Purchase Program, later the Kool Inner City Family Program,



Kool advertisement, 1984
Image courtesy of SRITA

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with the explicit goal, “to reach the core of Kool’s franchise (young, black, relatively low income and education),”¹⁸ with both retailer and consumer promotions.¹⁹

Music and Events Sponsorship

The tobacco companies also recognized the value of associating their brand with popular community events.

- Brown & Williamson used music as a way to target Black Americans beginning in 1975 with the Kool Jazz Festival, and later the Kool City Jam, a free two-day concert.²⁰
- R.J. Reynolds sponsored the “Salem Summer Street Scenes” festivals, during which they estimated reaching at least half of Black Americans in Memphis, Detroit, Chicago, New York, and Washington, D.C.²¹
- Philip Morris sponsored “Club Benson & Hedges” promotional bar nights throughout the 1990s, targeting clubs frequented by Black Americans.²²

Despite Kool and Salem’s dramatic rise and market share in the 1960s and 1970s, Newport’s aggressive marketing in the “Menthol Wars” era successfully doubled its share of the menthol market between 1981 and 1987, and in 1993 it became—and has remained—the market leader in sales of menthol cigarettes.²³ In 2019, more than half of people who used Newport cigarettes in 2019 were African American.²⁴

Appealing to Younger Black Americans

Newport also grew its market share by purposefully attracting a younger consumer base.²⁵ Industry documents show that the tobacco companies knew that while menthol cigarettes were attractive to younger smokers, novice smokers actually preferred cigarettes with a lower menthol content, whereas older smokers preferred more menthol content. With its lower menthol content, Newport had a market advantage with younger smokers, and the brand’s youthful advertising made it even more appealing.²⁶

Newport capitalized on the youth appeal of its product by employing youth-friendly marketing materials. In describing their Newport marketing strategy, Lorillard noted that, “Newport smokers perceive other Newport smokers as they do themselves—younger, outgoing, active, happy, warm, friendly, modern, extroverted.”²⁷ To this day, Newport cigarettes are advertised in magazines with imagery of young people—of various races—engaged in activities that look fun and social.

Recent Marketing Strategies

Menthol cigarettes continue to be heavily advertised to Black Americans in a variety of ways.

Point-of-Sale Targeting

Tobacco companies have taken advantage of the greater density of convenience stores and gas stations in lower-income and minority neighborhoods to heavily market and promote tobacco products. The 2024 Surgeon General’s Report concluded that, “**Tobacco marketing in general and marketing for menthol cigarettes in particular are more prevalent in neighborhoods with greater percentages of African American residents or of residents with lower incomes compared with neighborhoods with lower percentages of African American residents or of residents with higher incomes.**”²⁸ Their marketing strategies have included price discounts, promotional giveaways, heavy product placement and culturally tailored ad content at retail locations, both indoors and out. A wealth of research indicates that Black neighborhoods have a disproportionate number of tobacco retailers, pervasive tobacco marketing, and in



Price promotions for Camel cigarettes in Durham, NC. Photo courtesy CounterTobacco.Org

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particular, more marketing of menthol products.²⁹ In addition to being heavily advertised and widely available, certain tobacco products have been found to be priced lower in Black communities, making them more appealing, particularly to price-sensitive youth:

- A 2017 nationwide study found that stores in neighborhoods with the highest proportion of Black Americans have more than double the odds of advertising price promotions for tobacco products, compared to stores in neighborhoods with the lowest proportion of Black Americans.³⁰
- A 2011 study of cigarette prices in retail stores across the U.S. found that Newport cigarettes are significantly less expensive in neighborhoods with higher proportions of Black Americans.³¹
- A 2006 study of California smokers found that those who smoke menthol cigarettes are more likely to use promotional offers than non-menthol smokers.³²

The use of value-added or coupon promotions makes cigarettes more affordable to kids and those with less financial resources. In *U.S. v. Philip Morris* (the 2006 civil racketeering judgment against major cigarette manufacturers), the court specifically found that tobacco companies use strategic price reduction strategies such as coupons and multi-pack discounts to target young people.³³ According to the Surgeon General, “Because there is strong evidence that as the price of tobacco products increases, tobacco use decreases, especially among young people, then any actions that mitigate the impact of increased price and thus reduce the purchase price of tobacco can increase the initiation and level of use of tobacco products among young people.”³⁴

Disparities in advertising of tobacco products are particularly evident for menthol cigarette brands, which Black smokers use more than any other racial or ethnic group:

- Consistent with findings from previous California studies,³⁵ an analysis of California retailers in 2018 found that controlling for store type, neighborhood poverty and other covariates, tobacco retailers in neighborhoods with the highest proportions of Black residents were more likely to advertise menthol cigarettes and charged an estimated 25 cents less for Newport cigarettes, compared with stores in neighborhoods with the lowest proportion of Black residents.³⁶
- A 2013 study found that census tracts in St. Louis with a higher proportion of Black residents had more menthol and total tobacco product marketing, and that census tracts with a higher proportion of Black children had a higher proportion of menthol marketing near candy.³⁷
- A 2010 study that compared characteristics of storefront tobacco advertisements in a low-income, community with a large Black population and a high-income, nonminority community found that the Black community had more tobacco retailers and advertisements were more likely to be larger and promote menthol products.³⁸

Cultural Imagery

There is compelling evidence that tobacco companies not only advertise disproportionately in communities with large Black populations, they also create advertising specifically targeted to these communities. The 2024 Surgeon General’s report found that “menthol cigarette brands have targeted African American people by featuring hip-hop culture, music and movies in their marketing materials.”³⁹ Cigarette ads highly prevalent in Black communities and publications are often characterized by slogans, relevant and specific messages, or images that have a great appeal among those in the Black community or depict Black Americans in an appealing light.⁴⁰

In 2004, Brown & Williamson started an ad campaign for their Kool brand cigarettes clearly aimed at youth—and Black youth, in particular. The Kool Mixx campaign featured images of young rappers, disc jockeys and dancers on cigarette packs and in advertising. The campaign also included radio giveaways with cigarette purchases and a Hip-Hop disc jockey competition



Kool Mixx cigarettes, 2004
Image courtesy of SRITA

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in major cities around the country. The themes, images, radio giveaways and music involved in the campaign all clearly have tremendous appeal to youth, especially Black youth. Attorneys General from several states promptly filed motions against Brown & Williamson for violating the Master Settlement Agreement.⁴¹ Simultaneously, Brown & Williamson promoted a new line of cigarette flavors like Caribbean Chill, Mocha Taboo, and Midnight Berry using images of Black Americans and themes attractive to Black youth. These cigarettes were promoted through dance clubs and hip-hop music venues. In a similar vein, in the 1980s and 1990s, Uptown and “X” brand (emulating Malcolm X) cigarettes were also introduced, with the explicit aim of targeting Black Americans, although these brands quickly failed due to community backlash.⁴²

Magazine Advertising

The tobacco industry’s strategy of targeting magazines with high Black readership, which began in the 1960s, continues. Expenditures for magazine advertising of mentholated cigarettes increased from 13% of total ad expenditures in 1998 to 76% in 2006.⁴³ During the two years after the Master Settlement Agreement (MSA) in November 1998, the average annual expenditures for Newport in magazines with high youth readership increased 13.2 percent (from \$5.3 to \$6.0 million).⁴⁴ From 1998 to 2002, *Ebony*, a magazine tailored to the African American culture, was 9.8 times more likely than *People* to contain ads for menthol cigarettes.⁴⁵ An assessment of menthol cigarette ads run from June 2012 to February 2013 found that the tobacco industry spent an estimated \$31 million on menthol cigarette direct mail, email, print and online advertisements in just a 9-month period. During this time, 61% of Newport print ads featured at least one Black model. These ads ran in twenty publications including *Jet*, *Ebony*, and *Essence*, which have predominantly Black readership.⁴⁶

Tobacco Industry Philanthropy in the Black Community

The tobacco company’s decades long campaign to hook Black smokers coincided with concerted efforts to forge ties with the Black community in an effort to build a positive brand identity. Since the 1950s, Philip Morris and Brown & Williamson have provided funding and organizational support to a host of African American organizations.⁴⁷ In addition, the tobacco industry has supported Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) as far back as the 1890s when R.J. Reynolds helped to finance the founding of Winston Salem State University.⁴⁸ The 2024 Surgeon General’s report found that, **“Tobacco companies seek to improve how they are perceived in minoritized racial and ethnic communities by funding and donating to various political groups and nonprofit organizations and by sponsoring organizations and events. Through these tactics, the industry promotes normalization of tobacco use and brand loyalty and builds opposition to health-protective tobacco control policies.”**⁴⁹ In addition, industry documents reveal the companies’ true intentions in forming these relationships:

*“Clearly the sole reason for B&W’s interest in the black and Hispanic communities is the actual and potential sales of B&W products within these communities and the profitability of these sales...this relatively small and often tightly knit [minority] community can work to B&W’s marketing advantage, if exploited properly.”*⁵⁰ – Brown & Williamson

*“Tie-in with any company who help black[s] – ‘we help them, they help us.’”*⁵¹ – Lorillard

Today, tobacco companies continue to contribute to Black and civil rights organizations and political leaders, with the primary goal of enlisting prominent Black spokespeople and organizations to oppose policies to prohibit the sale of menthol cigarettes.

- R.J. Reynolds has provided funding to the **National Action Network (NAN)**, a civil rights organization founded by Reverend Al Sharpton, for decades.⁵² Al Sharpton has been a vocal opponent of the FDA’s proposed rule to prohibit menthol cigarettes. He has also conducted community forums to build

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opposition to local action to prohibit menthol cigarettes. These forums attempted to frame the issue as criminalization of the Black community, ignoring the devastating impact of the tobacco industry's targeted marketing and the public health benefits of prohibiting menthol. In 2016 and 2017, these forums occurred in Oakland, Los Angeles and Minneapolis.⁵³ In early 2019, a representative from NAN testified against proposed legislation in New York City to restrict the sale of menthol cigarettes.⁵⁴

- Law enforcement groups, including the **National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives** (NOBLE), the **National Black Police Association** (NBPA), **National Association of Black Law Enforcement Officers** (NABLEO), **Law Enforcement Action Partnership** (LEAP) and the **National Association of Blacks in Criminal Justice** (NABCIJ) all of which have received industry funding, have voiced active opposition to proposals to prohibit menthol cigarettes.⁵⁵ NBPA even launched a campaign to encourage submission of public comments to FDA in opposition of extending the prohibition on flavors to menthol, resulting in over 36,000 comments submitted in opposition to the ban.⁵⁶ Representatives from LEAP and NOBLE have also presented at NAN's forums opposing local restrictions on menthol cigarettes.⁵⁷
- Since the 1960s, the tobacco industry has supported the **National Newspaper Publishers Association** (NNPA), a trade association representing more than 200 Black-owned community newspapers.⁵⁸ According to the 2024 Surgeon General's Report, "For many decades, the tobacco industry was a commercial sponsor for the African-American press at a time when resources were scarce, and the industry used the resulting platform to embed the use of cigarettes within African-American communities and Black identity."⁵⁹ The most recently available financials show that Reynolds gave over \$225,000 to the NNPA in 2017.⁶⁰ As recently as 2023, Reynolds has sponsored forums at the NNPA's annual meetings, featuring many of the same speakers that have participated in NAN forums.⁶¹ **Dr. Benjamin Chavis**, President and CEO of NNPA has joined Rev. Sharpton in voicing opposition to local proposals to restrict the sale of menthol cigarettes⁶² and FDA's proposed menthol ban.⁶³
- **National Black Caucus of State Legislators** (NBCSL) lists Altria and Reynolds as partners for its Corporate Round Table (CRT), which also includes current and former employees of Reynolds and Altria.⁶⁴ R.J. Reynolds funded a \$40,000 lunch at the **National Black Caucus of State Legislators** in 2022, stoking fears about how prohibiting menthol cigarettes could increase policing in Black communities.⁶⁵
- Prominent civil rights attorney, **Ben Crump**, a vocal opponent of menthol bans, reports that he has accepted money from Reynolds.⁶⁶
- In 2011, Harry Alford, President & CEO of the **National Black Chamber of Commerce** (NBCC), testified at an FDA hearing in opposition to extending the federal ban on flavored cigarettes to menthol. At the time, Lorillard was a member of the NBCC, contributing \$35,000 in annual dues.⁶⁷ NBCC had also publicized their partnerships with Altria and Reynolds in previous years.⁶⁸
- **Niger Innis**, former national spokesman for **Congress of Racial Equality** (CORE), has also voiced opposition to FDA's proposal.⁶⁹ The *Wall Street Journal* reported that a consultant hired by Lorillard arranged for Mr. Innis to appear on radio programs to discuss their opposition to the menthol ban.⁷⁰

Other African American organizations and leaders have fought against the industry's targeted marketing.

- There is strong support for prohibiting menthol cigarettes from leading [Black civil rights and public health organizations](#), including the [NAACP](#), and from [members of the Congressional Black Caucus](#).
- **Rev. Horace Sheffield**, a pastor and prominent Black civil rights campaigner in Detroit who penned an editorial supporting FDA's plan to prohibit menthol cigarettes, was subsequently offered at least \$250,000 from R.J. Reynolds to oppose menthol bans. While Rev. Sheffield declined the offer, he was told that other local leaders accepted similar compensation.⁷¹
- In 2016, the **NAACP** voted to adopt a resolution to support state and local restrictions on flavored tobacco products, including menthol (according to a spokesperson in 2016, the NAACP no longer receives tobacco industry funding).⁷²
- **Delta Sigma Theta**, an African American sorority, approved a resolution in 2013 to urge FDA to prohibit menthol cigarettes.⁷³

Impact on the Black Community

Menthol cigarettes have had a profound negative impact on public health, and have had a particularly destructive impact on the Black community. In 2013, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) released a report finding that menthol cigarettes lead to increased smoking initiation among youth and young adults, greater addiction, and decreased success in quitting smoking. The FDA and FDA's Tobacco Product Scientific Advisory Committee (TPSAC) concluded that African Americans are disproportionately burdened by the health harms of menthol cigarettes.⁷⁴

Research published since FDA's and TPSAC's reports continue to bolster these findings:

- A meta-analysis of findings from nearly 150,000 smokers found that among African Americans, menthol smokers have a 12% lower odds of smoking cessation compared to non-menthol smokers.⁷⁵
- The 2020 Surgeon General's Report determined that, **"Use of menthol cigarettes has been shown to contribute to tobacco cessation-related disparities in the United States,"**⁷⁶ The 2024 Surgeon General's report stated that, **"Evidence suggests that menthol in cigarettes is associated with a reduced likelihood of successful quitting overall and particularly among people in minoritized racial and ethnic populations who smoke cigarettes."**⁷⁷
- Most recently, a study analyzing four waves of data from the government's Population Assessment of Tobacco and Health (PATH) study found that among daily smokers, menthol cigarette smokers have a 24% lower odds of quitting as compared to non-menthol smokers (the study did not find a significant difference among quit rates for non-daily menthol and non-menthol smokers). Among daily smokers, African American menthol smokers had a 53% lower odds of quitting compared to African American non-menthol smokers and white menthol smokers had a 22% lower odds of quitting compared to white non-menthol smokers.⁷⁸
- Among the African American community, menthol cigarettes were responsible for 1.5 million extra smokers, 157,000 smoking-related premature deaths and 1.5 million excess life-years lost during 1980-2018. African Americans bear a disproportionate toll of the public health impact of menthol cigarettes. During this time, African Americans represented 15% of extra new smokers, 41% of excess premature deaths and 50% of excess life-years lost, despite only accounting for 12% of the population.⁷⁹
- Lung cancer is the second most common cancer in both Black men and women, but it kills more Black Americans than any other type of cancer.⁸⁰ Decreased cessation success due to the popularity of menthol cigarettes among Black Americans likely contributes to this mortality disparity.⁸¹ Researchers estimate that a menthol ban would close the gap between lung cancer death rates for Black Americans and other U.S. racial and ethnic groups by 2025— twenty-five years sooner than it otherwise would have, and that by 2060, smoking attributable lung cancer death rates would be cut in half for Black Americans.⁸²

African Americans suffer the greatest burden of tobacco-related mortality of any racial or ethnic group in the United States.⁸³ **Each year, over 50,000 Black Americans die from smoking-related disease.**⁸⁴ Smoking-related illnesses are the number one cause of death in the Black community, surpassing all other causes of death, including AIDS, homicide, and accidents.⁸⁵

¹ Giovanni, J, "Come to Cancer Country; USA; Focus," *The Times of London*, August 2, 1992 [quoting Dave Goerlitz, RJ Reynolds' lead Winston model for seven years, re what an R.J. Reynolds executive replied to him when Goerlitz asked why the executive did not smoke].

² The Roper Organization. *A Study of Smoking Habits Among Young Smokers*. 1974 July. Philip Morris Records. <https://www.industrydocumentslibrary.ucsf.edu/tobacco/docs/#id=hjdv0130>.

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