



# How the tobacco industry targets young people to achieve a new generation of smokers

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This year's **World No Tobacco Day (WNTD)** focusses on the tobacco industry's continued targeting of young people, whose addiction to nicotine will help ensure the industry's on-going profitability. World Smokefree Day's social media handle #tobaccoexposed reminds us that, despite a new-found interest in '**unsmoking**' the world, and moving smokers to "reduced harm" products, tobacco companies continue to develop and promote smoked tobacco products that will appeal to young people. In this blog, we explore how tobacco companies have continued to recruit young people to smoked tobacco; we discuss their efforts to infiltrate public health agendas while continuing to innovate with smoked tobacco, and explain why strong policies and industry denormalisation strategies are vital to ensuring young people remain nicotine free.

Tobacco companies' sustained deceit of the general public, particularly people who smoke, is a matter of public record, as too are failed promises to stop selling tobacco products, should these be proved harmful.[1] Analysis of industry documents and arguments reveal glaring inconsistencies between tobacco companies' public assertions and their private knowledge, including declarations that nicotine is not addictive and efforts to undermine the rapidly accumulating scientific evidence that smoking causes serious, and often fatal, diseases.[2] The overall aim, neatly summarised in a PR strategy as "doubt is our product", [3, 4] was excoriatingly exposed in Judge Gladys Kessler's landmark decision, in which she concluded that tobacco companies: *"have marketed and sold their lethal products with zeal, with deception, with a single-minded focus on their financial success, and without regard for the human tragedy or social costs that success exacted."*[5]

Globally, this human tragedy is projected to cost a billion lives this century, unless current smoking trajectories change dramatically.[6] Most of those whose health and longevity will be harmed by smoking begin using tobacco as young people, attracted by product attributes and marketing imagery designed to override public health messages. The strategic importance of young people to tobacco companies is apparent in industry documents, which outline a chilling vision: *"Today's teenager is tomorrow's potential regular customer, and the overwhelming majority of smokers first begin to smoke while still in their teens...The smoking patterns of teenagers are particularly important to Philip Morris."*[7]

## **Marketing directed to young people**

Tobacco companies target young people using meticulously designed marketing appeals that position smoking to correspond to desired attributes; smoking confers rebellion, social prestige, attractiveness, masculinity, and femininity.[8, 9] Industry documents again provide insights into a deliberate strategy that targeted young people at times of transition and vulnerability: *"These years of transition [to young adulthood] represent a shift between the comfort of the high influence of the peer group, and relative structure in life, to the development of one's own personal, social and occupational goals. For some, smoking seems to fulfil the function during teens of uniting one with the all-important peer group. In adulthood, it may be used to ease the feelings of stress created by the pursuit of one's goals. Smoking, for a young adult, may fulfil both roles, providing a concrete balance at a time when life is chaotic and stressful. It represents both the ties with the "old days" and "old friends," as well as the more mature instrument for relaxing."*[9]

Past campaigns featuring cartoon characters are among the most cynical efforts to reach young people, and successfully fostered tobacco brand recognition among youth. A study conducted in 1991 to examine high school students' knowledge of the "Joe Camel" character found this marketing strategy had increased Camel's share of the children's cigarette market segment from 0.5% to 32.8% (estimated sales value of US\$476 million per year).[10] Examination of even younger children's character recognition reported that nearly a third of 3-year-old children correctly matched Joe Camel with a picture of a cigarette, while over 90% of 6-year-old children correctly matched Joe Camel and a cigarette.[11] Use of dare-devil characters who mixed sophistication with rebellion created pitch-perfect appeals to teenage audiences, with spill-over effects among even younger age groups.[12]

Tobacco companies also used flavours to position tobacco products and target children; as

one industry executive coyly put it: “Cherry Skoal is for somebody who likes the taste of candy, if you know what I’m saying.”[7] Flavour additives remain a critical product design feature used to make tobacco more interesting, palatable and appealing to young people. Packaging, recognised by tobacco companies as creating ‘badge’ products that say as much about users as the pack contents,[13] maintained appealing associations when advertising restrictions limited mass media communications. Point-of-sale displays and ubiquitous retail availability created high product and brand exposure, and ensured children were groomed to see tobacco products as normal and desirable.



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## **Undermining policy**

Today, tobacco companies find themselves in an invidious position: the very design of their product limits their consumers’ lifespan and requires them to locate new users, but government legislation, including plain packaging and the removal of tobacco retail displays, prevents them from marketing overtly to young people. Unambiguous evidence of smoking’s harms to tobacco users and those around them has moved smoking outside normal, socially acceptable behaviours, while growing public disquiet about tobacco companies’ behaviour has further reduced the acceptability of strategies promoting tobacco to any group, particularly young people. Yet rather than cease their efforts to attract new users, tobacco companies have met these regulatory and social challenges with a combination of guile and ingenuity.

Tobacco marketing remains powerful, but has adopted increasingly covert forms. For example, tobacco companies have paid to feature their brands in movies,[14] a strategy that had such an impact on young people the US Surgeon General declared a causal relationship between exposure to smoking incidents in movies and smoking uptake among young people.[15] Even following the US Master Settlement Agreement, [which forbade participating tobacco companies from directly or indirectly targeting youth](#), smoking and tobacco brands continue to feature in movies and television programmes.[16] Product placement, which integrates smoking and tobacco brands into lifestyles, positions smoking as normal and associates it with aspirational role models;[17] recent analyses suggest

tobacco product placement has increased, particularly among films rated PG-13.[18]

Social media platforms, known for their high reach to young people, have provided new opportunities for tobacco brands and enabled them to replace mass media advertising with personal, co-created content.[19-21] One study tracked British American Tobacco (BAT) employees' use of social media and reported some were "energetically promoting BAT and BAT brands on Facebook".[21] Specifically, employees had joined groups, administered these, posted photos of BAT events, promotions and products, despite being based in countries that had ratified the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), Article 13 of which prohibits tobacco advertising.[21]

As well as exploiting new media opportunities, tobacco companies have innovated with new smoked tobacco products. Capsule cigarettes (available in New Zealand), which feature intriguing flavours and technologies, have achieved rapid growth in otherwise declining markets,[22] and appeal more to non-smokers than to smokers.[23] Tobacco companies have undermined governments' efforts to regulate flavours, such as menthol, which ease smoking uptake by making the experience much smoother.[24] Rather than accept a measure designed to deter youth smoking uptake, [tobacco companies tried to circumvent flavour regulation](#) by adding menthol impregnated cards to tobacco packages, in an attempt to infuse the flavour into plain cigarettes.[25]

Despite these overt attempts to reach and influence young people, tobacco companies have maintained that young people should not smoke and declared that smoking is an "informed adult choice" (a statement that enhances smoking's appeal to young people and overlooks the fact that addiction is not a "choice").[26, 27] Numerous examples illustrate the striking difference between tobacco companies' public face and private practice. At the same time as promoting its "year of unsmoke", [Philip Morris launched a new cigarette brand - "Bold" - in Indonesia](#), accompanied by [widespread billboard advertising](#), and sold more than 700 billion cigarettes worldwide.

Despite BAT's proclaimed belief, echoed by other tobacco companies, that "[our products are only suitable for adults and we do not want people who are underage to use them](#)", tobacco companies internationally have strongly opposed proportionate, empirically-supported measures that would restrict their marketing and protect young people from smoking. They established front groups to challenge bans on in-store tobacco retail displays, ran well-funded campaigns to oppose standardised packaging, undermined tobacco excise tax increases, and are currently challenging flavour regulations.[28-31] [As a PMI corporate affairs strategy document shows](#), tobacco companies use their considerable resources to challenge governments, undermine the WHO, delay regulation, and protect the marketing tools they use to maintain the appeal, accessibility and affordability of their products.

## **New nicotine products - déjà vu?**

While electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS), such as e-cigarettes and vapes, could help smokers who have not been able to quit using approved cessation aids, they offer no benefits, but some risks, to non-smokers who begin vaping. Analysis of ENDS product marketing reveals the same strategies that are being used to market smoked tobacco; for example, recent studies have documented that manufacturers of vaping products use cartoon characters in packaging.[32] Predictably, given how cartoon characters featured on smoked tobacco products have influenced young people, exposure to cartoon characters on e-liquid packaging is associated with susceptibility to e-cigarette use.[33] While these

studies do not indicate whether tobacco companies or unaffiliated vaping companies are the ones currently employing cartoon characters in e-liquid marketing, this marketing strategy will undoubtedly increase the appeal of vaping to young people, the vast majority of whom will be non-smokers.

Cynical attempts to promote new nicotine products via [dating sites](#) suggest enticing young people to become nicotine users remains a key goal for tobacco companies. If ENDS are to play a role in reducing smoking prevalence and increasing progress towards the Smokefree 2025 goal of Aotearoa/New Zealand, they should only be targeted to smokers who have not been able to quit using other approaches, and who wish to transition from smoking to a less harmful form of nicotine, such as vaping. From a marketing perspective, it is highly unlikely these people will be reached through youth-oriented sponsorship of music concerts, feel at home in hipster vape stores, or be persuaded by youthful social media.[34] Other strategies, such as the vibrantly coloured products, sleek pod designs that support covert use, and intriguing e-liquid flavours that mimic sweets,[35] are brazen attempts to position vaping so the practice appeals to young people. Given clear parallels between e-liquid flavours and confectionary, dessert and cakes, youth interest in vaping is hardly surprising.[36-38] As we have noted in an [earlier blog](#), there are many grounds for concern about increasing vaping prevalence among New Zealand young people.

In 1972, Philip Morris vice president James Bowling repeated a promise made earlier that: “if our product is harmful, we’ll stop making it.”[1] More than four decades later, and after the loss of millions more smokers’ lives, plans to “unsmoke” the world are hard to see as believable. As numerous internal tobacco company documents show, giving this industry the benefit of the doubt has never served public health interests. Current efforts to establish a veneer of credibility and create opportunities to influence policy need to be viewed with considerable scepticism, particularly if we wish to protect children, who remain tobacco companies’ most profitable future customers.

Lead image by Colin Behrens from Pixabay

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