

Speaking *truth*sm to Youth

How the American Legacy Foundation Is Helping Teens Reject Tobacco

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Youth smoking in this country is an enormous problem. At least 4.5 million teenagers in the United States smoke.¹ Five thousand teens try cigarettes each day, and 2,000 of them will become regular smokers.² In fact, over 80 percent of all new smokers are teenagers.³ Most disturbing, one of every three smokers will eventually die from smoking-related causes.⁴ In North Carolina, 15% of middle school students and 32% of high school students are smokers.⁵

We have a historic opportunity to reduce youth access to tobacco and combat youth smoking in this country because of the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement (MSA). That agreement between the Attorneys General in 46 states and five US territories settled the states' Medicaid claims against the tobacco industry and charged The National Association of Attorneys General (NAAG) with creating the charitable foundation now known as the American Legacy Foundation (Legacy).

One of Legacy's primary goals is to create a public education campaign to reduce youth tobacco use. In February, 2000, Legacy launched the *truth*sm countermarketing campaign, the largest antitobacco public health campaign ever initiated by a nonprofit organization. The MSA also gave us help in reducing youth smoking by explicitly barring tobacco companies from targeting youth through advertising.

Yet the tobacco industry—a proven master marketer with deep pockets—continues to pose a major obstacle to our efforts. It has spent decades building some of the strongest brands in the world and making cigarettes attractive, especially to vulnerable teen consumers. Needing new smokers to replace the more than 1,200 Americans who die every day from smoking,⁶ tobacco companies have been enticing teens to smoke for generations.

They spare no expense in their efforts to do so. Just last

month, the Federal Trade Commission issued a report showing that tobacco companies as a whole have increased spending on advertising and promotions of tobacco products in the United States from \$8 billion a year to \$9.57 billion. This is up over \$3 billion since the settlement agreement was signed in 1998.

After being forced off television and billboards, the industry has developed more sophisticated marketing tactics. Manufacturers aggressively market their cigarette brands in retail outlets with promotional giveaways and coupons and with mini billboards placed under a height of five feet directly in the eye view of kids. They develop event and sports sponsorships and guerilla marketing programs. And they remain major advertisers in national magazines, some of which clearly appeal to kids.

Overwhelming evidence indicates that, despite signing the MSA promising not to target our kids, the tobacco industry continues to do so. On June 6, for example, RJ Reynolds Tobacco Co. was fined \$20 million by a California judge for advertising in magazines like *Vibe*, *Spin*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *Rolling Stone* that are popular with kids. In doing so, RJR violated the spirit, if not the letter, of the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement.

Even tobacco industry advertising campaigns that purport to reduce youth smoking are not what they seem to be. A recent research study published in the June issue of the *American Journal of Public Health* comparing Philip Morris's "Think. Don't Smoke" ads to Legacy's *truth*sm campaign showed that Philip Morris ads not only don't work, they actually make kids more likely to smoke.⁷

The study, conducted by the Research Triangle Institute under contract to Legacy, compared Philip Morris's ads to Legacy's *truth*sm campaign, which was launched in 2000. The study found that exposure to Philip Morris's ads strength-

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ened key pro-tobacco attitudes among 12-17 year olds, increasing their likelihood of future smoking.

After seeing the ads, 12- to 17-year-old kids were less likely to believe that cigarette companies deny that cigarettes cause cancer and other harmful diseases. They were also less likely to say that they would like to see cigarette companies out of business. Those positive feelings translated to an increased openness to future smoking. Our data confirmed that nonsmoking teens who had seen the “Think. Don’t Smoke” ads were 36% less likely to say they definitely or probably will not smoke a cigarette anytime during the next year than those who had not seen the ads. Even worse, Philip Morris’ ads resonate best with nonsmokers, while appealing least to the very kids an anti-smoking campaign wants to reach: kids open to smoking and current smokers.

It’s bad enough that Philip Morris’s much-vaunted “antismoking” campaign is making young people more likely to smoke while providing good public relations for the company. What’s tragic is that the Philip Morris ads are undermining anti-smoking campaigns that work—like the American Legacy Foundation’s **truthsm** campaign.

Let me explain the thinking and the strategy behind our **truthsm** campaign. For generations teens have been drawn to smoking. Studies have shown that as part of the maturation process, teens have the natural desire to rebel, challenge authority, take risks, and assert control. Unfortunately, cigarettes fulfill all these desires, giving smoking a powerful allure for teens. To a teen, smoking is a way to tell the world you are older, you will make your own decisions, and you are willing to risk your health. Telling teens not to smoke by exclusively focusing on the health risks associated with smoking only enhances the “forbidden fruit” status of cigarettes. Thus, one of the **truthsm** campaign’s challenges was to change this pre-existing perception by making smoking unattractive.

truthsm is interested in affecting all teens, but is particularly focused on reaching 12- to 17-year-olds who are most likely to experiment with smoking. Among teens who experiment with smoking, our goal was to identify those at greatest risk for becoming regular smokers. “Closed to smoking” teens, who are more driven by family values, school, careers and their future, have already made up their minds about smoking, and so are not a primary target for **truthsm**.

Extensive qualitative research revealed that at-risk teens are more likely to engage in risky and dangerous activities. They get bored easily and think that challenging authority figures is cool. These teens are “high sensation seekers” who are actively looking for ways to assert control. Research further suggests that the expressions of this control manifest themselves through six primal teen “need states,” including (1) the need to rebel; (2) the need to take risks; (3) the need to fit in socially; (4) the need to be independent; (5) the need to express oneself; and (6) the need to feel respected.

These needs are universal among all teens, but are most pronounced with the high-sensation-seeking or “open to smoking” teens who are the main target of the **truthsm** campaign. The bad news is that smoking cigarettes satisfies all of these needs. A cigarette in a sensation-seeking teenager’s hand shows the world he or she is independent and rebellious. It’s a prop to gain entrance into a crowd. It says a lot of things about who the teen is or aspires to be, without the teen having to say anything at all.

Tobacco companies capitalize on these feelings by portraying their cigarette brands as ultra-cool symbols of what teens aspire to be, with the muscle of a \$9.5 billion dollar marketing budget. For **truthsm** to succeed with sensation-seeking teens, we had to dramatically alter the landscape and make anti-tobacco cooler, more rebellious, and more a symbol of what teens aspire to be than the tobacco brands and the act of smoking cigarettes.

truthsm also encourages rebellious youth to decide that *not* smoking is a sign of defiance and independence. It does so by pointing out that the tobacco industry manufactures deadly and addictive products – and that by rejecting these harmful products kids can satisfy their need to challenge authority and rebel. Our countermarketing campaign demonstrates that questioning the norms of cigarettes and the practices of the tobacco industry is a cooler way to exert control. It allows teens to think for themselves, be independent and make their own evaluations of cigarette smoking and the industry.

Another key innovation is that the **truthsm** message is delivered using the voices of real teens. For years, anti-tobacco messages had been delivered to teens by authority figures, and had fallen on deaf ears. For **truthsm** to be persuasive, it needed to put teens in control of taking on tobacco, delivering the **truthsm** brand and the **truthsm** message in their own voices.

For example, one of the iconic **truthsm** television commercials is “Bodybags”: Truckloads of teens pull up outside the headquarters of a major tobacco company. They unload heavy body bags from the backs of the trucks, and pile them on the sidewalk outside the building. By the end of the spot, the teens have piled up 1,200 body bags representative of the now more than 1,200 people who die every day from smoking-related illness.

Our strategy is working. The *American Journal of Public Health* study cited above⁷ shows that in the **truthsm** campaign’s first 10 months, its ads have made 12- to 17-year-old kids’ attitudes toward tobacco more negative, reducing their future likelihood of smoking. Those 12- to 17-year-olds exposed to **truthsm** were more likely to want to join the fight to end smoking, more likely to agree that taking a stand against smoking is important, more likely to agree that the tobacco industry had lied and hidden the truth about the health effects of tobacco, and more likely to agree that cigarette companies try to get young people to start smoking.

These crucial attitudinal shifts translated into a decreased intention to smoke in the future. Kids in the target group who remembered the ads were 66% more likely to say they definitely or probably would not smoke a cigarette any time during the next year than those who did not remember. And **truth**sm ads did a far better job than the Philip Morris commercials in appealing to kids who smoke or are at risk of starting.

Why do we care about attitudes when it's smoking behavior that we want to change? Because changing attitudes toward tobacco is a key step in changing smoking behavior. Public health theory and practical experience tell us that kids who view tobacco and the tobacco industry in a negative light are less likely to become smokers. The dramatic reductions in youth smoking that resulted from the Florida truth campaign and the Massachusetts program clearly demonstrate that.

Legacy modeled its national **truth**sm effort on the Florida truth campaign, the conclusions of an expert marketing panel, and the peer-reviewed literature on countermarketing against tobacco use. Two years into the Florida campaign, kids' attitudes had become much more anti-tobacco as a result of its truth ads. And two years into the campaign, smoking rates had declined by 18% among high school students and by 40% among middle school students. Florida data showed that the attitude shifts among teens, like those seen in the Legacy study, immediately preceded the drop in youth smoking rates. Research pointed to the Florida truth campaign as a major factor in this observed decline.

Others have also acknowledged the effectiveness of Legacy's **truth**sm campaign. The University of Michigan's "Monitoring the Future" survey, sponsored by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, credited Legacy's **truth**sm advertising as one reason for the sharp declines it reported in teen smoking. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's May 16th issue of the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* also cited **truth**sm as one of the reasons for a significant decline in smoking by high school students since 1999.⁶ Lorillard Tobacco Co. has even filed suit in North Carolina to try and stop the campaign.

Combating youth smoking is a gargantuan challenge, but one that we can conquer if the tobacco companies don't

interfere. They must stop running "anti-smoking" campaigns that make kids more likely to smoke. They must honor their MSA promise not to market tobacco to our kids. And if they will not do so voluntarily, then we must take appropriate legal action to see that they do.

By winning the June 6 judgment against RJR for advertising cigarettes to our kids, California Attorney General Bill Lockyer and his colleagues have shown that the Attorneys General – the office holders who signed the 1998 MSA – have the power to hold tobacco companies accountable to the spirit of this landmark document. If Philip Morris will not act on its own to honor its commitment not to market tobacco to our kids, then perhaps the Attorneys General should do it for them.

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