An antismoking ad blitz vs. new cigarette marketing ploys

The girls in the living room lean toward the speakerphone with eyes raised, watching one another's reactions—looking like any prank phone callers at a weekend party. "What is the lucky part about Lucky Strike cigarettes?" asks one teen, maintaining her composure while the others giggle. "Is it that I might live?" she continues, prompting the executive at Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corp. to hang up. Laughter drowns out the dead-line buzz.

This TV commercial was part of a Florida campaign that drove teen smoking rates in the state down nearly 20 percent from 1998 to 1999, the greatest annual drop ever recorded by a state. Now health advocates and antismoking activists are trying to repeat that success nationwide. Scheduled to begin as early as next week is the first nationwide antismoking media campaign since the 1960s. The new ads will be sponsored by the American Legacy Foundation, an independent organization created with $1.5 billion of the $246 billion that's being paid over 25 years by Big Tobacco to settle health claims by the states.

What works? But the Legacy campaign also is touching off a new debate over teens and smoking, about what kind of prevention programs work, and whether the tobacco industry—and even many states—are really serious about stopping young smokers before they start. Last week, Legacy and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released figures showing 13 percent of 11-to-13-year-olds have used some form of tobacco, the first time that age group has been thoroughly surveyed. More than a third of older teens use tobacco.

Yet despite the gargantuan size of the tobacco settlement, states have committed only a tiny fraction to efforts to curb youth smoking. The cigarette makers have launched their own campaigns against youth smoking—pouring millions of dollars into school and community programs and TV ads. Antitobacco activists argue that teens' decisions are far more likely to be swayed by the new wave of cigarette
advertising: promotional events at bars, rock and blues concert sponsorships, and sleek magazine ads bombarding the 18-to-25-year-old market.

Emblematic of bold marketing to young but legal smokers: RJ Reynolds Tobacco Co. late last year debuted vanilla, citrus, and spice Camel cigarettes, flavors the industry long has believed would appeal to early smokers. RJ Reynolds insists its target is adults, but Matthew Myers, director of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, says the idea "appeals uniquely to children." It is just one indication, he says, that "the only thing that's changed is the rhetoric. The tobacco companies haven't changed their marketing behavior at all."

**Early users.** Myers and other tobacco foes maintain that the youth market always will be critical to Big Tobacco, because 80 percent of the nation's 47 million adult smokers began lighting up before the age of 18. Stop the 3,000 teens who become regular smokers each day, they say, and the pool of tobacco users evaporates. Everyone says curbing youth smoking is essential, but nobody seems to agree on how to do it. Case in point: The big television networks last week held up the initial versions of the Legacy Foundation ads. Network sources told Ad Week that they found the ads offensive in their graphic depiction of smoking's ill effects. "All we can say right now is that they are under review," CBS Vice President Dana McClintock told U.S. News. It was a frustrating development for Legacy, since its research shows that media-saturated teens need vivid illustrations of tobacco's consequences. "We believe they are very effective ads that reach teens in a new and innovative way," says Legacy's Carlea Bauman.

But whatever the final form of the campaign, at $150 million to $255 million a year, it's tiny compared with the $8.8 billion first installment of settlement dollars flowing to the states. So far politicians have committed less than 2 percent of that cash to antismoking efforts. The CDC has recommended that states spend one third of the money on tobacco control programs.

"A lot of [those programs] impress me as being naive and ineffective," says West Virginia's Attorney General Darrell McGraw. Says Texas state Sen. Bill Ratliff, "We don't know for sure that kids can be convinced." But CDC's Terry Pechacek says that the success of pilot youth prevention programs in states like Florida, Massachusetts, and California cannot be ignored. Largely because of a drop-off in these states, the national smoking rate for high school seniors has fallen slightly in the past two years after rising 30 percent in the mid-1990s, according to a University of Michigan study (chart)."We should not be denying the nation's youth something that's working in every state where it has been applied," Pechacek says.

The CDC says states must do more than hire glitzy advertising agencies. Pechacek says TV spots are merely "air cover," helpful in building public support for what happens on the ground. Since 1992, when Massachusetts voters passed the 25-cent-a-pack tax that funds its tobacco control program, the number of cities and towns with antismoking ordinances quadrupled to 144, with 3.8 million residents. "Reducing public smoking is a golden nugget in its impact on youth," says Lori Fersina, advocate for the American Cancer Society of Massachusetts. "You are changing the world you raise kids in, not just telling them it's bad for them." In November, Massachusetts announced a 15 percent decline in youth
smoking in the past two years. That same month, neighboring Rhode Island reported a 60 percent increase since 1993. "Massachusetts has taken a far more aggressive approach and is going to have a healthier population," laments Rhode Island's Lt. Gov. Charles Fogarty. Fogarty wants to fund a substantial antismoking drive, but so far, except for a $1 million grant, the legislature has backed Gov. Lincoln Almond's competing plan to pour the first $57 million into the state's general budget. In contrast, Massachusetts is using $20 million of its first settlement installment to expand its antitobacco program to a $54 million effort.

Tobacco companies, to the surprise of some, have advocated use of the settlement money for prevention. But there's a caveat: The industry wants campaigns directed at children, not adults. Health advocates complain that simply telling kids they're too young to smoke, without explaining why adults shouldn't smoke either, merely enhances tobacco's appeal. Critics have assailed Philip Morris's partnership with 4-H clubs and Brown & Williamson's program with the Jaycees. Tobacco industry officials say their approach is a legitimate effort to address societal concerns about under-age smoking while continuing to do business with adults who understand the risks. "If [our adversaries] were really concentrating on youth smoking, and not trying to put tobacco companies out of business, we might be able to get at the real issues, like self-esteem, risk-taking, and parental involvement," says Corky Newton, Brown & Williamson's vice president for youth responsibility programs.

**A moving target?** Industry officials insist they can afford to be sincere about youth prevention, even if it means fewer adult smokers. "We know how to compete in a declining market," says Carolyn Levy, Philip Morris Co.'s senior vice president for youth smoking prevention. Unfortunately, in the view of tobacco critics, that means an increased focus on the legal market of 18-to-25-year-olds. "The tobacco companies have been repositioning themselves since the settlement, and all for the worse," says Greg Connolly, Massachusetts's tobacco control program director. "The advertising that works best for the 15-year-old is targeting a 25-year-old." The companies have been hosting Kool Nites, Camel Club events, and Marlboro Party Nights in bars across the country, and ads in magazines such as Rolling Stone and Mademoiselle reinforce the image of cigarettes as an essential element of night life.

But RJ Reynolds spokeswoman Jan Smith notes that the settlement forced tobacco companies to yank down billboards, give up cartoon spokesmen, and withdraw from "youth-oriented" sports sponsorships. "It strikes me as a huge irony" that advocacy groups have criticized the bar nights, she says. "One of the very reasons that we view bars as a good place to be is it's an age-restricted environment." In fact, RJ Reynolds began selling its high-priced flavored cigarettes—Crema, Twist, and Samsun—strictly in bars and by direct mail to smokers over 21. Smith says the new "styles" are directed at adults. But Myers of Tobacco-Free Kids says the new CDC study on youth smoking shows that flavored cigarettes imported from India, "bidis," have become as popular among high school students as chewing tobacco (used by 5 percent to 6 percent of teens). Says Myers: "The only way to interpret [RJ Reynolds' s move] is as yet another tobacco industry appeal to the young."

**Shocking ads ring true**
California's "Voicebox" ad "shocked and mesmerized" teen focus groups.
• Debi recalls tobacco industry claims that cigarettes aren't addictive. After taking a drag from her laryngectomy hole, she remarks, "How can they say that?"

Teens believed Debi, who said she began smoking when she was young. "We should not be denying the nation’s youth something that’s been working in every state where it has applied."

**Tobacco ads stress choice**

Tobacco industry youth prevention ads urge teens to choose not to smoke.

Lorillard’s "Stereo Kid" ad illustrates how cigarettes burn away teens’ money. Kids say they don't smoke to be cool in Philip Morris’s "Think. Don't Smoke" ads. Critics say tobacco's ads don't offer teens compelling reasons not to smoke. "We might be able to get to the real issues, like self-esteem, risk-taking, and parental involvement."

**Teens keep puffing**

In 1999, nearly 35 percent of 12th graders—1 million total—had smoked a cigarette in the past 30 days.

**GRAPH: Teens keep puffing**

**PHOTO (COLOR):** Bar giveaways are part of the cigarette companies’ aggressive marketing to 18-to-25-year-olds.

**ILLUSTRATIONS**

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By Marianne Lavelle

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