Transparency and Truth

TEENS, THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY LOVES YOU!

EPISODE 1

"FOR ADULTS ONLY": YOUNG PEOPLE TARGETED BY THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY

SEPTEMBER 2025

In the first episode of this series devoted to the tobacco industry's tactics for manipulating young people, we explore why this population is the prime target, despite the industry's official stance that it wants to protect minors from smoking.

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TODAY'S TEENAGER IS TOMORROW'S POTENTIAL REGULAR CUSTOMER

The tobacco industry loves young people, or, more accurately, it needs them. Because without them, it's nothing.

"Younger adult smokers are critical to [R.J. Reynolds'] long-term performance and profitability [...] If younger adults turn away from smoking, the industry must decline, just as a population which does not give birth will eventually dwindle."[1]

These remarks, dating from 1984, come from a confidential document from the tobacco company R.J. Reynolds. They illustrate just how much this industry relies on young people to secure its future.

R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company is a tobacco company based in the U.S. Before its acquisition by British American Tobacco in 2017, R.J. Reynolds was the second-largest tobacco company in the U.S., owning brands such as Camel, Pall Mall, and Winston.

For Philip Morris, the strategy is equally as clear. A confidential document from 1981 states:

"Today's teenager is tomorrow's potential regular customer."[2]

And this is despite the industry's repeated claims that it "does not want children to smoke".[3]

The industry's cynical logic is easily explained: consumers eventually disappear, either because they quit smoking or because they die (often from tobacco itself: remember this industry kills up to one in two consumers).[4] To ensure their survival, cigarette manufacturers must therefore constantly recruit new customers, targeting the youngest.

But why is the tobacco industry so interested in teenagers? Couldn't it target non-smoking adults instead?

SMOKING, A PEDIATRIC DISEASE

An internal document from R.J. Reynolds provides the answer:

"Younger adults are the only source of replacement smokers. […] Less than one-third of smokers (31%) start after age 18. Only 5% of smokers start after age 24."[5]

To attract new consumers, cigarette manufacturers must therefore primarily target those under the age of 18. Later is already too late.

These data remain fully relevant today. According to Unisanté, "the vast majority of adult smokers (87%) started smoking before the age of 21".[6] In the United States, the 2012 Surgeon General's Report indicates that only 18.5% of smokers started after the age of 18.[7] The American Academy of Pediatrics even goes so far as to classify smoking as a pediatric disease.[8]

« la grande majorité des fumeuses et fumeurs adultes (87 %) a commencé sa consommation avant 21 ans »

Aware of this challenge, tobacco companies are waging a marketing war to win over this age group. As Philip Morris acknowledges, "it is during the teenage years that the initial brand choice is made".[2] For this reason, their aim is to develop products designed to be particularly attractive to young smokers, while still maintaining broader appeal to all consumers.

And the industry seems completely unapologetic about targeting minors. According to the industry, it's not responsible for underage smoking: if young people start smoking, it is solely their own decision. Tobacco manufacturers are simply "offering" a product that young people would have adopted anyway. Their logic of sidestepping responsibility is perfectly illustrated in this quote from R.J. Reynolds dating back to 1973:

"[...] we are presently, and I believe unfairly, constrained from directly promoting cigarettes to the youth market; that is, to those in the approximately twenty-one year old and under group. Statistics show, however, that large, perhaps even increasing, numbers in that group are becoming smokers each year, despite bans on promotion of cigarettes to them. If this be so, there is certainly nothing immoral or unethical about our Company attempting to attract those smokers to our products. We should not in any way influence nonsmokers to start smoking; rather we should simply recognize that many

or most of the "21 and under" group will inevitably become smokers, and offer them an opportunity to use our brands."[9]

LOYALTY AND INCREASED CONSUMPTION

Once a company has managed to attract a young person to its brand, the game is won: winning over a young person means gaining a customer "for life". Indeed, the tobacco consumption habits acquired during adolescence not only persist, but often evolve, leading to an increase in the number of cigarettes consumed. It is widely known that the earlier a person starts smoking, the more likely they are to develop a strong nicotine addiction.[10] This reality is nothing new to the tobacco industry. In 1981, Philip Morris described the period following adolescence as "pivotal years," crucial for consolidating and reinforcing this addiction:

"[...] the ten years following the teenage years is the period during which average daily consumption per smoker increases to the average adult level."[2]

Scientific studies confirm that the likelihood of becoming a regular smoker in adulthood is significantly higher when smoking begins in adolescence.[11,12]

WHY DO TEENAGERS START SMOKING?

To understand young people's motivations for smoking, it is essential to consider their psychological and neurobiological characteristics. The tobacco industry has long understood the value of studying and exploiting these factors.

PSYCHOLOGICAL MOTIVATIONS

Following their research on young people, R.J. Reynolds identified, in an internal document dating from 1973, five psychological and social motives: [9]

- **"Group identification":** If the majority of one's closest associates smoke cigarettes, then there is strong psychological pressure, particularly on the young person, to identify with the group, follow the crowd, and avoid being out of phase with the group's value system.
- **"Stress and boredom relief":** Cigarettes are sometimes seen as a source of support in tense or uncomfortable situations. They become a tool for emotional management, reinforcing psychological dependence.
- **"Self-image enhancement":** This motivation is particularly exploited in advertising. Young people, in search of an identity, are drawn to the strong and adventurous figures promoted by the industry.
- **"Experimentation":** Young people like to "try new things and have new experiences." This is certainly one of the reasons that drives them to start smoking.
- **"Anti-establishment attitude":** This attitude manifests itself as the rejection of the values promoted by the "establishment", particularly those of parents and people over the age of thirty. It is a form of rebellion that drives young people to adopt behaviors that go against established norms and to question authority.

Other companies have also closely studied teenagers in order to understand their motivations. This is done with the aim of encouraging them to smoke. A 1969 report on smoking initiation produced for Philip Morris emphasizes that to understand why teenagers smoke their first cigarette despite an unpleasant initial experience, we must first look for a psychological motive:

"Smoking a cigarette for the beginner is a symbolic act. The smoker is telling his world, "This is the kind of person I am" […] "I am no longer my mother's child," "I am tough," [...]." [13]

These findings are corroborated by scientific studies. On a psychological level, these studies show that adolescence is characterized by both an increased sensitivity to social influence and by a strong need for autonomy and identity building. The search for new sensations, a low tolerance for frustration, and limited impulse control are among the main predictive factors of substance use initiation, as repeatedly shown in scientific literature.[14,15]

A VULNERABLE BRAIN

An adolescent's initiation into smoking can also be explained by considering neurobiological factors. Adolescence is marked by profound neurobiological and psychological developmental processes that significantly increase vulnerability to risky behaviors and the onset of addictive disorders.[16]

Neuroscience research has shown that the human brain is not yet fully mature during this period. In particular, the prefrontal regions, which are responsible for executive functions such as impulse control, risk assessment, and long-term planning, are still developing. In contrast, the limbic system, particularly the nucleus accumbens, which is associated with reward and motivation, develops earlier and shows increased activity.[17]

This developmental gap between the emotional-motivational systems and cognitive regulatory processes, leads to a strong propensity among adolescents for immediate rewards, while their ability to assess long-term consequences is more limited than with adults.[18]

FROM "PRE-SMOKER" TO "CONFIRMED" SMOKER

These neurobiological and psychological considerations help to explain why adolescents may start smoking, despite often having unpleasant initial experiences. But what explains why they continue to do so?

After a few tries, young people get used to this unpleasant experience. Gradually, they no longer smoke just to assert their identity or to belong to a group, but because they no longer really have a choice: **nicotine addiction has taken over.**

This fact is summarized very well in a confidential Philip Morris document dating from 1969.

"As the force from the psychosocial symbolism subsides, the pharmacological effect takes over to sustain the habit." [13]

R.J. Reynolds describes the evolving motivations that lead an individual to smoke by distinguishing three profiles: "pre-smokers," "learning smokers," and "confirmed smokers"[9]. According to this model, initiation is primarily based on psychological motivations:

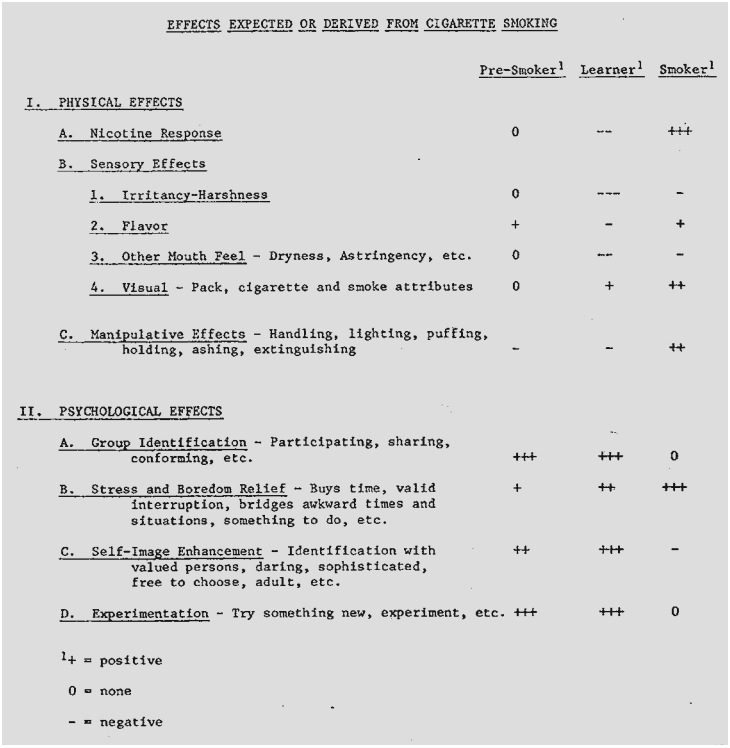
"The expected or derived psychological effects are largely responsible for influencing the pre-smoker to try smoking, and provide sufficient motivation during the "learning" period to keep the "learner" going, despite the physical unpleasantness and awkwardness of the period."

Once these stages have been completed, the "confirmed" smoker no longer smokes mainly for social or psychological reasons, but primarily to satisfy their physiological need for nicotine :

"[...] once the "learning" period is over, the physical effects become of overriding importance and desirability to the confirmed smokers, and the psychological effects, except the tension-relieving effect, largely wane in importance or disappear."[9]

Figure 1, taken from this same document, illustrates the expected or derived effects of smoking according to three profiles: "pre-smoker", "learner", and "smoker". For "pre-smokers" and "learners", it is mainly the psychological and social effects that encourage smoking. In contrast, for "confirmed" smokers, it is primarily the physical sensations and addiction that maintain their consumption.

Figure 1 – Expected or derived effects from cigarette smoking by R.J. Reynolds, 1973[9]



EFFECTS EXPECTED OR DERIVED FROM CIGARETTE SMOKING

	Pre-Smoker[1]	Learner[1]	Smoker[1]
I. PHYSICAL EFFECTS			
A. Nicotine Response	0	--	+++
B. Sensory Effects			
1. Irritancy-Harshness	0	---	-
2. Flavor	+	-	+
3. Other Mouth Feel - Dryness, Astringency, etc.	0	--	-
4. Visual - Pack, cigarette and smoke attributes	0	+	++
C. Manipulative Effects - Handling, lighting, puffing, holding, ashing, extinguishing	-	-	++
II. PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS			
A. Group Identification - Participating, sharing, conforming, etc.	+++	+++	0
B. Stress and Boredom Relief - Buys time, valid interruption, bridges awkward times and situations, something to do, etc.	+	++	+++
C. Self-Image Enhancement - Identification with valued persons, daring, sophisticated, free to choose, adult, etc.	++	+++	-
D. Experimentation - Try something new, experiment, etc.	+++	+++	0

[1] + = positive
0 = none
- = negative

However, the tobacco industry has long denied the addictive effect of its products. In 1994, several decades after the first internal documents described the physical effects of addiction, the CEOs of seven major tobacco companies testified under oath before the US Congress that they did not believe nicotine to be addictive.[20]

These findings are just the tip of the iceberg. Behind the official rhetoric which denies any interest in young people, the tobacco and nicotine industry has in fact developed a cynical and methodical strategy. In the upcoming episodes, we will delve into the

heart of these tactics, including the manipulation, targeted marketing, and influence strategies used, to reveal how this industry has perfected the art of capturing younger generations, all while claiming the opposite.

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IMPRESSUM

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