

FROM CARTOONS TO SOCIAL MEDIA, THE MARKETING TOOLS USED TO ATTRACT YOUNG PEOPLE

EPISODE 3**"FOR ADULTS ONLY": YOUNG PEOPLE TARGETED
BY THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY****DECEMBER 2025**

There's nothing like good advertising to attract new consumers. The tobacco industry has long understood this, and has widely abused it, particularly to attract young people. Admittedly, regulations and ethical standards have evolved: it is no longer possible to openly target minors or plaster massive advertisements in public spaces or on television. But the industry has grown more creative in finding ways to attract minors: entering their spaces, using their codes, and tapping into their interests. Here is a brief overview of marketing strategies, from past to present.

When repeated relentlessly, tobacco and nicotine advertising always ends up leaving a mark. And it doesn't just influence brand choice, it encourages people to smoke^{1,2}.

With posters and TV commercials for tobacco disappearing in many countries, the tobacco industry has shifted its strategies to other arenas: social media, festive events, TV series... All spaces where cigarette manufacturers can once again find their favorite target: young people.

In this episode, we take a closer look at the main marketing strategies used by the tobacco industry, both past and present.

EVADING REGULATION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

Open, borderless, and intrusive, social media easily slips past regulations. Hard to monitor, these transnational online spaces allow manufacturers to circumvent legislation that, in many countries, prohibits advertising for tobacco products.

On the internet, and especially on social media, the industry mainly uses two forms of communication:


- Direct advertising campaigns for their products;
- Posts shared by intermediaries (influencers), who publish a wide variety of content that is difficult to recognize as advertising.


Yet, this presence is far from harmless: a study of nearly 140,000 people (three-quarters of whom were teenagers) showed that **non-smokers exposed to tobacco-related promotional content on social media were twice as likely to start smoking** compared to those who were not exposed³.

In France, Contre-Feu (formerly Alliance Contre le Tabac/Alliance Against Tobacco) has shown that since 2019, 229 influencers have posted content tagging tobacco and nicotine industry products. The industry has even solicited non-smoking influencers to test and promote its products, revealing that the true objective of these campaigns is to recruit new consumers⁴.

For a more detailed analysis of the tobacco industry's marketing strategies on social media, please see our report "[Social media: the tobacco industry's new weapon](#)"⁵.




➤ **Figure 1** clearly illustrates the strategies used by the nicotine pouch brand  VELO (British American Tobacco) to target young people on social media. This approach relies both on advertisements that borrow codes specific to adolescence (partying, selfies, emojis, etc.) and on collaborations with influencers. The image on the right, for example, comes from the account of Niimi, a Swiss DJ and influencer who was invited to a hip hop music festival by VELO Switzerland. In Niimi's sponsored content, the product is woven into a festive and friendly atmosphere. This staging is designed to create a feeling of belonging to a community perceived as young and trendy.


 Nicotine pouches are small white sachets containing nicotine, nicotine salts, and flavorings, which are placed under the upper lip.

➤ **Figure 1** – Advertisements for VELO Switzerland on Instagram in 2025^{6,7}.



JOE CAMEL, CHILDREN'S "BEST FRIEND"


To target young people, the industry does not hesitate to resort to cartoons. These are used in particular to promote e-cigarettes and vapes  **Figure 2** ⁸.

 **Figure 2** – Advertisement for e-cigarette liquids. Screenshot from the Sweetch.ch website⁹.



But this technique is nothing new. Cartoons were among the first tools used by the tobacco industry to target teenagers and even children. Not very subtle, but extremely effective!

By associating tobacco or nicotine with friendly characters, the industry helps to normalize the product and soften perceptions of danger. The goal is to familiarize children with the world of tobacco, giving it an image that is both harmless and fun.

The most emblematic example of using a cartoon character to target young people is Joe Camel, created by American tobacco company R.J. Reynolds (later acquired by British American Tobacco) for its Camel cigarette brand  **Figure 3**). This "cool", macho character was designed to appeal to adolescents, particularly young boys.



◀ **Figure 3** – Joe Camel advertisements from 1989 (left) and 1991 (right)¹⁰.



And it worked extremely well: a 1991 study of children aged 3 to 6 found that **30% of 3-year-olds and over 91% of 6-year-olds recognized Joe Camel**¹¹. Another study also showed that these campaigns were far more effective at promoting Camel cigarettes among minors than among adults, confirming that children and teenagers were indeed the target audience of this campaign¹².

Going back even further, we find that the industry was already using cartoons in the 1940s and 1950s to appeal to young people in its advertisements ▶ **Figure 4**.

◀ **Figure 4** – Camel advertisement by R.J. Reynolds, 1954¹³.



PRODUCT PLACEMENT IN MOVIES AND TV SERIES

"I do feel heartened at the increasing number of occasions when I go to a movie and see a pack of cigarettes in the hand of the leading lady. [...] We must continue to exploit new opportunities to get cigarettes on screen and into the hands of smokers."¹⁴

This quotation, taken from a 1983 speech by Philip Morris, illustrates the importance the tobacco industry places on the visibility of its products in films.

A study by Contre-Feu shows that **in less than ten years, the presence of tobacco on screen has quadrupled in series aimed at young audiences.** In 2025, 53% of the most-watched shows among this age group contain scenes involving smoking. The second season of *Stranger Things*, a science-fiction and horror drama following the adventures of a group of teenagers, includes no fewer than 262 smoking scenes **👁 Figure 5¹⁵**.

👁 Figure 5 – Screenshot from season 2 of the series *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2016). This series, mainly aimed at teenagers and young adults, features 262 scenes of smoking in its second season.



Young people are influenced by the behavior of actors they admire and seek to emulate. When a celebrity smokes on screen, it normalizes and glamorizes smoking. Several studies show that the more young people are exposed to characters who smoke in movies, the more likely they are to start smoking themselves¹⁶⁻¹⁸. For example, a recent study by the Truth Initiative in the United States found that exposure to on-screen characters who vape can triple the likelihood that a young person will start vaping¹⁹.



"GADGET" PRODUCTS

The marketing ingenuity of e-cigarette and vape brands seems boundless. Recently, some devices have stood out by incorporating playful features, such as games like Pac-Man, Tetris, Snake, or Tamagotchi, as well as built-in earbuds or speakers²⁰. Some models emit multicolored lights when inhaled. Other brands focus primarily on design, with visuals and flavors specifically crafted to appeal to a young audience.

Moreover, some brands offer loyalty schemes, such as contests where users earn points with each puff²⁰. These multifunctional devices are readily available in specialty stores or online, at prices similar to those of standard e-cigarettes.

Figure 6 – Screenshot of the Airmez Xbeats product on the airmezvape.com website. Product description on the Airmez vape website: "Airmez Xbeats: the ultimate fusion of high-performance vaping and premium audio. This revolutionary device features in-built TWS earbuds, offering seamless music and calls without the need for extra gadgets. [...] With 15 delicious flavors and a unique, stylish design, Airmez Xbeats offers an experience that's truly next-level."²¹



THE TASTE OF CHILDHOOD

*"Two flavours which were discussed as options were Root Beer and Brazilian Fruit Juice, both of which tend to appeal to the younger generation while being rejected by their parents. [...] It was felt that the rebellion aspect would be encouraged if the cigarette not only tasted horrible, but also had a totally distinctive aroma characteristic."*²²

This quotation, taken from the "Project Kestrel" document by Lorillard (British American Tobacco), whose aim was to "develop a brand which 'breaks the rules', to appeal to a new generation and shock their parents," illustrates how flavors are used by the industry to attract young people.

Figure 7 – Advertisement for a pineapple candy flavored e-cigarette liquid. Screenshot from wevappy.ch website²⁵.




Flavors are used to mask the bitterness and irritation of tobacco, making the first experience of consumption more pleasant, whether with flavored cigarettes or cigarillos, capsule cigarettes or hookahs. They are also widely used to attract young people to nicotine products, especially e-cigarettes, vapes, and nicotine pouches, by giving these products a fun and harmless image. According to one study, more than 80% of young tobacco users in the United States use flavored products, and nearly three-quarters


By crushing a capsule built into the filter, the smoker releases a fruity flavor. Some cigarettes contain several capsules, each offering a different taste, allowing the smoker to choose the flavor they want each time they smoke. Although the European Union has banned flavored capsule cigarettes, they remain legal in Switzerland.



say they would stop using them if the flavors were removed²³. It has also been shown that **flavored products encourage early initiation and nicotine addiction**^{24,25}.

POINTS OF SALE AS A MARKETING TOOL

Cigarettes or candy? The Swiss Observatory of Marketing Strategies for Tobacco Products has shown that, in points of sale, tobacco and nicotine products are often placed at children's eye level and close to candy  **Figure 8**²⁷. Studies have shown that young people who are frequently exposed to products and advertising at points of sale are significantly more likely to smoke than those who are less exposed^{28,29}.

 **Figure 8** – Advertisements at children's eye level. The yellow stars indicate all visual stimuli related to advertising for tobacco or nicotine products. Some of these visuals are strategically placed at children's height, notably right next to sweets. January 31, 2025, in a gas station in Lausanne, Switzerland. (Photo: OxySuisse).



This placement is no accident: tobacco industry representatives regularly visit retailers to negotiate premium product placement in exchange for financial incentives or promotional gifts³⁰.

However, the situation is changing in Switzerland with the upcoming implementation of the "Children Without Tobacco" initiative, which aims to protect minors from the direct influence of tobacco marketing. The cantons of Vaud and Valais have taken the lead by already introducing advertising bans for these products at points of sale.

In addition to attracting young people through the staging of its products, the industry also plays the price card: aware that price strongly influences tobacco consumption among young people^{32,33}, it uses targeted promotions at points of sale to draw them in. A study conducted in the state of New York showed that retailers located in neighborhoods with a high proportion of young people were more likely to offer discounts on menthol cigarettes (a product particularly popular with young people) than those in areas with fewer young residents³⁴.

Figure 9 – Advertisement for the "Parisienne" cigarette brand (British American Tobacco), 2021³¹.



In Switzerland, the Coop supermarket chain, for example, introduced a cigarette brand called "5.50," corresponding to the price of a pack of 20 cigarettes. Five Swiss francs and 50 centimes, more than CHF 3 cheaper than the leading brand, which costs CHF 8.80 in 2021. Such a brand primarily targets young people, for whom the high price of cigarettes is one of the main factors discouraging them from smoking³³. In 2023, when Coop raised the price of these cigarettes by 15 centimes, it simply renamed them 5.65^{35,36}.

Figure 10 — Packs of 20 cigarettes produced and sold by Coop (2021, left, and 2023, right).



SPONSORSHIP OF FESTIVE EVENTS

Being present at festive events attended by large numbers of young people allows the tobacco industry to cultivate a "cool" image³⁷. This kind of experiential marketing is a particularly effective strategy for circumventing advertising restrictions while still reaching young people directly.

In Switzerland, several cigarettes and nicotine-product brands have made their way into festivals (OpenAir St. Gallen, Lakelive in Biel, Openair Frauenfeld, Montreux Jazz Festival, Paléo Festival, etc.) by offering spaces reserved for adults. By creating a feeling of exclusion for the teenagers left outside, this age restriction paradoxically becomes a powerful pull factor. The cigarettes thus become, symbolically, the key to joining the "grown-ups' club."

This approach mirrors exactly the principles outlined in 1991 by Clotaire Rapaille, a psychologist commissioned by Philip Morris to develop a marketing plan specifically designed to appeal to teenagers: *"observer [the teenager] is on the outside looking in / does not belong: wants to be included."*³⁸

To learn more about the tobacco industry's sponsorship of events and institutions, please see our report ["The self-serving generosity of the tobacco industry in Switzerland."](#)³⁹

The story doesn't end there. In the following episodes, we'll look at how the industry has conducted research on teenagers, and the surprising "prevention" programs developed by tobacco manufacturers.



➤ **Figure 11** – : **Above:** Paléo Festival in Nyon, Switzerland, 2012. At the 2012 Paléo Festival, Marlboro set up a promotional platform called “BEAT” (Be-At Marlboro), exclusively reserved for adults. This space offered various activities, including base jumping. It is reasonable to assume that one of the aims of this adult-only space was to enhance the brand’s appeal by creating a sense of exclusion among minors, who were not allowed to enter. **Below:** Paléo Festival 2025. Thirteen years later, Japan Tobacco International took over. The cigarette manufacturer runs a festive space, also off-limits to minors, where various activities are offered (including festive makeup and silent parties). (Photos: OxySuisse)



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Editing and proofreading

Sophie Lonchamp, Michela Canevascini, Pascal Diethelm,
Hugo Molineaux, Tanja Heizmann, Barbara Ducry (OxySuisse)

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Plates-Bandes communication

Cover photo

Unsplash

