

PREVENTING SMOKING: REALLY?

EPISODE 5

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

MAY 2026



In the 1990s and 2000s, the tobacco industry introduced programmes purportedly designed to prevent smoking among young people. Behind a philanthropic and educational façade, these initiatives actually served the tobacco industry's own strategic interests.

“Underage should NOT use any tobacco or nicotine-containing product. This is beyond question. To achieve our vision of a world without cigarettes, we must do everything possible to keep our smoke-free products out of the hands of anyone underage.”¹

Today, the tobacco company Philip Morris is keen to remind us that it wants to protect minors from smoking and nicotine addiction. This is, of course, false, as we have already seen in earlier episodes.

A few years ago, tobacco companies went even further by voluntarily implementing youth smoking prevention programmes. What a laudable goal, you might say! And yet...



A DECEPTIVE STRATEGY


The first “prevention” programmes developed by the tobacco industry emerged in the United States in the early 1980s. Aimed at retailers, parents, and young people themselves, they were officially intended to reduce the prevalence of smoking among minors. These initiatives took various forms, including television commercials and posters displayed in public spaces and at points of sale. Starting in the late 1990s, these programmes gained momentum and spread worldwide.

At the time, the industry was confronted with a wave of lawsuits; its public image was deteriorating sharply, and its credibility was being severely undermined. These programmes thus enabled the industry to address a major political challenge: improving its image among the public and policymakers, thereby making the latter less inclined to adopt overly strict measures against the industry. An internal document from R.J. Reynolds stated in 1982:

“A program to discourage teens from smoking (an adult decision) might prevent or delay further regulation of the tobacco industry.”²

In 1991, the Director of Corporate Affairs at Philip Morris US, Joshua Slavitt, further indicated that: ***“The ultimate means for determining the success of this program will be: 1) A reduction in legislation introduced and passed restricting or banning our sales and marketing activities; 2) Passage of legislation favorable to the industry; 3) Greater support from business, parent, and teacher groups”.***³

In reality, the industry cared little about the effectiveness of these programmes in reducing youth smoking. As we have shown in previous episodes, it had no interest in seeing such consumption decline⁴.

 In 1998, attorneys general in 52 U.S. states signed a landmark framework agreement, the Master Settlement Agreement, with the four largest tobacco manufacturers in the country, settling dozens of lawsuits brought by the states to recover billions of dollars in healthcare costs related to the treatment of smoking-related diseases.



Public health experts largely agree on one point: **these programmes were not designed to be effective**, and available data even suggest an increase in smoking among minors during this period⁵.



PREVENT OR ENCOURAGE ?

The prevention of smoking among minors was therefore merely a pretext. In addition to improving its image among the public and lawmakers, these campaigns also allowed the industry to target young people legally—and potentially to encourage them to smoke.

Although seemingly harmless, these campaigns relied on two recurring themes: they presented smoking as a decision reserved for adults and emphasised respect for the law as a means of deterring minors. At the same time, however, they glossed over other factors, such as the addictive nature of nicotine, the health effects of smoking, and the role of tobacco marketing in initiating smoking.

In this way, tobacco companies achieved what Pascal Diethelm, president of OxySuisse, has described as “highly effective incitement campaigns”:

🗨️ ***“[The tobacco industry] is launching a highly effective campaign to encourage smoking among young people, sending a strong message that smoking is the norm and portraying young people who don’t smoke as immature [...]. It secures the right to broadcast (as many as 500 times!) a campaign promoting smoking on television channels, circumventing bans by presenting it as a prevention campaign.”***⁶

🗨️ Quote in original language :
« [L’industrie du tabac] lance une campagne très efficace d’incitation au tabagisme auprès des jeunes, en passant un message fort, suggérant que le tabagisme est la norme et décrivant les jeunes qui ne fument pas comme des personnes immatures [...]. Elle obtient le droit de diffuser (à 500 reprises !) sur les chaînes de télévision une campagne d’incitation au tabagisme, contournant les interdictions en la faisant passer pour une campagne de prévention. »

He is not alone in this assessment. In 2004, a WHO report described the same strategy in similar terms:

“While these programmes are created to appear to dissuade or prevent young people from smoking, in fact the effect is often the contrary. By portraying smoking as an adult activity, these programmes increase the appeal of cigarettes for adolescents.”⁷



Through its “prevention” programmes, the tobacco industry pursues several key objectives:

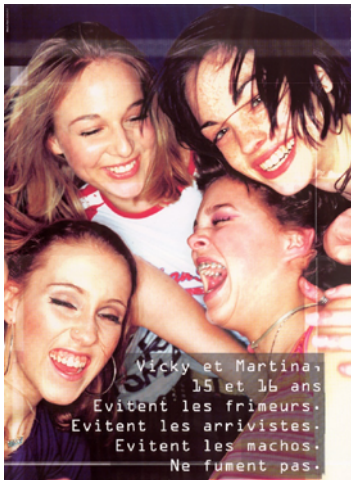
- With the **public**: to improve its image and reputation;
- With **lawmakers**: to prevent the implementation of new measures that could harm its interests;
- With **young people**: to appeal to them through subliminal messaging.

To better understand why these campaigns are ineffective — or even serve to incite smoking — let’s examine them more closely.

In 2001, the Swiss Cigarette Industry Association (later Swiss Cigarette) launched a series of prevention campaigns with the stated aim of “promoting a smoke-free lifestyle”⁸. These campaigns featured posters in public transportation and a video clip broadcast on television 500 times. The images used depicted young people identified as non-smokers in various situations.

Below is a poster from this campaign:

Figure 1 – “Youth Smoking Prevention” campaign by Swiss Cigarette (Switzerland, 2003–2005)



Four young girls appear in this poster, but only two names are given: Vicky and Martina. The viewer is left to assume that these names refer to the two girls at the bottom of the image, closer to the text.

The appearance of these two teenagers does not match what young people their age typically aspire to, showing unflattering facial



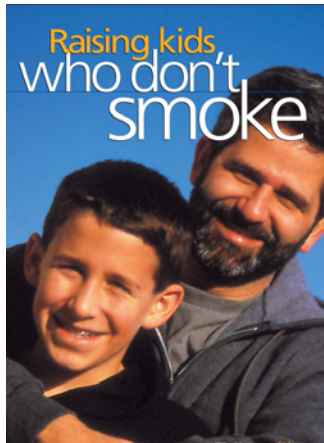
expressions, childlike faces, braces... All features that contrast with the teenage ideal of maturity and attractiveness.

The text meanwhile presents Vicky and Martina as models of virtue: they avoid risky behaviours, keep away from show-offs, and above all, they don't smoke. They thus embody the archetype of the "goodie-goodies"⁹, well-behaved, trouble-free young girls.

Without details about the other two teenagers shown, who appear more mature and attractive, the viewer can easily infer that they are likely smokers. This implicit implication suggests that smoking is associated with a form of maturity and social appeal, which ultimately constitutes a subtle incentive to smoke.

U.S. campaigns employed similar tactics:

Figure 2 – Philip Morris "Raising Kids Who Don't Smoke" campaign (2003)¹⁰



In this poster, Philip Morris uses a message open to dual interpretation, designed to be understood differently depending on whether the viewer is a parent or a young person.

- Parents will instinctively identify with the adult, whom they perceive as a good father, concerned with protecting his son from the dangers of smoking.
- Young people, on the other hand, do not identify with the child at all. What teenager would want to resemble a "goodie-goodie"⁹, burdened with braces and quite literally smothered by his father's overprotective grip?



This divergence in perception is reinforced by the choice of the word “raising”, which creates a subtle yet significant shift: it transfers responsibility for smoking prevention away from the tobacco industry itself and onto parents.

Figure 3 – Lorillard “Tobacco is Whacko” Campaign (2000)¹⁴



This poster, with a graphic style inspired by Marvel comics, depicts a visibly terrified teenage girl being struck head-on by a cigarette. The use of bright colours, exaggerated lines, and the look of panic on the girl’s face gives the image a caricature-like quality. The overall effect evokes a scene from a horror film, in which the cigarette is personified as an evil entity.

The slogan “Tobacco is Whacko if You’re a Teen” appears, at first glance, to discourage young people from smoking. Yet its ambiguous phrasing conveys a more insidious underlying message: by presenting tobacco as an activity reserved for adults, it implicitly encourages teenagers to prove their maturity by taking up the “challenge” of smoking: cigarettes, in other words, aren’t for wimps. This dual interpretation mechanism allows tobacco companies to claim they’re promoting prevention while simultaneously arousing the curiosity of young people.

NOTHING IS LEFT TO CHANCE

Across these campaigns, teenagers portrayed as non-smokers are almost always characterised by childlike attributes, such as braces, a youthful face, or a certain degree of immaturity.



It's worth noting that these campaigns are commissioned by companies that work on a daily basis with leading communications agencies and possess unparalleled expertise in the psychological effects of their advertising messages, tailored to specific audiences.

In Switzerland, the “prevention” campaign is handled by TBWA¹², an international marketing agency. However, this same agency is also contracted to promote some of the most well-known cigarette brands of these multinationals, such as Benson & Hedges by Philip Morris.

Under these circumstances, it is difficult to view certain features of these prevention campaigns as mere mistakes or oversights. Given the recognised professionalism of tobacco marketing, every detail seems, instead, to be a deliberate choice, inviting a more critical interpretation.

Join us for the next and final episode of this “For Adults Only” series, where we'll revisit the key points discussed so far and offer both reflections and concrete actions.



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