
Fighting fire with fire: the aggressive FDA anti-smoking campaign based on exploiting basic human fears

Real Cost FDA Tobacco Campaign

In 2011, the tobacco industry in the United States spent more than \$8 billion on advertising and promotions (“Economic Facts”). Although teen smoking rates are lower than in the past, about 1 out of every 6 people aged 13-18 are regular smokers (“Trends”). Alarmed at the high rates of teen smoking and the increased use of electronic cigarettes, the Food and Drug Administration launched an anti-smoking campaign called “The Real Cost” in an attempt to combat these problems. The FDA’s Real Cost anti-smoking campaign exploits the fears of both female and male high school students who are at risk for habitual smoking. Through extensive use of pathos and unconventional symbolism, they encourage the audience to consider the true dangers of smoking and end the habit.

The “outside now” print advertisement (see Appendix B) features a miniature bully standing in a locker, who demands that a student step outside to smoke a cigarette. The long edge of the skateboard in the locker and the lines of the locker itself lead the audience's eye from the bully to the main text, which serves to emphasize these important features of the ad. The “outside now, punk” text is in a bold, bright red which contrasts against the dark background and is difficult to ignore: the color imparts a sense of action or movement in the audience, who is immediately intrigued. The direct command of the header further draws them to read the white subtitle underneath, which says that “you wouldn't take it from a tiny bully... but you're taking it from a cigarette”. By equating smoking with the socially unacceptable situation of bullying, the ad highlights the dictatorial nature of nicotine in a person’s life. According to the ad, smokers take orders from a bully instead of standing up. This appeal to pathos arouses fear in the audience of potentially experiencing the situation firsthand. Many teenagers begin smoking because the future adverse health effects are too abstract to truly register in their minds; this ad instead reinforces the immediate disadvantages of addiction such as loss of control. The subtitle, therefore, is an inspirational call to action for the audience to stop allowing cigarettes to control them. The messages in this ad that smoking is not worth the problems it causes apply to the primary audience of male high schoolers. The presence of a skateboard and a sticky note in the locker that says “football game Sat night” suggest that the image is directed toward young men. However, a secondary audience may be high school girls as well: the metaphor of a bully is relatable to most students, which increases the applicability and possible influence of the advertisement.

A second striking advertisement in the campaign shows a detailed view of decayed teeth, accompanied by the text “You get all your smokes for free. Or do you?” (see Appendix C). The mouth and teeth do not follow the rule of thirds but are instead located in the direct center of the ad, where the eye is drawn first. The lips of the mouth naturally surround and emphasize the main focus, the decayed, stained teeth, creating a grotesque image. This shocking image immediately compels the audience to desire to understand and read the white text that accompanies it. The starkly contrasting, bright white text of the caption further contributes to this jarring effect. The use of pathos leads to an overall impact that directly appeals to an audience’s fear and vanity; the decrepit teeth provide a visual, and therefore concrete, future

possibility and scare the audience to end smoking for the sake of their appearance. This specific advertisement does not appeal particularly to students but instead to anyone who values their physical appearance.

Another set of advertisements in the campaign, aired on the radio, rely on situational irony to communicate the message (Appendix D). The radio ads begin with statements about an unnamed character that a listener would immediately connect with a bully, such as “he takes your money” and “he drags you outside”. The audience might be led to expect that this is a campaign to take action against bullies, or something similar. However, the ad captures the audience’s attention by saying that “you just smoked another one”. While the ad plays off the traditional definition of addiction, where cigarettes interrupt one’s everyday activities, it also leads listeners to view cigarettes like bullies: harsh, controlling, and victimizing. The unexpected metaphor and personification of a bully cigarette shocks the listeners into considering an unconventional view of their relationship to smoking. It also manipulates the encouraged response to bullies (to stand up, or to get help) and directs it toward the act of smoking. In addition, the continual second person point-of-view creates an accusatory tone (especially in such statements as “you smoked another one”) that places responsibility for action on the shoulders of the audience. Near the end of the advertisement, the narrator calls this bullying “just another real cost of tobacco”, which implies that the loss of control is not even the worst that can happen to a smoker but that there are other costs as well. As evidenced by the statement “smoke just a few and cigarettes can start to control you”, these radio ads mainly apply to the non-smoking student population. The implied warning is that smoking even a few cigarettes recreationally can cause such adverse effects as stated in the ads; they employ pathos, again in the form of fear, to scare students who may have been considering smoking but have not yet started.

The overall message of the campaign is that the cost of smoking cigarettes extend past sole monetary value. One radio advertisement presents this argument succinctly: “even when you’re not paying... you’re paying” (“The Real Cost”). The advertisements serve to highlight, in detail, the other ways that smokers must pay for their addiction, such as gum disease, unattractive physical effects like wrinkles and stained teeth, and complete loss of control in one’s life. The majority of the ads portray cigarettes as bullies, an unorthodox analogy that further increases their effectiveness. Another interesting point is the complete lack of logos in any of the advertisements of the campaign. This increases their applicability and makes them more memorable; when trying their first few cigarettes, teenagers are much more likely to remember graphic images than statistics.

Although the FDA’s initial budget of \$115 million for this campaign may appear paltry compared to the annual cost of marketing for the major tobacco companies in the United States, their effort to reduce smoking addiction in young men and women is commendable (Cha). I believe that, for the average high schooler, this campaign will be reasonably effective. The advertisements exploit teenagers’ vanity, mixed with creative, striking images that inspire fear, to scare teenagers to refrain from the act of smoking. Because many young people believe that they can acquire cigarettes from others, they are not deterred by the excessively high cost of a pack. The FDA convincingly reminds the audience of even worse consequences than price. Generally, in the United States, smoking is an activity that is frowned upon and often prohibited in public; it is not considered as “cool” as it once was because the average citizen is aware of the harm it can cause. Although America still has a long way to go to reduce or even eliminate smoking, the Food and Drug Administration’s campaign is an admirable effort to diminish the

influence of tobacco corporations.

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