The 21st Century Tobacco Industry: A Tiger That Has Not Changed Its Stripes

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On May 31, the global public health and tobacco control communities will celebrate the 33rd annual World No Tobacco Day. This significant day "encourages a 24-hour period of abstinence from all forms of tobacco consumption across the globe" and seeks "to draw attention to the widespread prevalence of tobacco use and to the negative health effects." Each year a specific theme is selected by the World Health Organization (WHO) to communicate a global message for the event, and to establish priorities for WHO's tobacco control agenda for the year to come. The theme for 2020 is protecting youth from tobacco industry manipulation and preventing tobacco product use. This theme could not have been selected at a more ideal time.

For the last few years, the tobacco industry has been waging a rebranding campaign in a desperate attempt to clean up their public image. This campaign insists that they've changed. On the contrary, the tobacco industry of the future is responding to normative and regulatory shifts regarding tobacco use by strategically transitioning their product portfolio from a reliance on combustible tobacco products to products they claim to be "less harmful." This is not an entirely new strategy for the industry. For instance, "light" cigarettes, which many smokers believed to be safer than regular cigarettes, were found to be as harmful or more harmful than regular cigarettes. These "less harmful products" from the tobacco industry likely carry unknown health risks and may be a springboard to more harmful combustible tobacco products.

There are many events demonstrating that this amounts to nothing but an empty promise, and that the tobacco industry has in no way renounced their deceptive and manipulative practices. Let's consider the activities of Altria and Phillip Morris International (PMI), some of the world's largest tobacco companies, to further illustrate this industry hypocrisy. In 2017, PMI invested nearly $1 billion to create the Foundation For A Smoke-Free World, which pledged their commitment to create a "smoke-free future." However, since then, they have done just the opposite.

In 2018, for example, Altria, PMI's domestic arm, invested billions of dollars in JUUL. JUUL, the leading e-cigarette on the market, is widely believed to have initiated the current youth vaping epidemic that resulted in millions of addicted youth throughout the nation. The National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine has also concluded that youth who vape are at increased risk to transition to regular cigarettes. In 2019, PMI launched the cigarette brand Phillip Morris Bold in Indonesia, a country with one of the highest smoking rates in the world. Most recently in 2020, Altria sued the Food and Drug Administration to prevent the implementation of graphic warning labels on tobacco products, maintaining the labels would cover "an unprecedented amount of premium real estate," despite the abundant evidence from multiple countries that graphic warning labels are effective to prevent smoking and promote quitting.

In the three years since PMI committed to "end smoking in this generation," they have invested in vaping companies whose products have initiated youth into nicotine addiction and kept adults smoking. They have

launched new brands of cigarettes and have resisted regulation designed to inform and protect the public from their lethal products.

It is evident that despite their expensive media campaigns and claims to the contrary, the tobacco industry cannot be trusted, and has not changed. In truth, they are the problem, not the solution for making a smoke-free world a reality. The need for World No Tobacco Day and this poignant theme to highlight this deadly discrepancy has never been greater. While the nation attempts to combat emergent public health epidemics, it is vital that we also maintain our focus on the youth vaping epidemic. If left unchecked, youth vaping could eradicate decades of progress to reduce youth tobacco use.




The seven CEOs of the biggest U.S. tobacco companies testifying under oath in 1994 before Congress that they did not believe nicotine was addictive (left). The co-founder of JUUL, James Monsees, testifying in defense of JUUL during a 2019 Congressional Subcommittee hearing (right).

In another era, when the causal link between cigarette smoking and lung cancer was made public for the first time, then Phillip Morris president made another commitment to a smoke-free world in 1954 in newspapers across the country. He stated, “If we had any thought or knowledge that in any way, we were selling a product harmful to our customers, we would stop business tomorrow.” This statement nearly 70 years ago did not create a smoke-free world any more than this new foundation will.

Ultimately, it is not the passage of time or public relations platitudes that changes the tiger’s stripes, but rather the resolve to take decisive action. For the industry’s statements to be remotely credible, they must align their business practices with the promotion of public health, acknowledge the scientific evidence regarding the harms of tobacco and act in full cooperation with regulatory processes. Otherwise, no matter how many times over the years you assert you’re as docile as a house cat, you’ll never be anything more than a fearsome predator of the jungle.

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