

Selling addiction: Tobacco industry transition to new products

To dominate the market for e-cigarettes and novel tobacco products, the tobacco industry is re-using tactics that successfully targeted youth and misinformed the public about product safety in the past. While the industry aggressively promotes its new products under the guise of offering solutions, some of the hard-fought, life-saving tobacco control measures currently in place are being undermined.

What is the tobacco industry's new narrative?

Since 2011, major transnational tobacco companies – including Philip Morris International, British American Tobacco/RJ Reynolds, Imperial Tobacco and Japan Tobacco International – have developed or acquired leading brands of e-cigarettes/electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS) and novel tobacco products such as heated tobacco products (HTPs) (1). In 2012, Japan Tobacco International acquired Nakhla, a leading waterpipe tobacco company, to widen its portfolio and footprint in the Middle East and Africa (2), a region that the industry views as ripe for e-cigarette marketing with a projected growth of 9.74% per year (3).

In promoting these new devices, tobacco companies claim to have given “smokers a wider range of choices” and declare ENDS and HTPs to be “safer alternatives” intended as “reduced risk products”. The tobacco industry has declared such products will “save” millions of people worldwide from traditional, more harmful cigarettes and made expressions of support for “harm reduction” initiatives (4). Table 1 gives examples of the “transformation” messages communicated by major tobacco companies and the ENDS/HTP brands they are marketing.

Table 1. Transformation messages and tobacco industry brands¹

Tobacco company	Initiative/campaign	Industry jargon	ENDS	HTPs	Key markets (ENDS/HTPs)
British American Tobacco	Transforming Tobacco, A Better Tomorrow	Next generation products (NGPs)	Vype	Glo	Poland, United Kingdom, United States/Japan
RJ Reynolds			Vuse	Eclipse Revo Neocore	
Imperial Tobacco	European Citizens Initiative: Let's demand smarter vaping regulations	NGPs	Blu	Pulze	France, Japan, United Kingdom, United States/Japan
			Jai		
			Puritane		
Japan Tobacco International	It's time to rethink tobacco #ReThinkMusic	Reduced-risk products (RRPs)	Logic cig-a-like E-lites	Ploom	Japan, United Kingdom, United States/Japan, Republic of Korea, United Kingdom
Philip Morris	Smoke-Free Future, Hold My Light Unsmoke Your World, #ItsTime Mission Winnow	RRPs Harm reduction equation Heat-not-burn products	Nicocig Juul	IQOS	Canada, Germany, Indonesia, Israel, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States/Egypt, Japan, Russia

Source: Tobacco industry corporate strategies: then and now. Bangkok: Global Center for Good Governance in Tobacco Control (GGTC), Stopping Tobacco Organizations and Products (STOP) project (forthcoming publication).

What's wrong with the industry's message about going "smoke-free?"

Philip Morris International's leaked corporate affairs strategy (2014) reveals the company's plans to simultaneously increase profits/sales and normalize the use of **both** cigarettes and novel products by engaging third parties (scientists, harm reduction advocates, policy-makers), establishing itself as a "solution provider" and resisting "extreme" regulations (5).

Analysis of the messages and practices of transnational tobacco companies reveals that the following tactics are being employed (6).

- **Corporate whitewashing**

Tobacco companies are using ENDS and novel tobacco products to establish themselves as public health solution providers and to clean up their corporate

¹ Information as of July 2019.

image, as can be seen from the sustainability reports and public statements of Philip Morris, British American Tobacco and Japan Tobacco International. By widely publicizing their new “safer products” or “smoke-free” messages to the media, the tobacco industry aims to detract attention from decades of harm caused to health and the environment.

- **Misleading “safety” messages**

In recent years, the tobacco industry has showcased vaping or the use of vapour products as part of a smoke-free strategy. However, studies show that the aerosol from a vape is not safe. “Smoke-free” is a term associated with a healthy and clean environment, and is widely used by public health advocates to refer to environments that comply with global standards (Article 13 Guidelines). Hence, marketing vaping as “smoke-free”, coupled with the reputational rehabilitation of the tobacco companies as health solution providers, contributes to the perception that novel tobacco products are safe or benign.

Tobacco industry marketing: what does the public hear?

Philip Morris spokesperson (2019): *“We do a lot of the research ourselves when you use an e-cigarette or one of our products, you produce an aerosol. It’s made purely of water droplets” (7).*

U.S. Surgeon General (2016): *“E-cigarette aerosol is not harmless “water vapour”*

- **Access to policy-makers and undue influence on tobacco control**

These “smoke-free”, “public health solution” messages create new opportunities for tobacco companies to access policy-makers and, therefore, the possibility to influence regulation of both novel tobacco products and traditional cigarettes. For example, policy-makers in the Philippines, who had been approached by the tobacco/vaping industry to liberalize e-cigarettes, suggested during a United Nations civil society meeting in 2017 that, in lieu of tobacco tax increases, governments should explore private-public partnerships with the industry on novel tobacco products. Such suggestions directly contravene Article 5.3 (Protection of public health policies from the commercial and vested interests of the tobacco industry) and Article 6 (Price and tax measures) of the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC).

- **Utilization of third parties or front groups against tobacco control**

Transnational tobacco companies are providing technical support and policy drafts to tobacco front groups and policy-makers (in Indonesia, Philippines and Viet Nam). These front groups, while manifestly supporting novel tobacco products, have pushed for the weakening of tobacco control regulation (in South Africa and Philippines). Vaping front groups are being funded by the tobacco industry to promote relaxed regulations for ENDS/novel tobacco products (in countries of the European Union and South Africa).

- **Youth marketing**

ENDS and HTPs could result in youth initiation, in part due to an impression that the products are safe. A study that evaluated submissions by Philip Morris to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration found that even the company's own data show that IQOS could result in youth initiation. In the United States of America, adolescents misinterpreted "lower exposure" claims made about ENDS as communicating "lower risk", even when no express claims of lower risk were made. The false perception of the "safety" of ENDS, coupled with intense marketing of attractive products through innovative channels, has enticed new users who are non-smokers, including young people. As a result, a teenage vaping epidemic has been reported in the United States and is projected in Canada.

- **Obfuscation of science**

The renewed image of tobacco companies, along with the funding of third parties, has allowed the industry to recruit "independent" scientists and create doubt within the scientific community. These links with scientists could disrupt the integrity of the scientific process and lead to massive disinformation, as happened when the harms from cigarettes were first being studied.

- **Reversal of smoke-free laws and advertising bans**

Another major concern is that progress made in tobacco control – such as comprehensive advertising bans and 100% smoke-free environments – could be reversed if novel tobacco products are indeed mistakenly viewed as public health solutions. The tobacco industry's efforts to reverse advertising bans have already found some success. Sponsorship of Formula One races, which was banned from 1997 to 2006, saw a revival in 2018 and 2019. Philip Morris International partnered with Scuderia Ferrari sporting the Marlboro red-and-white chevron, and sponsored the Ducati team of MotoGP. British American Tobacco has engaged in a multi-year partnership agreement with McLaren through the "A Better Tomorrow" campaign. Both tobacco companies couched these partnerships in terms of marketing their novel tobacco products. However, the WHO FCTC Secretariat took action and sent governments a reminder to enforce comprehensive advertising bans to counter the industry's revived tactic. Official findings that such sponsorships circumvent existing policies forced the tobacco companies to drop the branding in Australia and France.

How is the tobacco playbook used to sell ENDS and new products?

The tobacco industry's tactics are the same when it comes to increasing profits from both traditional and novel tobacco products: marketing to the young. To address youth marketing issues, lawsuits (including class actions) have recently been filed against Juul and investigations launched against British American Tobacco. Even competing tobacco companies agree that teenagers have been targeted. Table 2 gives examples of tobacco industry strategies that are being repeated to sell ENDS/HTPs.

Table 2. Tobacco industry strategies, past and present

Known tobacco industry strategy	Strategy used to sell ENDS/HTPs
Manipulated nicotine content to increase the addictiveness of the cigarettes	Increasing the level of nicotine content to remain competitive
Marketed fruit and other flavoured cigarettes that appeal to youth	Selling fruit-flavoured e-cigarettes and using brand names similar to cereal and candy products that appeal to youth
Promoted banning of sales to minors to detract from advertising bans, smoking bans and tax hikes	Promoting banning of sales to minors and opposing other forms of regulation, including advertising bans
Kept taxes and prices low to keep the products affordable	Keeping taxes and prices low, must be lower than cigarettes to be "proportionate to the level of harm"
Used hip/cool or trendy images to market the product	Using young social media influencers and images to promote the product
Sponsored music, film and other festivals	Sponsoring music and film festivals and events (Juil with Sundance, Blu with Sasquatch!, and Japan Tobacco International's #ReThinkMusic)

Source: Tobacco industry corporate strategies: then and now. Bangkok: Global Center for Good Governance in Tobacco Control (GGTC), Stopping Tobacco Organizations and Products (STOP) project (forthcoming publication).

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