

# **Critique of MTV Europe: “Youth Smoking Prevention” Campaign, sponsored by BAT, Philip Morris and Japan Tobacco International.**

## **[Background:](#)** **[Message Development and Strategy](#)** **[Media Strategy.](#)** **[Conclusions](#)**

### **Background:**

British American Tobacco, Philip Morris and Japan Tobacco International are spending \$3.6m (approx £2.4m) on an advertising campaign on MTV Europe, which they say is designed to persuade teenagers (the target group is 12-17 year olds) not to smoke. MTV Europe is shown in 38 European area countries, and is largely youth-focused. The campaign was launched in April 2001, and ran until July 15. The campaign was split into two parts – a 42 day “Part 1”, with 20-40 ads per day, and a 56 day “Part 2”, with 10-20 ads showing per day. In each of the slots, one of six short films is shown which depict European teenagers doing normal, “cool” teenage activities, while being non-smokers. The companies state that the intention behind the advertisements is to persuade teenager that it is possible to be cool and popular without smoking.

The launch of the campaign was very highly publicised – copies of promotional materials were distributed to a wide-range of opinion formers, including all Members of Parliament, MEPs and the Press. These materials set out the prevalence of teenage smoking in the countries to be covered, and set itself up as a solution to this. The campaign also received a considerable amount of publicity, with coverage in both the national daily newspapers and the marketing trade journals.

Linked to the MTV campaign, the sponsor tobacco companies have set up a website ([www.youthsmokingprevention.net](http://www.youthsmokingprevention.net)) which was billed in the promotional literature accompanying the campaign as being a major resource for the prevention of underage smoking. However, at the time of writing (22 August) this site contains no more than 4 paragraphs of text describing the MTV campaign, and with no information about combating youth smoking.

This document is an evaluation of the effectiveness of this campaign. It examines the campaign’s effectiveness from two points of view. Firstly, whether the messages being used in the campaign are likely to be appropriate or effective in changing the behaviour of the target audience. Secondly, it examines whether this campaign is likely to be effective in communicating *any* message to its target audience (ie is it sufficiently big, are the outlets chosen to right ones to reach this audience etc). The answer to both of these questions is a resounding “no”. Not only are the messages chosen by the tobacco companies to communicate their non smoking message very unlikely to affect young people’s behaviour, but even if the message was effective, it is not getting through to a significant proportion of the target audience because of the campaign strategy chosen.

## Message Development and Strategy

The approach used by the tobacco industry in this campaign is that “It is possible to be cool and not smoke”. In a letter to Clive Bates, Director of ASH, Michael Prideaux, BAT’s Corporate and Regulatory Affairs Director, explained this strategy in the following terms:

“Youth is not receptive to messages that they see as “adults telling them what to do”. Youth does unfortunately believe that “smoking is cool” and that it is entirely socially acceptable in their world. [...] Researchers tried a number of different messages, e.g. “don’t follow the herd”, and “why not spend your money on other things”, etc. The only message that worked was that there are many different ways to be cool, and that you can be cool and not smoke.”

This decision, according to Mr Prideaux, was taken as a result of research undertaken in Portugal on similar campaigns – young people in focus groups were presented with a number of different possible messages for an advertising campaign, and asked to choose which one they felt would be most likely to stop them smoking. While on the surface this appears to be a reasonable (and reasonably effective) approach to take, the response which will be received depends entirely on which options are presented to the young people – there is no guarantee that the focus groups will do anything other than pick the best of a bad bunch. Previous research has shown that one of the most effective approaches to tackling young people’s smoking is to confront them with the health effects of smoking. The 2000 Health Development Agency report “A Breath of Fresh Air: Tackling Smoking Through the Media”,<sup>ii</sup> described research carried out in 1997 by the Centre for Social Marketing on young people’s attitudes to smoking. This research suggested that young smokers held a set of beliefs and attitudes about smoking that were crucial to understanding any mass media campaign aimed at changing their behaviour. Central to this set of beliefs was a view that smoking:

“was just one of life’s many risks and was a risk they were prepared to accept. There was little real understanding among younger smokers of the magnitude of the health risks actually compared with each other. [...] Younger smokers seriously underestimated the addictive nature of nicotine. Most believed they could give up easily if, or when, they wanted to.” (p31)

As a result of this research, the HDA concluded, when developing its next campaign aimed at cutting down youth smoking, that

“any mass media campaign needed to challenge young smokers to think about their reasons for smoking and give them reasons to quit.” They felt that, for the campaign to be most effective, “it should make the health-risk messages seem personally relevant for young smokers” (p32).

They concluded that the most effective message to give to young smokers was that smoking could kill them, and that the damage was being done while they smoked now, rather than at some undefined point in the future. This view was borne out by the success of this campaign.

The experience of the HDA is very different to that of the tobacco industry when setting up the current campaign. In their focus group research for this campaign, while it is true that they tried out several different messages in focus group testing for the MTV campaign, the adverse health effects of smoking was not one of the tested strategies<sup>iii</sup>. At best, this might be due to the understandable reluctance of the tobacco industry to draw attention to the diseases caused by smoking in advertising which it is paying for. However, it may also be that the tobacco companies

deliberately did not use the most effective message for their advertising in order to minimise its effectiveness.

In fact, the focus group which the tobacco industry is carrying out to assess the effectiveness of this campaign does not even attempt to establish whether it has been successful in changing either the attitudes or the behaviour of its intended audience. In a letter to John Connolly of ASH, BAT's Adrian Marshall admits that "no research has been undertaken to see whether the advertisements by themselves led directly to a child's decision not to smoke or to stop smoking". They have also said that they do not intend to undertake any such research in the future. BAT's stated reason for this is that it is very difficult to establish what role the advertising has had in any decisions to quit smoking. It is true that there are many factors which influence teenagers' decisions whether or not to smoke, and that advertising campaigns are only one of these. However, it is difficult to see what other form of evaluation of the success of this (or any) campaign would deliver useful results as to its success or otherwise. Their evaluation of the campaign focuses on young people's awareness and understanding of the campaign's message, rather than the likelihood of the adverts changing behaviour.

In addition, serious doubts remain as to whether a single-medium campaign such as this is the best way to attempt to change the behaviour of such a diverse group as all 12-17 year old smokers in 38 countries. This target audience is remarkably diverse, and a message which may work for one section of the audience may well not work for another. Equally, mass advertising of this sort might be too broad in scope to appeal to any one people's values effectively. It is interesting that it appears no research was carried out on the target audience's demographic breakdown ahead of the campaign, as advertising can only really be targeted effectively after this information is known. Even if we accept that the message "you can be cool and not smoke" is going to be effective in persuading young smokers to quit, or stop non-smokers from starting, it is extremely debatable whether a relatively low key campaign such as this one could ever hope to change the prevailing culture among the target audience that smoking *is* cool. Health promoters have been trying to challenge teenage social norms and perceptions of smoking for decades. They have found that this is extremely difficult to do well, and very easy to do badly. This would require a long-term cultural change which *could* be addressed through a mass-media campaign, but only in the context of a wider tobacco control strategy, which would also need to include a ban on the advertising of cigarettes. The tobacco industry remains opposed to the banning of advertising, but it is this advertising which does a lot to determine teenagers' perceptions of smoking.

## **Media Strategy.**

The effectiveness or otherwise of the message contained in any advertising campaign is irrelevant if the advertisements are not seen by the intended audience. In its promotional literature for this campaign, the tobacco industry described these adverts as "a major advertising campaign". However, on examining the industry's own figures for who will see this campaign, one can see that this statement does not hold up to scrutiny.

According to the tobacco companies in their launch publicity, the intended audience for the MTV Europe campaign is 12-17 year olds. However, according to BAT's Adrian Marshall, MTV Europe do not collect viewing figures for this age group. According to BAT, figures are only available for 16-34 year olds, and so in their estimates of how many of the potential audience have seen their campaign they have used these figures as a proxy for their actual target group. However, in the information which it sends out to potential advertisers, MTV quotes figures for 10-15 year old viewership in the UK. This latter category seems to capture the campaign's

intended audience more accurately than 16-34 year olds, and would have made a more effective proxy for the purposes of audience research for this campaign.

Even if one accepts the validity of using 16-34 year olds as a proxy, it does not appear that this is a particularly high-profile campaign. The total expenditure for the campaign is £2.4m (\$3.6m) over 38 countries. To put this in perspective, a recent NHS/HDA “stop smoking” campaign invested over £2.7m in its campaign, in the UK alone<sup>[iii]</sup>. According to figures released by British American Tobacco, the MTV campaign ads will be seen at least once by 33% of 16-34 year olds living in households which receive MTV in the UK, and 4 or more times by 17.7%. In other words only a third of the advertisements’ target audience have seen this advert even once. In addition, these figures do not take account of the fact that only 40% of UK households can receive MTV. In fact, only 13% - less than one in seven – young people in the UK will have seen this campaign even once over the course of the campaign. When one considers that it is generally thought in the advertising world that an advert will actually only have any effect on behaviour after the second or third time it is seen, these are extremely small numbers. By contrast, the current Government “Don’t give up giving up” campaign has been seen 4 or more times by over 70% of its total potential audience. These low numbers are even more concerning in the context of this being a campaign which is attempting to change the behaviour of a large number of young people by redefining social norms – telling them that they can be “cool and not smoke”. This strategy is unlikely to be successful if hardly any of the peer group it is intended for see the advertising.

The tiny reach of this campaign is shown in even sharper focus when one considers it in comparison with other “stop smoking” campaigns. Advertisers use the term TVRs as an alternative way of describing the reach of their adverts. One TVR equals 1% of the area population capable of accessing the commercial. While a heavyweight campaign, aiming for almost saturation coverage, is hoping for TVRs of well over 1000, even a lightweight campaign would be aiming for 400-500 TVRs. These figures can be broken down in a number of ways. For example, 500 TVRs might mean that 50% of the population has seen the ads an average of 10 times ( $50 \times 10 = 500$ ), or that 25% of the population has seen them an average of 20 times ( $25 \times 20 = 500$ ). In the UK, the MTV campaign anticipates only 190.6 TVRs – much below the level aimed for by even a lightweight campaign. In addition, these figures do not take account of the fact that only 40% of the population can see MTV, so in fact the TVRs across the whole population are only 76. It seems extraordinary that companies with such a strong track record in advertising would deliberately spend millions of pounds on a campaign with little or no impact.

In addition to the above figures showing the relatively small number of people who have seen this campaign, it should be added that it is quite unusual for a campaign of this sort to be conducted using only one medium. More usually, a television campaign would be backed up with (for example) a poster campaign or spots in cinemas. While there is a website accompanying this campaign, it contains no useful information, and appears still to be almost a test version of the site. This raises doubts of whether the tobacco companies are fully committed to the success of the campaign.

## Conclusions

As can be seen, there is extremely strong evidence that this campaign has been ineffective, both in its choice of message to put across, and also in its chosen method of getting this message across.

While this may have happened by mistake, it seems unlikely that companies which have been among the most successful and inventive users of marketing in the business would have made a mistake of this magnitude. One possible explanation for why the tobacco industry has done this is that they simply did not WANT to communicate this message to 12-17 year olds.

Drawing this conclusion does, however, rather beg the question of why the tobacco companies would be willing to spend £2.4m on this campaign, if not for the reasons they have given. This question is also worth asking given that tobacco companies, like any other companies, are driven by commercial imperative. Any activity (especially one costing £2.4m) has to contribute towards building the business (e.g. charitable donations are useful for companies when they help to strengthen relationships with useful organisations or generate favourable publicity). Industry simply does not spend this sort of money for purely altruistic reasons, and so one has to ask what is in this for the tobacco industry, especially as stopping young people from smoking and building tobacco markets are incompatible goals. One possible answer is that its actual intended audience is actually the policy and opinion-formers whose attention was drawn to the campaign at its outset, not young potential smokers. It may be that the true point of this campaign was to persuade the political and media establishment that the tobacco industry is a responsible and ethical sector of business, which should not be subject to strict regulation but should actually be left to run its own affairs as it sees fit. It may be no coincidence that this campaign comes at a time when, both in the UK and across the EU, governments are committed to banning advertising and promotion of tobacco products. This campaign may be intended to erode enthusiasm for these bans by going some way to restoring the tobacco industry's terrible reputation. Paying for "anti-smoking" advertisements is a tactic which the tobacco industry has used in the past (for a detailed look at their tactics in this area, see ASH's report: [Danger: PR in the Playground](#)). It could be that the real purpose of this campaign was to achieve the publicity which it did achieve at its launch, and which it is seeking again at its close.

This assessment is lent weight by internal industry documents which discuss the tobacco industry's motives for supporting initiatives which claim to be aimed at cutting youth smoking. An internal Philip Morris memo from 1991 says that the "ultimate means for determining the success" of industry-funded youth anti-smoking initiatives would 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." [1]

The memo did not mention a reduction in youth smoking being a success criterion. This document, and others like it, set out quite baldly that these campaigns are a Public Relations exercise aimed at reducing regulation of the industry. Any reduction in teenage smoking which accompanies the campaign is purely incidental.

---

<sup>[1]</sup> "A Breath of Fresh Air: Tackling Smoking Through the Media", Health Development Agency, 2000.

<sup>iii</sup> The following alternative messages were tested: “Testimonials” – role models telling children not to smoke; “Smoking makes you unattractive to the opposite sex”; “Smoking is uncool”; “Peer Pressure – Don’t follow the herd” and “Cost – there are better things to spend your money on”.

<sup>iiii</sup> The Health Development Agency’s “Testimonials” campaign in 1998/99 cost £2.72m.