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# How Big Tobacco Got a New Generation Hooked

It's using the slick, high-tech disguise of vaping.

By Alex Bogusky

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Juul promotes itself as a health-conscious company, even as it develops potentially more addictive vaping products. Credit Damon Winter/The New York Times

Twenty years ago, as [a creative director](#), I helped create a commercial for the Truth campaign to introduce its effort to prevent cigarette smoking by young people. The spot was simply footage of tobacco executives all testifying, “I believe nicotine is not addictive.” All we did was add a laugh track.

The effect of my campaign and others was to help a generation of young people see the tobacco companies as they really were. Companies that lied not just to the government but the public, with misleading ad campaigns aimed at teenagers, their “growth market.”

Now they're doing it again, but in a new, slick, high-tech guise that is [harder to combat](#). And ad agencies, which had mostly left Big Tobacco's side, are aiding the effort, lured back in by increasing fees for the work and decreasing fears the public will judge them for it.

While teenage cigarette smoking rates have recently fallen below 5 percent, America is now contending with an epidemic of young people using e-cigs, vapes and other “nicotine delivery devices,” as the tobacco industry christened them years ago in secret memos, searching for an official alternative to describing their products as cigarettes. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says vaping rose by nearly 80 percent among high school students from 2017 to 2018, [erasing previous progress](#) in reducing tobacco use among teenagers.

Vapes began as enigmatic underground products that might subvert Big Tobacco, but today the old corporate giants are major stakeholders in the market. Among them are [Altria](#), which owns Philip Morris, the maker of Marlboro cigarettes, yet also holds 35 percent of the vaping giant Juul; Reynolds American, which owns Vuse; and Imperial Tobacco, which owns Blu.

The vaping industry exploits everything Big Tobacco was already good at. Grow the tobacco, extract the nicotine, provide it in concentrations even higher than found in cigarettes, put it in sleek packages and market it relentlessly.

According to Juul — a brand so popular that “juuling” has become its own verb — one of its “[pods](#)” has more nicotine in it than an entire pack of cigarettes on average.

The sticks’ fruity and minty flavors, the “vaping trick” competitions that resemble bubble gum blowing contests of yore and the range of custom colors to choose from, like you would with an iPhone, attracts the exact clientele you’d expect: Students “hit the Juul” [on the way to class](#) and raise their hands for a bathroom break to get a fix. It looks like a USB drive and leaves no lingering foul odor — many teenagers are reveling in the confusion it causes among adults. (Just search [#doitforjuul](#), as a primer).

The Food and Drug Administration, meanwhile, has called the use of e-cigarettes and vapes by about two million middle and high school teenagers annually a dangerous epidemic. And last year, the agency warned vaping manufacturers that if they didn’t prove they could keep their products away from underage users, then they’d face penalties.

But the tobacco companies have largely shrugged at the ultimatum.

They are driving awareness and sales via a loophole big enough for the entire industry. Because the research on it isn’t yet sufficient, vape brands aren’t authorized by the F.D.A. to explicitly market their products for their ability to help smokers quit, or “[cessation](#).” So Juul, which controls [roughly three-fourths](#) of the American vaping market in the United States, instead simply runs ads in which people happen to describe getting rid of their cigarette habit by switching to Juul.

And, yes, since there’s plenty of nicotine per puff, you can easily switch from cigarettes. Still, your nicotine addiction isn’t going anywhere.

For grown men and women, that’s an alternative vice of their choice. But the chairman of a National Academies committee that produced a report evaluating e-cigarettes said that vaping’s “adverse effects clearly warrant concern” for young adult users. But in a sea of paid influencer posts, [magazine profiles of vapers](#), and mass-marketed ads, it can

be hard for teenagers to fully appreciate the implications: vape liquids contain additives that can form carcinogenic compounds and researchers are concerned about long-term effects.

And now we know Juuling [leads to smoking](#). In one British study, teenagers using these products who weren't smokers became four times more likely to go on to smoke cigarettes.

If Juul were serious about marketing to adults, it could use pinpointed digital marketing to make sure that those seeing its ads are over 21. Stanford researchers found the company's launch marketing "[was patently youth-oriented](#)."

Traditional tobacco products have strict regulations. But since Juul is a nicotine delivery device with no tobacco leaf, it is largely free to market as aggressively as possible. You won't hear cigarette ads on the radio. You could hear from Juul. You can't see cigarette ads on your television. But you [might see one](#) for Juul, or any of the others.

The quiet truth is these brands have to [lure young users to grow](#) fast and satisfy investors. You'll even see Juul signage placed near kids' eye level in stores — a ploy right out of the tobacco playbook.



Juul's fruity and minty flavors attract a young clientele. Credit Damon Winter/The New York Times

There was a longstanding taboo that kept most in the advertising world from working with cigarette brands. But the tobacco companies are reaching out to their old ad friends under new pretenses — like the Philip Morris-funded Foundation for a Smoke-Free World. But selling vapes hasn't meant they've stopped selling cigarettes. If anything, with vaping it's getting closer to its core goal: nicotine addiction no matter the vehicle.

Ad agencies have an important choice to make. Big Tobacco can pay big fees. But tobacco-related disease takes years off consumers' lives. Can you say to your friends and family with pride in your chest that you work for Big Tobacco? If that gives you pause, then ask if it's really worth the money.

My agency, [Crispin Porter Bogusky](#), is joining other ad agencies in the [Quit Big Tobacco](#) campaign led by the global health organization Vital Strategies in a pledge to not work for the tobacco industry, in any capacity, adjacent or direct. Oddly enough, as I drafted this essay, we were invited to propose an advertising campaign for a vaping product. The answer will be no. Still, if they're audacious enough now to approach an agency known for its anti-tobacco stance, we can be sure they're coming after us all. But there's no need to sell clouds of nicotine when there's so many other better products making the future.

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