New global campaign encourages every organisation to Quit Big Tobacco

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Ad agencies contribute to 7 million deaths each year © Vita Strategies / Quit Big Tobacco

In honour of World No Tobacco Day, a campaign called Quit Big Tobacco ***[1] is asking members of the NCD Alliance, and other organisations with an interest in health not to work with ad agencies who work for the tobacco industry.***

The tobacco industry expends its most significant resources on marketing and advertising their products that not only kill, but also seek to hook the next generation of users.

Using a website [1],Twitter [2] feed, personal outreach and offline events, Quit Big Tobacco aims to disrupt the industry's network of support. For-profit and non-profit organisations with an interest in health are being encouraged to sign a pledge that they will not employ marketing and ad agencies who also work with the tobacco industry, and to insert "no tobacco" clauses into their vendor contracts.

The need for action is clear. Every year tobacco kills more than seven million people, including nearly a million non-smokers who have been exposed to tobacco smoke. It's the world's leading cause of preventable death. Tobacco is uniquely harmful, killing half to two-thirds of all lifetime tobacco users. Many governments have implemented tobacco control policies designed to reduce this harm, guided in recent years by the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) and the MPOWER package. Nonetheless, we're on track to see a billion tobacco-related deaths this century.

Advertising is a vector of the epidemic

To continue making tens of billions of dollars in profits, the tobacco industry must constantly recruit new customers to replace the millions of smokers who die each year - and the younger they are, the more profits the industry will generate before they quit, sicken or die. They do this with the help of slick advertising campaigns designed by some of the world's leading agencies. They sell addictive and deadly products to women as a sign of emancipation, and to the young as a sign of maturity, vitality, popularity and sex appeal. These agencies are complicit in the global tobacco epidemic.

They help the tobacco industry to exploit every possible marketing and advertising tactic to influence perceptions and to recruit and retain users - growing and sustaining the tobacco epidemic for profit. This is why the industry continues to spend billions of dollars on marketing and advertising every year, despite tobacco marketing bans in many countries. The poor, vulnerable and youth are prime targets for the industry's deceptive marketing.

Ensure that you're not working with the same ad agencies that work for big tobacco

A new campaign, Quit Big Tobacco [1], is challenging ad agencies – and their non-tobacco clients – to think about their role in this deadly cycle. While some agencies have proactively adopted ethical and responsible policies of not working with tobacco companies, others remain willing to take the industry's money. Real conflicts of interest occur when the same agencies that promote these deadly products also work for governments, health-focused companies and non-profits on campaigns to promote health messages and objectives.

This is particularly pertinent to organisations working on NCDs. Tobacco use and exposure to second-hand smoke has been a primary driver of the global NCD epidemic, so the NCD community has a vested interest in breaking the links between the tobacco industry and the advertisers and marketers that are helping to perpetuate the tobacco epidemic.

We're delighted that the NCD Alliance and many of its members, including the World Heart Federation and The Union, have already signed the pledge, and encourage every member of the NCD community to avoid tobacco-related conflicts of interest. You can see a list of the organisations that have pledged to Quit Big Tobacco here [3].

Agencies are being asked to step up, too

Agencies are encouraged to Quit Big Tobacco too, by pledging that they will not work with tobacco companies. Some advertising and PR agencies already have that ethical foundation in place, including Edelman and Arnold. But you might be surprised by some other agencies, who serve the tobacco industry's interests while serving health-related clients at the same time.

The Marlboro "Don't Be a Maybe" campaign which ran in dozens of countries, for example, is the work of Leo Burnett [4], which serves health-related clients around the world. In spite of industry claims that it doesn't target youth, "Don't Be a Maybe" urges audiences to go for that first kiss, motorbike ride, bungee jump or just try smoking. That is a deliberate appeal to youth.

Ogilvy [5] has a significant number of clients in the public health sector. It recently produced an ad for the Ad Council, for a Real-Time Pre-Diabetes Test. Tobacco is estimated to cause 10% of global diabetes cases. Yet Ogilvy also works with British American Tobacco [6].

An advertising agency that serves the interests of the tobacco industry does not serve the interests of health, sustainable development, environmental protection, child protection or social justice. It cannot be a suitable partner for health, development and other organisations concerned about those issues – all of which are harmed by tobacco.

The tobacco epidemic is driven by people – tobacco industry executives and ad agency CEOs who have decided that profit is more important than health. We're confident that the solution is driven by people too – the global NCD community and executives at other health-oriented organisations and agencies who stand on the side of health. As this campaign grows, we expect more organisations will Quit Big Tobacco. Be an integral part of World No Tobacco Day by taking a stand not to work with the tobacco industry and its agents.

Visit Quit Big Tobacco **[1] and join the pledge today.**

About the Author

Rebecca Perl is Vice President of Partnerships and Initiatives for Vital Strategies [7] (@ [8]VitalStrat [9]). She is responsible for guiding the organisation's work on global NCD prevention. In addition, Ms. Perl directs Vital Strategies'

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