

# TELLING THE “TRUTH” ABOUT TEEN SMOKING

## SUMMARY

When the state of Florida launched the “truth” campaign in 1998, its in-your-face style was a far cry from the first antismoking campaigns of the 1960s. One Florida PSA featured tobacco executives receiving an award for being history’s biggest killers, even beating out Adolf Hitler. Another showed teens asking publishers how they could accept tobacco advertising when they have young readers. “Is this about people, or is this about money?” one of the teens asks. Surprised by the question, the executive replies, “Publishing? It’s about money! Look, I’ve got to go. I have a job to do.”

Needless to say, the tobacco companies weren’t exactly thrilled. After all, it was their \$11.3 billion settlement with the state of Florida that was footing the bill for this unprecedented campaign. Over the past three years, “truth” has received \$140 million to steer kids away from smoking – money that, thus far, appears to be well spent.

According to the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, smoking declined by 40 percent among Florida middle school students and by 18 percent among high school students in the first two years of the campaign. With those kinds of stats, other anti-tobacco campaigns are following Florida’s lead, most notably the American Legacy Foundation’s well-publicized national effort, which premiered during the Super Bowl.

So why does Florida appear to be succeeding where others have failed? Money has certainly helped. Most public service campaigns struggle to find enough funding to create even the most generic ads. Even then, they need to rely upon the goodwill of broadcasters to donate airtime, which often ends up being during the graveyard shift when few people are watching, let alone the ones they want to reach.

The “truth” campaign, on the other hand, has an annual budget of \$15 million for media and marketing, with \$6.75 million dedicated to purchasing television time. Campaign officials point out that this unusually large budget has allowed them to buy coveted airtime when young people and their parents are watching, and to receive one free spot for every spot they purchase from broadcasters. Beyond the marketing budget, the program has an additional \$24 million annually for other key supplementary tactics such as school-based education, research, and youth programs. The result is that 94 percent of young people in Florida recognize the “truth” brand.

But, even those most thankful for Florida’s budgets have noted their limitations. The big budget cuts made by the state legislature after the campaign’s first year were but one sign that funding in government-sponsored campaigns is no more certain than the shifting political winds. What’s more, “throwing money at it doesn’t mean it is going to work,” warns Frank Penela, director of communications and program marketing at the Florida Department of Health, the government agency responsible for the campaign.

Campaign officials knew that it wouldn’t matter how many times young people heard their message if it failed to resonate with them. Neydy Gomez of the campaign’s ad agency Crispin Porter Bogusky explains, “The tobacco industry had done an extremely good job of creating cool brands. To be successful, we needed to create a brand as strong and as powerful to take the place of tobacco brands.”

To accomplish this, the late Florida Governor Lawton Chiles told the marketing team to take risks not usually associated with government-sponsored campaigns. According to David Zucker of Porter Novelli, the campaign's public relations firm, Chiles expressed "no nervousness about being too edgy or out there. He wanted to take on the industry and do whatever it would take to be effective." So when Chiles announced the campaign, he insisted that young people be actively involved in every aspect of it, since they were the intended audience.

"How you target your audience is so important," explains Penela. "It is what has been missing in most public service campaigns. Sometimes in our quest to do the right thing politically, or in being a policy expert, we don't think about what will sell to the audience."

In one commercial, a teen calls a movie producer with an idea to put warning labels on films that glamorize smoking. He suggests, "Something like 'The makers of this film couldn't find a way to make their characters cool or sexy or rebellious or rockin' so instead they'll just smoke.'" It is all part of a strategy – dubbed by campaign architects as "focused rebelliousness" – which

uses humorous ads to turn normal teen rebellion against a new target, the tobacco industry's lies and manipulation. Says Dolly Yuen, one of the 15,000 young members of Students Working Against Tobacco, a group that has been a central part of the overall "truth" campaign, "Once kids get the anti-industry perspective in the ads, the message is very effective."

Now, campaign officials say, the trick is to keep it that way – to overcome budgetary threats and a cluttered media environment to keep telling young people the "truth" about tobacco and the industry that peddles it to them.

## The "truth": Florida Pilot Program on Tobacco Control

### BACKGROUND

**Sponsor:** Florida Department of Health

**Purpose:** To stop teen smoking

**When:** 1998 to present

**How Much:** Since its first full year of funding, the campaign has received \$20 million for paid placement of PSAs (out of a total of \$58 million for media and marketing).

**Donated/Paid:** Paid

### THE CAMPAIGN

Three years after Florida began its Pilot Program on Tobacco Control, 94 percent of young people are familiar with the campaign, youth smoking is down, and others – including the National Legacy Foundation – are following the Sunshine State's lead. When explaining the success, one of the factors officials point to is the fact that the Florida "truth" campaign had something very rare for public service efforts: money. What is even more unusual is that this unprecedented amount of funding has come from the tobacco industry itself.

When Florida settled its \$11.3 billion lawsuit with the tobacco industry in August 1997, the state began to spend those resources for paid PSAs, youth programs, school-based education, enforcement, research, and other efforts designed to keep young people away from tobacco. Since its first full year of funding, which began in July 1998, lawmakers have appropriated more than \$140 million for the Florida Pilot Program on Tobacco Control, \$58 million of which has been dedicated to marketing and media, including about \$20 million for paid placement of public service advertisements (PSAs). According to campaign officials, this purchasing power has translated into negotiating power. Because they are a consistent buyer – not to mention a social cause – their annual negotiations have yielded roughly one free spot for every spot they purchase.

A state-sponsored campaign can create some problems, however. Planning and media negotiations have to wait until the budget has been officially approved by the legislature each year, and purchases have to wait until the beginning of the fiscal year. "The budget is set aside by the legislature every year, and it is appropriated every year," explains Neydy Gomez of the campaign's ad agency, Crispin Porter Bogusky. "So we never know what will happen, if they will or won't allocate the money to tobacco. We almost always end up missing the first three weeks of July since nothing can be purchased in the new fiscal year until July 1."

In fact, after the first full year of funding, the Florida Pilot Program on Tobacco Control was faced with the possibility of deep budget cuts by the state legislature. Though they had demonstrated significant declines in tobacco use among youth, some legislators felt the progress could have been due to other factors such as cigarette price hikes. Some observers suggested political pressure by the tobacco industry; others cited changing state leadership during the life of the campaign. The end result was the budget was significantly reduced, the program director was removed, and one-third of the staff was reassigned.



*The main character walks out of a building and appears to be searching for a cigarette. As people approach, he asks them if he can bum a carrot.*

Campaign officials believe that the worst impact of the budget cuts was the media coverage. In the first year, more money was needed to start up the program. In the second year, “we could show we could be more efficient and frugal, and still show significant results,” explains Frank Penela, director of communications and marketing at the Florida Department of Health, the campaign’s sponsor. “We can also use the spill from the national “truth” campaign,” suggests Gomez. “For example, it doesn’t make sense to buy print, because there is already a strong presence from the national campaign.”

While those behind the campaign stress that significant resources have been necessary to compete with the size and sophistication of the tobacco marketers, they also acknowledge that money, by itself, isn’t enough. “Throwing money at it doesn’t mean it is going to work,” warns Penela. “The tobacco industry had done an extremely good job of creating cool brands,” explains Gomez. “To be successful, we needed to create a brand as strong and as powerful to take the place of the tobacco brands.”

That meant avoiding the stale and bureaucratic stereotypes of government-sponsored campaigns – something the late Governor Lawton Chiles, who created the program, was willing to do, according to those involved in developing the messages. “Chiles encouraged the agencies to go even further on the edge,” remembers David Zucker of the campaign’s public relations firm, Porter Novelli. “He had no nervousness about being too edgy or out there. He wanted to take on the industry and do whatever it would take to be effective, as long as we stayed within legal boundaries.” (Initially, the state was somewhat constrained by legal limitations to not directly attack the tobacco industry. This limitation was lifted with the Texas settlement.)

To develop an effective approach, campaign officials asked: “How do we reach this target audience to change their behavior and attitudes?” “How you target your audience is so important,” suggests Penela. “It is what has been missing in most public service messages...sometimes in our quest to do the right thing politically, or in being a policy expert, we don’t think about what will

sell to this audience.” “It may be a message that you are uncomfortable with, because it is not intended for you,” adds Kay Green of the Florida Department of Health.

The marketing team spent significant time and money on research to find the most effective approach. Ultimately, they settled on a strategy called “focused rebelliousness.” Every adolescent experiments with ways to gain independence – a phase adults see as rebellion. The marketing team wanted to take this natural rebelliousness and focus it against tobacco. Instead of using smoking to rebel, teens were asked to rebel against the ways tobacco companies manipulate them. Instead of only receiving warnings to avoid something “bad,” young people were guided towards something positive – “truth.”

“We made it into a cool brand name that kids want to be a part of,” states Dolly Yuen, one of the young people who advise the campaign. The end result was a series of paid PSAs spotlighting the ways the tobacco industry manipulates people into using tobacco. In one ad laden with dark humor, tobacco executives receive an award for being the world’s biggest killers, even beating out Adolf Hitler. In an ad directed at the film industry, teens call a movie producer and suggest a warning label for movies that glamorize smoking: “Something like ‘The makers of this film couldn’t find a way to make their characters cool or sexy or rebellious or rockin’ so instead they’ll just smoke.’” In another PSA, two teens are seen making calls to executives at companies that supply or run tobacco advertising:

**Teen:** “Do you have any youth readership at all?”

**Ad Exec:** “Of course we do.”

**Teen:** “Why do you accept that kind of advertising when you have that youth readership...?”

**Teen:** “Is this about people, or is this about money?”

**Ad Exec:** “Publishing? It’s about money! Look, I’ve got to go. I have a job to do.” (He hangs up.)

Overall, the brand is supported in many ways beyond advertising, including: gear (t-shirts, bags, watches, hats), collateral material, postcards in movie theaters, and the “truth” truck that goes to major events like concerts. “Our philosophy is that every single opportunity is a contact point and is considered as media,” states Gomez.

In the early stages of the effort, the marketing team determined it would be necessary to build real support for this controversial approach among adults. They used earned media to present this story through the news – and prepared young people to explain why the campaign was using this strategy and why it would be effective.

They also targeted adults with donated PSAs about second-hand smoke that were more reserved, and less “in your face,” according to strategists, than the paid PSAs. “We did a parody of the Brady Bunch,” explains Penela. “The question became ‘how can we bring parents in?’ Parents want to be seen as cool. We want to help make that segue.” The campaign was able to use the paid effort to help convince stations to donate airtime to the Brady Bunch PSA. “We made a decision to allocate the dollars against teens and not against adults,” notes Zucker. “If we spread out those dollars to include adults for a second-hand smoke message, we’ll risk missing the mark on both sides.”

From the beginning, Chiles wanted young people involved in all aspects of the campaign. At a Teen Tobacco Summit, 600 high school students worked with the advertising agency Crispin Porter & Bogusky to brainstorm approaches that would work with young people. There is a youth sounding board, comprised of 45 representative teens who give their input on everything from t-shirts to television ads. Others are part of Students Working Against Tobacco or SWAT, an organization of thousands of teens working at the county, regional, and state levels. Each quarter, SWAT members decide upon a new initiative. For example, they are currently looking at tobacco marketing practices overseas and releasing a report on their findings. Next, they plan to examine how Philip Morris uses advertising to improve its corporate image. At the conclusion of every quarterly initiative, the teens, who have been trained as spokespeople, hold a press conference.

“The enthusiasm that they bring helps us get their message out better,” explains Penela. “That doesn’t mean they make all the decisions. It means we actively solicit the opinions and attitudes of youth, including in marketing.” At the same time, the team educates teens about the process, so their advice can be even more effective. “Very early on, the gut reaction of the kids was to go to scare tactics – graphic, frightening imagery,” remembers Zucker. “We worked with them to show from the research that it may not be the best way to go. It might get attention, but would not move toward behavior change.”

SWAT youth have so closely identified with the “truth” brand that it has created some challenges. Because the young people want even more involvement, the team is in the process of getting SWAT members more integrally involved in determining how to market the youth-led group, and in creating a brand identity for SWAT.

Campaign development is a continuing process – and, according to officials, young people help the marketing team stay close to the audience they are trying to reach. “The campaign is directed to youth,” notes Yuen, teen board member of SWAT, “so you have to include them. It is easier for teens to talk to teens [about] any message.” But the campaign also sees formal evaluation as a central component of the effort, with significant resources devoted to determining the impact of the campaign, testing advertising effectiveness, and evaluating new concepts and products.

Even with such a rigorous process, real change takes continuity, something that is not always possible in government-sponsored campaigns, where budgets have to be approved by the legislature every year and a change of administration can put the entire effort in jeopardy. “We had the backing of the Governor [Chiles] at the time,” explains Penela, “and we continue to have the backing of the Governor [Bush]. That is a powerful statement in itself. Now it is easier because we have shown results. If we didn’t have results, we might not be here.”

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Campaign officials note that “truth” has achieved unprecedented levels of success.

After two years, current cigarette use dropped from 18.5 percent to 11.1 percent among middle school students, and 27.4 percent to 22.6 percent among high school students. The percentage that has never used tobacco has risen from 56.4 percent to 69.3 percent among middle school students and 31.9 percent to 43.1 percent among high school students.

Annually, the campaign estimates it reaches 83 percent to 92 percent of teenagers an average of 14 to 19 times, generating over 140 million media impressions among the target audience. This visibility has led to nearly universal awareness of the brand (94%) among Florida youth. Additionally, more than 15,000 students are SWAT team members, and tens of thousands more participate in antitobacco community activities.

## FUTURE CHALLENGES

“The biggest challenges facing the campaign are how to keep the concept fresh and keep pace with the target audience as it matures and as new kids enter the age group,” notes Zucker. “Also, maintaining clear communications in the face of a more crowded environment for tobacco prevention messages, especially those from the industry.”

“Creatively, we have no plans to move away from the truth brand or core positioning,” states Zucker, “but the ways in which it is executed are evolving to keep it fresh.” “We evaluate annually to determine whether the strategy is still effective, and we continue to try different angles to keep it fresh,” adds Gomez. “Sometimes we question whether we are at the point where we are running out of things to say about the tobacco industry. However, there is still a lot of material we can use that reinforces our message and strategy.”

Another challenge, suggests Zucker, is that “as we continue to make progress and see decreases in prevalence, you get closer to the core of kids whose behaviors will be too difficult to impact.”