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SAFE Glen Cove Coalition: The Truth About Marketing Tactics E-Cigarette Companies Use to Target Young People

According to The Truth Initiative, E-cigarettes appeal to young people because they are flavored, affordable, tech-forward, and easily concealed. In addition to these elements of product design, young people are also exposed to e-cigarettes through targeted marketing on social media, experiential marketing, brand sponsorships, and more. These marketing tactics can increase awareness of e-cigarettes and create perceptions that vaping is stylish, popular, safe, relaxing, and pleasurable.

Despite a decline in youth e-cigarette use, young people who vape are doing so frequently, and products have grown bigger in size, cheaper in price, and stronger in nicotine content, offering large amounts of nicotine at prices affordable to young people. According to retail sales data, the total amount of nicotine sold in e-cigarettes jumped by 249.2% from February 2020 to June 2024, largely due to the proliferation of disposable and illegal e-cigarette products. These easily accessible and appealing products contain highly addictive nicotine and pose a threat to young people's health. There are few federal restrictions on e-cigarette marketing, allowing companies to promote their products through traditional outlets — such as TV and radio — despite a ban in 1971 on cigarette advertising on TV and radio to reduce cigarette marketing to children.

E-cigarette companies also target young people through social media, the retail environment, and by connecting with young people through entertainment, music, and pop culture.

Here are four tactics Truth Initiative researchers say e-cigarette companies use to target young people.

1. Sponsoring music festivals and concerts

Following the marketing tool used by cigarette brands, e-cigarette companies use music to connect with young audiences. In 2025, e-cigarette brand Geek Bar hosted a booth at EDC Las Vegas, a major three-day electronic dance music festival that attracted over 500,000 fans. The booth offered free flavor trials, Geek Bar merch, and a selfie station. To promote their festival appearances, Geek Bar leveraged social media, with festival-related content accounting for 39% of their Instagram posts in the second half of 2024. Together, these efforts helped Geek Bar establish a strong presence at music festivals and associate their brand with a young audience.

Cigarette and smokeless tobacco companies have been prohibited from using these kinds of marketing tactics. However, e-cigarette and oral pouch brands are not bound by the same restrictions. The 1998 Master Settlement Agreement and the 2009 Family Smoking Prevention

and Tobacco Control Act prohibited cigarette and smokeless tobacco companies from sponsoring music, sports and other cultural events because of evidence that linked these types of marketing tactics with youth tobacco use.

2. Youth-appealing imagery in ads

With up to 95% of teens using social media, e-cigarette companies have access to young audiences across a range of social media platforms. Platforms such as Instagram have restrictions on tobacco advertising, however these policies are often violated and loosely enforced.

To attract young people, e-cigarette brands frequently use youth-appealing imagery, bright colors, fun flavor descriptions, and toy-like packaging. A study also found that JUUL, Vuse, and Velo included young models, animations, and energetic music in their TV ads, which is likely to appeal to young people.

There's also another hidden tactic that e-cigarette brands use to raise awareness of their products across social media: Instagram influencers posting and promoting branded vaping content while failing to disclose brand relationships to viewers. Such content promoted specific brands, failed to disclose brand relationships, rarely included warning labels, and even featured cartoon imagery.

3. Themes of freedom, glamor, personal style

When JUUL first launched in 2015, they debuted with colorful images of young men and women smiling and dancing while using JUUL. These ads positioned the product as a stylish and modern lifestyle choice, free from smoking restrictions, social stigma, and health risks associated with traditional cigarettes. JUUL-related posts on Instagram largely focused on youth culture and lifestyle. As a result, JUUL laid the foundation for other e-cigarette brands to market their products with themes of freedom and glamor. Advertisements today continue to portray e-cigarettes with young, attractive models in fun social settings.

4. Offering price incentives

E-cigarette companies have spent millions of dollars to offer coupons, discounts, and promotions to their target audiences. One popular promotion strategy on social media is "incentivized friend tagging", where followers are encouraged to tag their friends on the brand's posts to win free or discounted products. In addition, companies spend millions of dollars on sampling. Despite the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) prohibiting companies from giving away free samples of e-cigarettes, companies found loopholes by offering samples of \$1 or less, for example.

Discounts, coupons, and sampling are especially appealing to price-sensitive groups such as young people and those with lower incomes. Today's e-cigarettes are more affordable: price drops of disposable e-cigarettes from 2020 to 2022 nearly tripled the purchasing power for youth. Thus, price minimums, increased taxes, and strong restrictions on the use of coupons and other price incentives are needed.

Strong restrictions on advertising, discounting, and promoting e-cigarettes in the retail environment and on social media are needed to curb youth exposure to e-cigarette marketing. Nicotine is highly addictive and harmful for young people: nicotine in any form can harm the developing brain and make young people susceptible to addiction later in life, and nicotine addiction can increase stress and intensify symptoms of anxiety, posing a major public health risk to the youth.

SAFE, Inc. is the only alcohol and substance abuse prevention, intervention, and education agency in the City of Glen Cove. Its Coalition is concerned with all combustible and electronic products with tobacco. The Agency employs environmental strategies to educate and update the community regarding the negative consequences of smoking and vaping. To learn more about the SAFE Glen Cove Coalition please follow www.facebook.com/safeglencovecoalition or to learn more about electronic products visit the Youth and Tobacco Use and Vaping Facts and Myths Pages of SAFE's website to learn more about how vaping is detrimental to your health at www.safeglencove.org.

The Truth Initiative is the nation's largest nonprofit public health organization dedicated to preventing youth and young adult nicotine addiction and empowering quitting. Research is conducted through the Truth Initiative Schroeder Institute that produces independent research to provide evidence for policy change and leadership in cessation research. For more information, please visit www.truthinitiative.org.