
Tobacco industry using sponsored content in major media outlets to shift public perception and makeover its image despite continued sale of harmful products, Truth Initiative® research shows

Published in Tobacco Control, report analyzes Big Tobacco's multi-million-dollar campaign leveraging advertorials, digital and social media channels to promote "support" of public health while continuing to invest in and market its deadly cigarettes

WASHINGTON, D.C. (May 16, 2022) – With a long-history of circumventing and finding loopholes in tobacco advertising regulations and policies, Big Tobacco is turning to sponsored content in America's most prestigious news outlets to rehabilitate its poor image and continue efforts to mislead the public for financial gain about its commitment to public health, a [new study](#) from [Truth Initiative](#) shows. The report illustrates how the tobacco industry uses paid media, including digital and social channels, to reposition and align itself with the public health strategy of harm reduction and promote its new products as "safer alternatives" to smoking despite inconclusive evidence.

According to research published in the current issue of Tobacco Control, Phillip Morris International (PMI) and Altria, the makers of Marlboro, are pursuing a makeover campaign using a range of sponsored "advertorials" both in print and online. These ads featuring high profile corporate executives seek to promote the industry's new non-combustible offerings and company sponsored research to position itself as an advocate for public health, even as its tobacco products remain the leading cause of preventable death in the U.S. and globally. The sponsored content closely resembles and appears near legitimate editorial content, clearly designed to leverage the influence and credibility of major news organizations and obfuscate to readers that these are paid ads, the study asserts.

"It's the next phase in a long line of strategies to manipulate the public discourse on smoking, vaping and nicotine. These advertorials can often appear indistinguishable from real editorial content, and readers need to pay close attention to see them for what they are: industry propaganda," said Robin Koval, CEO and President of Truth Initiative and one of the report's co-authors. "We need to raise awareness about the ways the tobacco industry is using advertising like this to spread a false narrative in an attempt to position itself as aligned with public health when in fact the exact opposite is true. Make no mistake, these efforts are meant to generate sales of the industry's products, boost profits and



burnish their tarnished corporate image regardless of the actual consequences to the public's health.”

The extent to which these ads have infiltrated major news outlets is concerning. The Truth Initiative study found that combined, PMI and Altria spent \$11.72 million between January 2020 and August 2021 on corporate advertising concentrated in national newspapers including the Boston Globe, The Denver Post, The Washington Post, Politico and The Wall Street Journal, along with digital video ads. The study believes that the companies' spending is likely vastly understated since it doesn't include all forms of advertising, including these “advertorials,” and mobile application ads, which are digital and notoriously difficult to track.

For years, [restrictions have existed to prohibit some forms of tobacco product advertising](#), including a 1998 [Master Settlement Agreement](#) that stopped tobacco advertising targeting young people; eliminated outdoor, billboard and public transit advertising of cigarettes; and prohibited event sponsorship. Newspapers are still permitted to run tobacco advertising, although many instituted their own policies that prohibit paid ads containing cigarettes. To circumvent these current restrictions on advertising, tobacco companies are able to purchase ads in many publications under the guise that they are corporate advocacy messages which many publications, even those with tobacco advertising restrictions permit. However, with tobacco as their only or majority products, this is clearly a loophole being exploited to further overall corporate objectives.

The research findings from Truth Initiative confirm those from a recent report from Stanford University School of Medicine, which [specifically analyzes PMI's public relations campaign](#) that claims it is a public health advocate seeking to create a “smoke-free future.” The Stanford report addresses the campaign's promotion and use of advertorials to portray PMI science as trustworthy and accurate, which the authors say is an attempt to sway regulators and policymakers to adopt rules favorable to the company's business. In publishing the report in Tobacco Control, the authors hope it will prompt the media industry and government regulators to take further action on tobacco industry advertising initiatives.

“These ads fly in the face of the intent of current marketing regulations and policies. They are clearly designed to influence public opinion and perpetuate an industry whose products cause more than 8 million preventable deaths per year and are responsible for nearly 1,600 children trying their first cigarette every day



in the U.S.,” Koval said. “Newspapers need to stop accepting funding from tobacco companies to promote their products, regardless of the advertisement’s form.”

About Truth Initiative®

Truth Initiative is a national public health organization dedicated to achieving a culture where all young people reject smoking, vaping and nicotine and a future where tobacco and nicotine addiction are a thing of the past. In 2020, we celebrated 20 years of saving lives and preventing millions of youth from smoking. Our impact has helped drive the teen smoking rate down from 23% in 2000 to under 3% in 2021. The truth about tobacco and the tobacco industry are at the heart of our proven-effective and nationally recognized **truth**® public education campaign. As youth e-cigarette use threatens to addict a new generation to nicotine, we are leading the fight against tobacco and nicotine addiction in all forms. Our rigorous scientific research and policy studies, community and youth engagement programs supporting populations at high risk of using tobacco, and innovation in tobacco dependence treatment are also helping to end one of the most critical public health battles of our time. Based in Washington D.C., our organization, formerly known as the American Legacy Foundation, was established and funded through the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement between attorneys general from 46 states, five U.S. territories and the tobacco industry. To learn more, visit truthinitiative.org.

###