



"USA TODAY hopes to serve as a forum for better understanding and unity to help make the USA truly one nation."

—Allen H. Neuharth
Founder
Sept. 15, 1982

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DEBATE

Anti-smoking effort is good for youth

Critics of the tobacco industry are snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

The Tobacco Institute announced a campaign this week to discourage young people from smoking. Anti-smoking crusaders sneered, but this was cause for celebration.

The campaign has five parts:

► "It's the Law," an education campaign to help retailers enforce state laws prohibiting tobacco sales to kids.

► Support for new state laws making 18 the minimum age for tobacco sales where there is no limit or a lower one.

► Support for new state laws requiring that cigarette vending machines be locked up or supervised in places that minors frequent.

► Restrictions on free cigarette samples, premiums and billboard advertisements to keep them away from kids.

► An advertising and educational effort to help parents teach children to resist peer pressure to smoke.

The anti-smoking jury has condemned the youth campaign as a cynical ploy, an evasive maneuver by the tobacco companies to ward off criticism as well as government restrictions — like bans on all cigarette vending machines and cigarette ads.

You can read that view elsewhere on the page.

But the critics should let the tobacco industry off the hook on this one. Any campaign to keep kids from smoking, no matter who conducts it, should be applauded. What the anti-smoking forces don't seem to realize is that it's possible to serve the public's interests as well as those of the tobacco industry:

By discouraging the 50% of people who start smoking before they're 18.

By helping teenage girls, who quit smoking at much lower rates than the rest of society, to give up cigarettes.

By sparing some of our children the consequences of a habit that's hard to break — an ever-expanding list of horrors like emphysema, cervical cancer, leukemia, heart disease, stroke and lung cancer. Even back pain.

Praise for this promotional effort doesn't free the tobacco companies from blame for smoking's ills.

They can still be blamed for their consistent failure to acknowledge that smoking is hazardous to health, with the new campaign no exception.

They can still be blamed for their steadfast refusal to admit that secondhand smoke poses any danger, even though an Environmental Protection Agency panel calls this pollution a "Class A" carcinogen — up there with asbestos, radon and benzene.

They can still be blamed for battling against warning labels that spread the bad news about tobacco's perils.

Since young people are most vulnerable to the pressures of their peers and the persuasions of cigarette promotions, it's only right that they should be the target of a special no-smoking campaign.

It's most fitting that the tobacco companies conduct it.

We don't have to applaud their moves, but we should cheer on the mission.

Even those who sell a deadly weed can do an occasional good deed.

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