



What It Is

FDA’s award-winning youth tobacco prevention campaign, “The Real Cost,” aims to prevent susceptible youth from trying tobacco and keep experimenters from becoming regular tobacco users. Launched in 2014, initial campaign advertising focused on reaching the more than 10 million youth ages 12–17 in the United States who are either open to smoking or are already experimenting with cigarettes by challenging their “cost-free” mentality of tobacco use.^{1,2} In 2016, “The Real Cost” expanded its brand umbrella to include new advertising targeting rural male youth ages 12–17 who are at risk of smokeless tobacco use.

Why It’s Important

Tobacco use is the leading preventable cause of disease, disability, and death in the United States, responsible for more than 480,000 deaths each year.³ But the consequences of tobacco use are not limited to adults. In fact, tobacco use is almost always initiated and established during adolescence. Every day in the United States, more than 2,300 youth under age 18 smoke their first cigarette, and about 1,100 youth use smokeless tobacco for the first time—highlighting a critical need for stronger, more targeted youth tobacco prevention efforts.⁴

Through “The Real Cost” campaign, FDA seeks to reduce the number of youth who experiment with tobacco and ultimately reduce the number of future tobacco users.

Who It Targets

“The Real Cost” campaign targets two subsets of at-risk youth ages 12–17—teens who are open to or already experimenting with cigarettes (i.e., have smoked fewer than 100 cigarettes in their lifetime), and rural male teens at risk for smokeless tobacco use. Key demographic and psychographic insights for each target audience are embodied through the campaign’s at-risk personas, Nikki and Travis (see box).

MEET NIKKI



Living a chaotic life, Nikki (aged 12–17) struggles with her social and economic situation both at home (living in a suburban area with single parents who use tobacco at home) and at school (poor school environment and low academic achievement). Her stress about her personal situation, coupled with poor coping skills and a pessimistic outlook on life, makes Nikki a troubled kid. Nikki finds it hard to regulate her mood and is a sensation-seeking risk taker. Nikki smokes occasionally (<100 cigarettes, lifetime), as do her friends.

MEET TRAVIS



Travis (aged 12–17) lives in a small rural town. He has very strong bonds with his friends, family, and community, and is proud of his hometown. He has a close-knit group of friends that he’s grown up with, and they hang out together a lot. His older brother and some of his friends dip, and he’s considered trying it. He’s into sports, girls, music, trucks, and gaming. He cares about school, fitting in, money, and his family. In his free time, he likes to fish, hunt, and play baseball with the guys. It’s times like these that he’s often exposed to dip.

What It Does

“The Real Cost” campaign was developed using evidence-based best practices and multiple phases of research to identify promising messages. The campaign is specifically designed to affect at-risk youth who experiment with tobacco but do not consider themselves users, do not believe they will become addicted, and are not particularly interested in the topic of tobacco. Campaign messages are intended to make the target audience acutely aware of the risks of tobacco use by highlighting consequences youth are concerned about, such as loss of control due to addiction, dangerous chemicals in tobacco products, and health effects like tooth loss and skin damage.

“The Real Cost” message areas include:

- **Loss of Control:** Reframes addiction as a loss of control to disrupt the beliefs of independence-seeking youth who currently think they will not get addicted or feel they can quit at any time.
- **Dangerous Chemicals:** Depicts the dangerous chemicals in tobacco and tobacco smoke to motivate youth to find out more about what’s in them and reconsider the harms of tobacco use.
- **Health Consequences:** Dramatizes the negative health consequences of tobacco use in a meaningful way to demonstrate that all tobacco use comes with a “cost” that is more than just financial.

How It Is Being Implemented

The campaign uses a multi-channel advertising approach that surrounds teens with “The Real Cost” messages. Through national and local media buys, the campaign advertising airs on traditional broadcast media channels such as TV and radio, as well as through a mix of other multimedia channels including web, cinema, print publications, and billboards. Daily engagement with youth via multiple social media platforms also helps broaden the campaign’s reach and creates spaces for teens to engage in peer-to-peer conversations about tobacco use in ways that are authentic to who they are.

A critical factor in reducing youth tobacco use is to produce and maintain effective levels of campaign awareness within the target population. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicates new tobacco prevention campaigns that reach 75 percent of the target audience within one year can expect to influence attitudes and create behavior change within two years if the time in-market is adequately sustained.

To achieve behavior change and improve public health, “The Real Cost” campaign has exceeded the benchmark of reach, frequency and time in-market recommended by CDC.

THE REAL COST

The campaign brand, “The Real Cost,” focuses on making youth hyper-aware of the cost that comes with every cigarette or dip to challenge their “cost-free” mentality. “The Real Cost” is designed to be candid, empowering, and respectful. It speaks directly to teens in a straightforward and authentic manner.



How It Is Evaluated

FDA hired an independent research firm, RTI, to conduct large, multi-year outcome evaluation studies to measure the campaign's success in changing tobacco-related attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors among youth. The first outcome evaluation study found that 89% of youth were aware of at least one campaign ad 7 months from launch, and "The Real Cost" positively influenced tobacco-related risk perceptions and beliefs specific to campaign messages after 15 months.^{5,6}

Most notably, final results from the first study indicate that exposure to "The Real Cost" from 2014–2016 was associated with a 30% decrease in the risk for smoking initiation, preventing an estimated 350,000 U.S. youth ages 11–18 from smoking.⁶ A separate outcome evaluation study specific to smokeless tobacco use is underway.

How You Can Get Involved

We recommend adults and stakeholder audiences use [CTP's Exchange Lab](#), a free resource library of tobacco-related digital content that can be easily syndicated on existing websites or other applications. Orders can also be placed for free printing and shipping of select materials.

FDA's goal is to keep "The Real Cost" campaign an authentic and effective youth tobacco prevention brand. Thus, "The Real Cost" campaign website and social channels are intended for teens. Stakeholders should use FDA's social media channels to engage with us around the campaign. Organizations that work directly with youth can help extend the campaign by encouraging teens to share campaign messages with their peers. Stakeholders who do not work directly with youth can share our resources with youth-focused organizations. For more information, please contact TheRealCost@fda.hhs.gov.

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Sources:

¹ U.S. Census Bureau. *Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Single Year of Age and Sex for the United States: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2014*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division; 2015.

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Food and Drug Administration (FDA). *Total At-risk Experimenters and Susceptible Non-trier Estimates: 2012 NYTS Dataset and Codebook*. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Updated October 1, 2015. http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/surveys/nyts/. Accessed May 26, 2016.

³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS). *The Health Consequences of Smoking—50 Years of Progress: A Report of the Surgeon General*. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Office on Smoking and Health; 2014.

⁴ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). *2016 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Detailed Tables*. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, SAMHSA, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality; 2017. <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/NSDUH-DetTabs-2016/NSDUH-DetTabs-2016.htm>. Accessed October 12, 2017. (Original Data Source: NSDUH 2016, Table 4.10A)

⁵ Duke J, Alexander T, Zhao X, et al. Youth's awareness of and reactions to The Real Cost national tobacco public education campaign. *PLoS ONE*. 2015;10(12):e0144827.

⁶ Farrelly MC, Duke JC, Nonnemaker J, et al. Association Between The Real Cost Media Campaign and Smoking Initiation Among Youths — United States, 2014–2016. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR)* 2017;66:47–50. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6602a2>.



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