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Jay Chiat 4A's award submission

Nicotine Equals

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Part 1

Previous campaigns had raised awareness about flavored vapes, but we had a “so what” problem from too many parents, due to misconceptions about “smoking for the nicotine, but dying from the tar.” They saw nicotine as *addictive*, but not *dangerous*. Against every other problem their kids faced, worrying about tobacco seemed trivial, even a little antiquated.

In actuality, significant developmental risks arise from nicotine *in and of itself*. Nicotine alters growing brains, leading to issues like anxiety, impulsivity, learning difficulties, irritability, and mood swings. Given teenage struggles, this is like pouring gasoline on a fire.

We built our campaign around that fact, and looked to **change perceptions of nicotine by spotlighting its effects on cognitive/emotional development**. This was crystallized in our insight: **everything that's hard for teens, nicotine makes worse**. Our creative work vividly depicted the emotional storms kids face, and tied them to the developmental effects of nicotine.

We nearly doubled awareness of the harms. Parents took vaping more seriously on their list of concerns, and sent thousands of letters to local officials. We sustained the campaign over the following years, spurring a groundswell of local action. Ultimately in November 2022 Californians voted for a statewide ban on flavored tobacco.

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Part 2

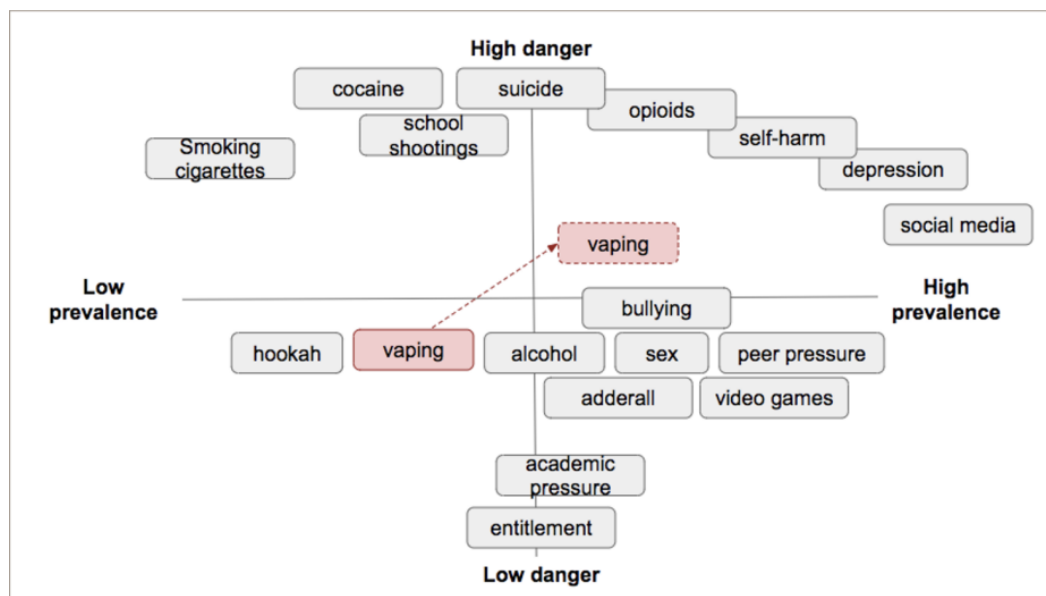
For 30 years, the California Tobacco Control Program(CTCP) has pushed the category, altering core notions of tobacco’s social acceptability and driving the smoking rate down 4x faster than the national average.

But the 2010s weren’t about smoking. Instead, they saw the explosion of nicotine delivery that didn’t look, smell, or taste like cigarettes. The combination of fun flavors, a technological form factor, and a story of “harmless vapor” created an unprecedented (and avoidable) rise in youth uptake. From 2017-19, vaping increased by 218% among middle schoolers and 135% among high schoolers. California launched the world’s first public health campaign on vaping in 2015, and followed it up with campaigns on flavored tobacco in 2018. But we were beginning to hit a plateau, and needed to figure out *why*.

To do that, we needed to get out of our own parochial corner of public health and understand the world that parents lived in. In formative focus groups we started without ever mentioning tobacco and the socially acceptable scripts around it. We talked to them about their kids, and **what they worried about as parents**.

Unsurprisingly, they had a LOT on their plate: Mental health crises, school shootings, social media addiction, bullying, drug use, and a more deep-seated “failure to launch.” While the exact concerns varied by culture, geography, and SES, parents all seemed to hold a mental shortlist of threats based on danger level and perceived prevalence.

The day after the research groups, as we were waiting for our flight, we drew up a small 2-axis grid of “danger” and “prevalence.” This basic sketch evolved into the core of our strategy.



Parents saw vaping as *prevalent* but relatively innocuous. In fact, **the more informed a parent felt about nicotine, the more likely they were to think of it as addictive but harmless**, “like caffeine.”

The biggest of these was the misconception that “people smoke for the nicotine, but die from the tar.” It sounds good, right? It feels satisfying to draw the cognitive distinction that “well, the nicotine is the addictive thing, but it’s not so bad on its own, is it?” (*Perhaps you the reader have also held this misconception. We forgive you, many of us did too before working on this account.*)

As an aside, this halo around nicotine isn’t accidental: it’s in the industry’s interest to rehabilitate the reputation of their primary ingredient. They’ve spent a lot of money funding questionable science on its benefits. They established think tanks who promoted those same comparisons to caffeine.¹ Well-informed, well-meaning parents were unconsciously repeating the talking points of long-dead PR flacks.

But back to the problem: **If one thinks of e-cigarettes as a safer way to get nicotine, and doesn’t think of nicotine as particularly harmful, there’s no urgency.**

We realized we needed to take dead aim at nicotine itself, not the various delivery methods it came through. It also meant we needed to spend two weeks poring through dry academic literature and surgeon general’s reports. (Nearly all of the client-provided facts were rooted in a particular tobacco product, rather than nicotine in isolation.) We came out with the following facts:

- Nicotine changes adolescents’ brain cell activity in the parts of the brain responsible for attention, learning, and memory.²
- It can worsen anxiety, irritability, and impulsivity.^{3 4 5}
- Because addiction is a form of learning, adolescents can get addicted much more easily than adults.²

After we had assembled them, we were kind of stunned to take them in. *Why didn’t anyone know about this?* Once we had done our homework, the insight was right there: **everything that’s already hard about adolescence, nicotine makes worse.** Permanently.

¹ Ling and Glantz, “Tobacco company strategies to identify and promote the benefits of nicotine.” *Tobacco Control* 2018

² US Surgeon General. *Surgeon General’s Advisory on E-cigarette Use Among Youth*. 2018.

³ Kutlu and Gould, “Nicotine modulation of fear memories and anxiety: Implications for learning and anxiety disorders.” *Biochem Pharmacol*. 2015

⁴ Goriounova and Mansvelder, “Short- and long-term consequences of nicotine exposure during adolescence for prefrontal cortex neuronal network function.” *Cold Spring Harb Perspect Med*. 2012

⁵ Hughes JR. “Effects of abstinence from tobacco: Valid symptoms and time course”. *Nicotine Tob Res*. 2007

This seemed especially pernicious given the likelihood of teens using vapes as a means of self-soothing, not realizing that they were only making the problem worse.

We worked with our creative directors as we developed a brief and moved into creative development. We got an object lesson in why the ad industry needs to support women in creative through their careers: when your ECD and lead copywriter are moms with adolescent kids, they take the work personally. They sweat the details, and understand what will hit an emotional resonance. Our insight was boiled down to its stark core: **Nicotine equals brain poison for developing teens.**

Once we had the idea, the strategy team crafted a three-pronged messaging architecture to coordinate actions across paid, earned, and owned media, and to keep creative and media on the same track. Our prongs were: **(1)** high-impact, high-frequency media to reach people not paying attention, **(2)** longer-form content to tell the fuller story, and **(3)** mobilize support - both offline and online - and organize parents, schools, and local communities.

For part 1, we leveraged video as the primary vehicle because it was the best means to communicate an emotional message. We looked to capture moments that felt real. Cinematic depictions of emotional storms that blow through young people were then linked with proven cognitive effects of nicotine, demonstrating what “irritability” or “impulsivity” really meant. Research showed that families with teens have high co-viewing behaviors, so we placed media in prime programming that would spark conversations among families and motivate parents to get the facts.

For our Spanish-language and Asian-language audiences, we showed the realities of a bilingual household, where parents may not have the same access to information as their media-savvy kids, and feel a more acute struggle to maintain control.

For part 2, we continued the conversation that we’d catalyzed in our target’s living room. To complement our campaign creative, we were able to secure integrations with local TV news and radio personalities, solidifying the idea that this was something real and pressing that parents should appreciate as a threat.

Finally, part 3. Given that recency bias impacts how people evaluate “how big a problem is this,” we used retargeting tactics to reinforce salience of the topic, and drive parents to make time for conversations. We also put a large “do something” button on the website (“Protége a tus hijos” on the Spanish site), making it easy for parents to take action no matter what content they were viewing on the page. Actions included informational toolkit downloads, social shares, or generating letters of concern to their mayors and city councils.

Results

The campaign first aired during the spring and summer of 2019. Efforts were somewhat sidelined during the pandemic, but the campaign aired in some form through 2022. (In part due to industry obstruction; see below.)

As expected given our primary goals, we saw the greatest gains in awareness of nicotine's cognitive effects. For each of our stated effects, we saw near-doubling in strong agreement. (32% to 57%) Similar spikes were observed for "irritability and anxiety" (33% to 59%) and "learning difficulties" (26% to 50%).

Pre-wave work the prior year (2018) indicated that strong agreement re: nicotine's cognitive harm was at 32%, a gap of 35 points from strong agreement about its addictiveness (67%). We cut the gap from 35 to 21 points, while pushing both measures up: 78% thought of it as highly addictive, and 57% thought of it as brain poison.

We don't see results like this every day. These facts were both "new" and highly sticky (73% video recall). We also saw greater self-education on the issue, with reports of online searches jumping from 18% to 28% among the Hispanic/Latino audience, suggesting they were looking to even the information gap. We significantly cut into the gap between nicotine's harm and its addictiveness, while pushing both measures up. In terms of basic perceptual change, the campaign was extremely successful.

In the years that followed, communities took action. 6,530 letters to local representatives were sent from our campaign landing page since 2020. Parents aired what they saw and worried about in school board meetings. School board resolutions led to city council discussions, and a wave of local ordinances against the sale of flavored tobacco products. Ultimately, 137 communities took action, and the state legislature took up the issue in 2020.

Even then, the tobacco industry was not done, funding a statewide referendum on the law that took place in 2022. We're proud to say it wasn't even close, as 63% of California voters chose in favor of upholding the regulation. Flavored vapes are a thing of the past in California, and youth vaping is less than half the national average.