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CMO TODAY

Antivaping Campaign Highlights Mental Health by Pitching 'Depression Sticks'

Truth Initiative ads show a fictional marketing executive trying to sell the fake e-cigarette to a real store and seeking support from influencers



Truth Initiative's fake e-cigarette 'Depression Sticks.'

PHOTO: TRUTH INITIATIVE

By [Alexandra Bruell](#)

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Antitobacco organization Truth Initiative recently hawked a new vaping product to stores and ad agencies, but it wasn't actually looking to make any sales.

The product, the Depression Stick, wasn't real. It was fabricated to be used as part of a larger marketing campaign titled "We're Messing With Your Heads," which aims to convince teenagers that there is a correlation between nicotine products and anxiety and depression.

"We know from data that if you ask what are the things that young people are really concerned about right now, mental health goes right up to the top of the list," said Robin Koval, president and chief executive at Truth Initiative.

Truth Initiative, known until 2015 as the American Legacy Foundation, is a nonprofit formed in 1999 out of the Master Settlement Agreement between big tobacco companies and 46 states and five U.S. territories. In recent years, it has shifted its emphasis from traditional cigarettes, the target of an earlier Truth campaign depicting body bags in the street, to include e-cigarettes.

Truth's latest effort to curb vaping will kick off this week with an ad slated to air during Sunday evening's National Football League matchup between the Baltimore Ravens and Kansas City Chiefs. In various versions of the ad, a marketing-executive character named Craig presents the Depression Stick in flavors such as Disappoint-mint and Citrus Sadness to unsuspecting real-life convenience-store workers, ad executives and influencers. Hidden cameras capture confused reactions before they reject the product.

In one ad dubbed "Casting Call," influencers audition to promote the product online. Examining the product in front of lights and cameras, an influencer who goes by Hannah Jo asks, "It purposely makes people sad?" The video shows the influencers turning down the gig. "This is a sick thing," said another, Matt Petitto.

"The real idea here is: What if somebody really told the truth about what vape products really are and do, and do that in a way that is sort of very bold, and to see how people would really react?" said Ms. Koval. "What's great and so engaging about this idea is that of course they said no. These are the real reactions."

As part of the campaign, Truth released a report citing research that it said suggested connections between vaping nicotine and worsening symptoms of depression and anxiety, although it said it was unknown whether a causal link exists.

The campaign also includes a billboard in Times Square, a fake Depression Stick storefront on the Lower East Side in New York City and a social-media blitz, the organization said. Marketing materials lead people to Depressionstick.com, which ultimately connects the product to Truth Initiative.

Vaping products from Juul Labs Inc., Reynolds American Inc.'s Vuse e-cigarettes and NJOY Holdings Inc. have come under fire in recent years for using flavors and marketing tactics that attract young people.

The Food and Drug Administration has ordered off the market close to 1 million products with flavors including apple crumble and cinnamon toast cereal, saying manufacturers hadn't provided enough evidence that the products helped adult smokers enough to outweigh their potential appeal to young people. The government agency recently extended a deadline to decide whether e-cigarettes made by top manufacturers can remain on the U.S. market.

E-cigarette marketers describe their products as less harmful alternatives to cigarettes, and say they are meant for adults. Juul, one of the most prominent e-cigarette brands, has said it has never targeted children and that it is working to earn the public's trust.

According to a 2020 survey by the FDA and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 20% of U.S. high-school students said they had vaped at least once in the past 30 days. That was down from nearly 28%, or 4.11 million, in 2019. A federal increase in the legal purchase age for buying tobacco products to 21, as well as the removal of fruity-flavored e-cigarette cartridges from the market, may have helped drive some of that decrease.

Truth acknowledges there has been progress, but said vaping still poses a harm to teens.

Truth has used less serious topics to get its messages across. One campaign made the case that online dating profiles featuring smoking lead to nearly twice as many "left swipes," or rejections, as those that didn't.

For its latest campaign, Truth's agency, Mojo Supermarket, wanted to send a new message to teens who don't like to be preached to in ads, said the agency's founder and Chief Creative Officer Mo Said.

"When I grew up, there were reasons to quit," he said, referring to the health effects of cigarettes. "We knew it caused cancer. People think vapes are just diet cigarettes. We can't go with the same reason and say it still causes cancer but a little bit less. We needed a new reason for a new generation."

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