



Youth Advocacy for Point-of-Sale Policy Change

Episode Details:

Date of Publication: June 28, 2023

Title: Episode 33: Youth Advocacy for Point-of-Sale Policy Change

Description: In this episode, we are talking about advocacy through the eyes of youth. On May 16-19th, youth groups and organizations from around the country came together in-person in Washington D.C. to meet each other, participate in activities, learn more about the tobacco industry, and rally against one of the largest tobacco companies, Altria. One of these groups is Reality Check out of New York, who organizes this Mobilize Against Tobacco Lies (MATL) event each year. During this event last month, participating youth spoke out against tobacco industry targeting and made it known they will not stand for this through their advocacy efforts. You will hear more about this example of youth who are making a difference during this episode.

Transcription:

You're listening to the Counter Tobacco Podcast.

I'm your host for today, Jackie Boards. On this podcast, we are talking about the power and influence of youth in the fight against the tobacco industry. You will learn about youth groups who are showing the tobacco industry who is boss through their grassroots mobilization and advocacy efforts. These youth are making it known that the tobacco industry can't keep getting away with putting profit over people.

One of these youth groups is Reality Check. Established in 2001, Reality Check is a youth-led program out of New York state with youth from around the state who mobilize and advocate to expose the tobacco industry's manipulative and deceptive marketing practices which target them, expose them to deadly tobacco products, and contribute to their addiction. This program provides an opportunity for youth to develop their leadership skills, strengthen their public speaking, build their confidence, engage their interests and talents, become empowered, build a community of peers, and fight back against an industry that makes billions off the lives of people like them.

In partnership with youth groups and national partners from around the country, a key part of the Reality Check efforts is a yearly event and movement, called Mobilize Against Tobacco Lies (MATL for short), with a goal to speak out and rally against one of the largest and most profitable tobacco companies, Altria. Altria and its subsidiaries own, produce and market several of the most popular tobacco product brands such as Marlboro cigarettes, Copenhagen and Skoal smokeless products, and Black & Mild cigars. Altria also continues to expand their portfolio such as their recent acquisition of NJOY this year, an e-cigarette brand, and their previous, now defunct investment in the Juul e-cigarette brand. In their words, Altria is trying to move beyond smoking, but continue to seek more brand recognition, increase their market share, promote products to keep people hooked, and block tobacco prevention and control efforts.

This Mobilize Against Tobacco Lies event brings together adults and youth activists during the time of the annual Altria shareholders meeting each year. These shareholder meetings allow Altria to meet with their investors, shareholders, and other parties to talk about their financial standing, progress as a company, and plan for the future. This presents a good time for youth to speak out against their company practices. The goal is to hold tobacco companies like Altria accountable for their actions and demand change. Based on data from the 2022 National Youth Tobacco Survey (NYTS), over 3 million U.S. middle and high school students use tobacco products, including over 2.5 million who use e-cigarettes specifically.^[1] Altria sells some of the most popular brands of tobacco products among youth.

Before 2020, this event was held in-person in Richmond, Virginia where Altria has its home base and held its shareholders meetings. In 2020-2022, the event was held virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and included social media advocacy, training webinars, and at-home activities. This year in 2023, everyone was able to come back in-person on May 16-19th to meet, learn from one another, and advocate.

With Altria having the shareholders meeting virtually this year, everyone decided to come together in Washington D.C. to rally in front of the Altria lobbyist office on May 18th. With their lobbyists going to Capitol Hill to promote Altria's agenda, these youth showed them they can't hide behind their meeting rooms no matter the state.

During the rally on May 18th, the youth stood right in front of the Altria lobbyist office to chant and use signs to promote their message and show the tobacco industry their voice will be heard. This was all happening in real time during the Altria shareholders meeting. So, while Altria was holding their meeting, these youth were speaking up in their own way on the streets of D.C. Some select youth even got a chance to virtually attend and ask questions of the Altria executives during the Q&A portion of the shareholders meeting. Here is a snippet of one of the questions that was asked by the youth during the Altria shareholders meeting.

The rally cry was for tobacco companies like Altria to remove all flavors in all tobacco products and for all people. Studies show that flavors play a major role in youth initiation and use of tobacco products. Over 80% of youth who have ever used tobacco started with a flavored product.^[2] The tobacco industry knows this. These tobacco companies claim they

don't intentionally market to youth, but we know they continue to advertise their tobacco products in ways that reach and expose youth like through the advertisements, flavors, discounting, and availability of their products in the retail environment. Removing all flavors in all tobacco products for all people could save a new generation from becoming addicted and dying from tobacco products.

Their signs during the rally had statements like no more lies, keep kids tobacco free, and tobacco isn't candy. Youth used their loud voices and strong words to make it clear they are not afraid to stand up and speak out. Here are some of these chants from the rally.

As you can hear, these youth do not want to be hypnotized by big tobacco. They don't want to be targeted with flavored tobacco products and get caught in the tobacco industry's flavor trap. They don't like how the industry is helping fuel addiction through providing their deadly tobacco products. They want the tobacco industry to be held accountable for their practices. They want policies to be enacted to remove products. In these important messages, the youth show why policy is so important, and how inaction will only increase the tobacco industry's power.

Public demonstrations, rallies, protests, and marches help spread the word. These methods direct attention to a particular issue and amplify it. They empower people to speak up and unite. These youth did just that.

After the rally, everyone participated in a press event, at the historic Metropolitan AME Church in downtown D.C., to spread the word about flavored tobacco products, especially menthol, in support of the Center for Black Health and Equity.

To coincide with the day of the rally, everyone came together for a reception, trainings, and team building activities in the days before to meet each other, learn more about the tobacco industry's influence and get prepared to rally. On May 17th, we at Counter Tools held a training for these youth about the importance of policy and talked about recent policy news, such as flavored tobacco product bans, around the country and interference by the tobacco industry to stop this. Youth learned why flavored tobacco product bans are important, and why their efforts are so vital to changing the course of how the tobacco industry operates and the negative health impacts we see from tobacco products.

This year, the event drew over 100 youth and adults from over 10 states. The groups and partners involved included Reality Check, Indigenous Peoples Task Force, Texas Say What, New Hampshire Dover Youth to Youth, Coalition for a Tobacco-Free Hawaii, Wisconsin FACT, Michigan Making it Count, Delaware Kick Butts Generation, Corporate Accountability, the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, the Center for Black Health and Equity, the Truth Initiative, and us at Counter Tools.

Here is an interview we did with one of the youth about what this event means to her and why she is involved in being an advocate.

All in all, the efforts this year were resounding with the amount of youth participating, the involvement of everyone in coming together for a cause, and the reach had. Here is feedback from some of the youth on their experiences with the event.

The momentum won't stop this year, these efforts to Mobilize Against Tobacco Lies will continue, with a message all the same to stop the tobacco industry's marketing to youth and enact policy to reduce the negative impact of tobacco products we see in our communities.

This story shows the power of youth and provides a good example of what others can do. Engaging youth is a key strategy in tobacco prevention and control. If we want to see changes, like improvements in the retail environment and reductions in disease and death from tobacco, youth have to be a part of the conversation and the fight. The youth voice is strong and needed. Youth challenge the status quo. The efforts in D.C. this year show this in action.

That's all for today. We hope this story provided some inspiration. Thanks for listening! Email us at info@countertobacco.org if you have any questions, check out the [youth and community engagement page](#) on our CounterTobacco.org site to learn more about the importance of youth engagement, and look out for our next podcast!

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