

FORTUNE

Commentary: Philip Morris Says It Wants to Quit Cigarettes. But It's Just Blowing Smoke.

By MATTHEW L. MYERS and ROBIN KOVAL January 5, 2018

[Philip Morris International](#) (PMI)—the giant cigarette manufacturer operating in most countries excluding the U.S.—claims it wants a smoke-free future, placing advertisements in major United Kingdom newspapers earlier this week with a New Year's resolution: “We're trying to give up cigarettes.”

These ads should have run on April Fools' Day instead.

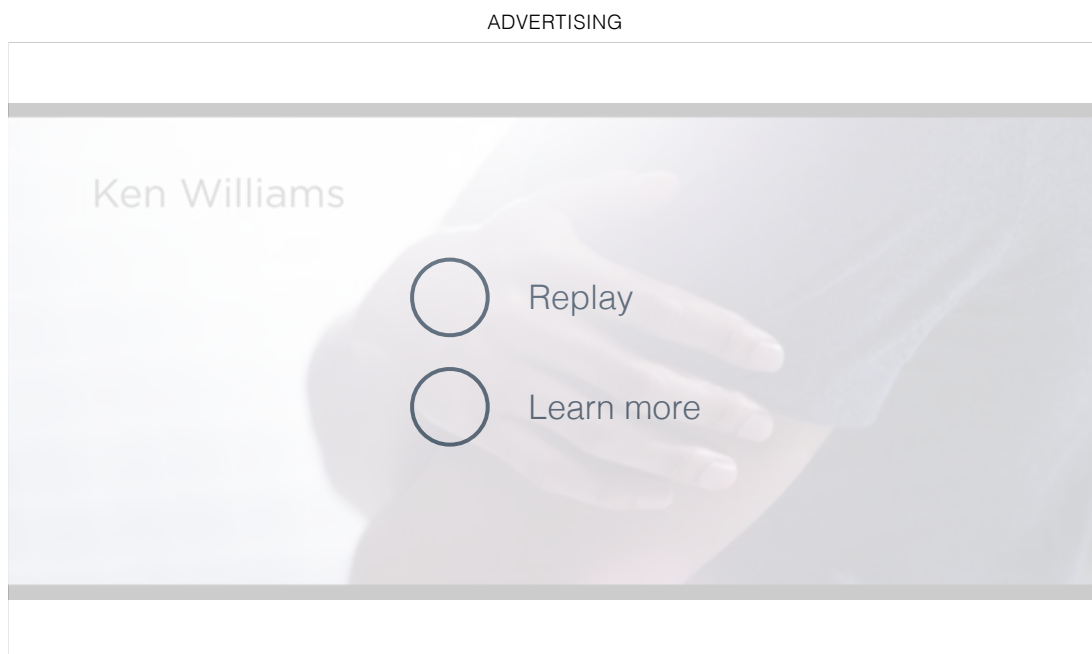
It is the height of hypocrisy for PMI to proclaim that it is helping solve the tobacco problem while it aggressively markets cigarettes—especially in low- and middle-income countries—and fights proven policies to reduce tobacco use and save lives. This advertising campaign should be seen for what it is: an effort to divert attention from the fact that PMI remains a primary cause of the smoking problem, not the solution.

Not surprisingly, PMI set no deadline for actually giving up cigarettes. If the company is truly committed to a smoke-free future, it should actively support the proven policies to reduce smoking that are endorsed by an international public health treaty, the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. These include significant tobacco tax increases, comprehensive smoke-free laws, tobacco advertising bans, and graphic health warnings on cigarette packs. These policies apply equally to all tobacco companies, and supporting them would not put PMI at a competitive disadvantage.

Instead, the company has led the fight against these policies around the world. [A 2017 investigative report by Reuters](#) revealed a massive, secret PMI campaign aimed at “bringing to heel the world's tobacco control treaty.” From Australia to Uruguay to

Thailand, the corporation has filed expensive lawsuits that challenge strong tobacco control laws and seek to intimidate other countries into inaction.

In the same breath that it talks of a smoke-free future, PMI brags that Marlboro is “[the number one global cigarette brand](#).” Across the globe, Philip Morris promotes its cigarettes in ways that [appeal to kids](#), introducing flavored cigarettes, conducting aggressive marketing near elementary schools, and sponsoring [race cars](#) and [concerts](#). In 2016, a senior company executive touted PMI’s efforts to “[develop untapped markets](#)” for cigarettes across Africa and the Middle East. That doesn’t sound like a company that wants a smoke-free future.



In its UK ad, PMI claims, “No cigarette company has done anything like this before.” In fact, this is not the first time a tobacco company has claimed to fund “independent research” and pledged to solve the smoking problem. PMI itself did so in September, when it [created its Foundation for a Smoke-Free World](#). Instead of advancing public health, tobacco companies have used such research to divert attention from real solutions and their own harmful actions.

Tobacco companies also have a long history of introducing supposedly safer products that turned out to be no safer at all, most notoriously their fraudulent promotion of light and low-tar cigarettes.

This is also not the first time Philip Morris has claimed that it would get out of the cigarette business. In 1954, a Philip Morris vice president stated, “[I]f we had any thought or knowledge that in any way we were selling a product harmful to our customers, **we would stop business tomorrow.**” Yet tobacco industry scientists knew at the time that cigarettes were dangerous to health. In 1997, Philip Morris’s CEO said in a deposition that the company would “shut [production] down instantly” if presented with evidence that smoking causes lung cancer. But that evidence **had already been presented** in a surgeon general report released more than 30 years earlier.

PMI’s latest claims are no more credible. Until the company stops marketing cigarettes and fighting efforts to reduce smoking, its claimed commitment to a smoke-free future should be seen as another public relations stunt, not a serious effort to reduce the death and disease caused by its products.

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