

Fear Tactics and Graphic Advertising: An Appropriate Approach for Reducing the Negative Impact of Smoking | *Lauren Ellis*

Currently in the United States there are approximately 44.5 million people who smoke cigarettes. It has been documented that tobacco use is the current leading cause of preventable death in the United States. The CDC estimates that approximately 438,000 deaths per year in the United States are due to smoking-attributable conditions. Translating this into years of potential life that is lost yields 5.5 million life-years lost due to shortened life spans of those that die from smoking-related causes. This figure can also be measured in terms of an economic value of productivity losses, totaling \$92 billion. Adding this figure to the estimated \$76 billion that is spent annually on smoking-attributable health care yields a total of \$168 billion lost to smoking-related causes.

These numbers speak for themselves in terms of how much money is being spent “paying” for the damage done by smokers to their bodies (and to those of others in the form of second-hand smoke). This is a staggering amount of loss and striking in comparison with the vastly smaller amount spent by the national and state governments attempting to ultimately decrease this devastating loss through tobacco prevention and control programs. In light of these stunning statistics, it is obviously important that successful and effective programs are created in attempts to reduce smoking-related disease and premature death.

Historically, public service announcements and health education programs have resulted in controversy regarding effectiveness. There is currently much debate over the graphic images in the New York State Smokers’ Quitline new campaign featuring “Every Cigarette is Doing You Damage” advertisements. While the shock value of the images is under dispute, the campaign’s trial has a place and value in today’s society. During a four year run during 1997-2000 in Australia, the National Tobacco Campaign aired these advertisements, and evaluations have proven their success in reducing the national smoking prevalence rates. Despite their controversy, the “Every Cigarette is Doing You Damage” advertisements may be considered necessary to be included in a national campaign as a tobacco prevention and control method for the United States due to the large amount of smoking-related human suffering and economic loss.

The challenge of preventing and reducing smoking among youths and others is significant. In the past twenty years, anti-smoking campaigns and resulting public health awareness of the consequences of long term smoking have increased dramatically. Studies have been done on many government-funded national anti-smoking campaigns that prove their effectiveness. The government programs to educate youths about the dangers of smoking are definitely justified, given the particular vulnerability of this age group. Shocking methods may be controversial.

However, in comparison with the stunning statistics on smoking-attributable deaths approaching half a million people per year, it is difficult to argue that such serious methods be reconsidered: the risk of inaction is too great. By innovating in advertising and analyzing its impact, the available funds can be used to evolve effective programs while addressing legitimate concerns along the way. It is possible that the most effective elements of “shock” advertising can still be delivered well and perhaps even enhanced in effectiveness.

I aim to demonstrate that there is a great need for effective anti-smoking campaigns in the United States, and to explain why extreme measures such as fear tactics and shocking approaches to advertising are warranted. Even controversial campaigns, such as the “Every Cigarette is Doing You Damage” campaign, can be defended on the basis of their previous successes in other countries. Due to the large extent of human suffering and economic loss that result from smoking-attributable disease and mortality, it is imperative that the government take extreme measures to develop new types of campaigning to counteract damages done by the tobacco industry. Extreme measures such as shocking advertising can be expected to result in some controversy, but in the end their value will be difficult to refute in face of the more shocking consequences of inaction.