

TSET Better Health Podcast Transcript

Episode 36: The Sinister Shapeshifting Tobacco Industry

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Summary: Tobacco companies have long used deceptive marketing in ever-changing ways to lure new customers into buying and becoming addicted to their dangerous products. They know how to appeal to different populations, and it has worked with deadly results. TSET is launching a new media campaign that exposes how the tobacco industry uses “shapeshifting” marketing to make tobacco and vape products seem appealing to people of different ages and communities. Episode guests will include TSET Health Communication Manager Chase Harvick, who will speak about the Shapeshifter campaign; Donald Richardson of Guiding Right, a local agency that helps African Americans and others break free from tobacco use and other health threats, and Purcell High School students Carter Goldston and Alexis Wenthold on the influences that draw teens to vaping and tobacco use, and how to counteract those influences.

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[Theme music]

James Tyree: Hello and welcome to the TSET Better Health Podcast. This is your host James Tyree, senior health communication consultant at TSET.

Dylan Jasna: And I am TSET Health Communication Manager Dylan Jasna. Today we’re going to explore *shapeshifting*. It sounds like science fiction but, unfortunately, the shapeshifting we are talking about is all too real because this is how tobacco companies come after Oklahomans and threaten our health and well-being.

J. Tyree: Our last episode explored how the tobacco industry lobbied for pre-emption laws at the state government level to stifle local control over tobacco-free ordinances to protect their residents. But today, you will hear about another insidious industry tactic, which is marketing to specific groups of people to make their tobacco and vape products seem so very appealing. It is true that all industries target their audiences for advertising, but I describe tobacco advertising as insidious because it purposefully tries to entice youth and others to use highly addictive products that are known to kill hundreds of thousands of Americans every year, including 7,500 annually right here in Oklahoma.

D. Jasna: TSET has just launched a broad media campaign called “Shapeshifter” that dramatically, yet realistically, shows how uses different faces and places in our communities to lure new customers. We are very excited about this eye-catching and thought-provoking campaign to educate and save lives. Here to tell us more about Shapeshifter is a colleague here at TSET.

C. Harvick: (00:12) My name is Chase Harvick. I am a health communication manager here at TSET, the Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust. I've been with the agency for about three

years. As part of my job, I oversee our Oklahoma Tobacco Help line and Tobacco Stops With Me health communications.

D. Jasna: So what is Shapeshifter all about?

C. Harvick: (00:48ish) When people ask me “what is Shapeshifter?”, I tell them that Shapeshifter is kind of the embodiment of big tobacco. It's kind of the personification of evil, if you will. But when people think about tobacco and the tobacco industry, they're, they're still primarily thinking about cigarettes, smoking and tobacco chew. And we wanted to visually communicate the new ways that Big Tobacco is shifting to gain new customers. And that's what the campaign is all about Shapeshifter. So you're going to see here that we call our evil guy, we call him Big, which is just short for big tobacco, but you're going to see Big transforming into various personas, high school students, friends, different ages, different genders, just anyone who can persuade someone to use a tobacco product, that's who Big is going to be in these spots. So, because big tobacco targets everyone, Big is everyone, because big tobacco targets everyone.

D. Jasna: Where can we see these ads?

C. Harvick: (2:20) ... People are going to see our shapeshifter campaign on TV, cable, radio, plus on their preferred digital platforms in print and on social media. We're also creating a dedicated website on the Tobacco Stops With Me landing page, and that's stopswithme.com.

(8:40) ... I want to briefly touch on an interesting point. We filmed nine or 10 different vignettes that show big tobacco transforming into a different person, a barber at a barber shop, a student at a high school, et cetera. But this allows us to easily take those ads, the 30-second ads that we put on air and customize them for whatever demographic is going to be watching that particular program. So if it's a sports program, we might put the more male skewing vignettes in that spot. But really it's so flexible and so effective, unlike a lot of other ads that are just kind of one and done.

D. Jasna: The concept and execution sound pretty interesting, but how do you know it will resonate with Oklahomans?

C. Harvick: (3:30ish) Before we filmed, we did extensive message testing. In September, we partnered with the local analytics group and put together a panel of 500 Oklahomans who were surveyed on three different campaign messages that we were looking at. And Shapeshifter was by far the highest performer. ~~We also showed the same panel some different animatics of the spot, and I should point out, animatics are kind of basic versions of the actual ad with, instead of video, you have animation. You have just like, this is kind of a placeholder for ... It gives people a general overview of what the spot's going to be. So we showed our panel some animatics of the spot and asked them to tell us how they felt.~~

(04:17): Amazingly, 79% found it informative and 73% said it grabbed their attention. Shapeshifter was especially impactful with women and parents of children living in the home. But going back to your other question about what makes it stand out, I think

you'll also see the production value, the acting, the editing are all exceptional. This spot will absolutely grab your attention, plus the look of it immediately is different. I know you know this, Sam, but some folks might not, but the aspect ratio of most TVs now is 16 by 9. So it's like 16 spaces for every nine spaces. This was filmed in with an aspect ratio of 16 by 10, like a movie. So it looks very cinematic.

- D. Jasna: So we see or hear the ads and we want to do something to stop the tobacco industry's manipulation. What can we do; Is there a call to action?
- C. Harvick: (6:40ish) ... Tobacco Stops With Me encourages Oklahomans to make their lives tobacco free, either through Personal choice or by advocating for tobacco free policies in their communities. So with Shapeshifter, not only are we really pulling back the curtain on big tobacco, we're also calling for viewers to stop the lies. And that's going to be the message that most of the spots have on the end plate. ... The spots also direct viewers to visit stopswithme.com and to use the free resources there to become advocates for tobacco free and smokefree policies in their own communities.
- (music)
- C. Harvick: It is worth noting that Shapeshifter ads launched in late February and are airing now. You can also see them, as Chase said, by visiting stopswithme.com.
- J. Tyree: Shapeshifter does a great job of showing Oklahomans some of the many personas the tobacco industry takes on to appeal to specific individuals and populations. Two of those groups are youth, especially with vaping in recent years, and African Americans, whose neighborhoods tend to get exposed to increased marketing, especially with menthol cigarettes. So we spoke with two high school students, who we'll hear from later to get their perspectives on what influences teens to vape and use tobacco, and with a coordinator at the non-profit agency Guiding Right in northeast Oklahoma City.
- D. Richardson: (00:12) My name is Donald Richardson. I am the coordinator of the African American M-Power Program, which is the Tobacco Use Prevention Project. ... Guiding Right is the community-based organization. Historically we are HIV AIDS prevention Agency. We've since expanded since then. We became an organization in 1999, so this year I guess we'd be celebrating our 24th year. Our target population is African Americans and other disadvantaged people in Oklahoma City and Tulsa.
- (1:11) Currently, we've been having our Tobacco Prevention Program for the better part of 10 years now. And so what we've done in the community, we are tasked with helping businesses and other organizations located in our target population, which would be Oklahoma City, Tulsa, the Tulsa area, and the Lawton area. ~~So I think Lawton is Comanche County,~~ so we assist businesses in those areas in becoming tobacco free.
- J. Tyree: In this episode, we're discussing how the tobacco industry "shapeshifts" to make their harmful products appealing to different but specific audiences. What have you seen in the black community?

D. Richardson: (3:33) Historically when they used to do these tobacco ads, they used to attach them to black events. So if there was some sort of concert that the target population, African Americans, or so some event in the city, the tobacco industry used to basically throw dollars at that event. So that that event could help publicize basically tobacco use.

J. Tyree: What else have you seen?

D. Richardson: (4:22) Well, when we first started, I think when you guys first started too, we did what we call the Storefront Project, where we would go around to stores in our community and see how many tobacco ads they actually had. And we would also go in other sections of the city to see how many tobacco ads they had on this particular side of town. And we've come to find that there are way more tobacco... The tobacco marketing efforts in black communities are two to three times... I would say this, there were more tobacco as an African American community than we've seen in any other community in Oklahoma City. The targeted efforts were astounding.

J. Tyree: That is horrible.

D. Richardson: (5:43) I'll tell you, just as me personally, you almost feel used.

... Where our offices are located now, we're located in the heart of hood, as they say, on Northeast 23rd. And so these stores that, just me personally, just my personal practice, these stores that, and not just the tobacco marketing efforts, but even the alcohol ads, and things of that nature I don't, just personally, I don't go to their stores. So let's say I didn't bring my lunch today and I'm going to eat lunch somewhere in the area. I only eat at black-owned places, actually, because I've noticed that the restaurants or the African American owned restaurants on this side of town, of course, they don't have any of those type of ads. Yeah. None of them.

J. Tyree: How have menthol products hurt the community, and what are your thoughts on the FDA and lawmakers finally taking menthol products seriously?

D. Richardson: (9:11) Right. I really do hope that they are taking it seriously, and whatever it is, legislation or whatever needs to be passed for that to become a reality needs to happen and needs to happen soon. Because we both know... Me, when I smoked it was definitely the menthol. The menthol is what gets you, of course the nicotine of course, but the menthol is what helps keep you addicted. It makes it easier to go down, so to speak. And that's why now, of course, we know with programs like yours, programs like ours, we can't just get everybody to stop smoking. But I have noticed with smokers, when you limit their access to places where they can go and smoke... Just like I said, being a former one myself, it assists that person that's trying to quit.

J. Tyree: As a state Health Department M-POWER grantee, you go and help businesses and organizations in predominantly black communities become tobacco-free. But what happens when individuals come to you seeking help to quit tobacco use?

D. Richardson: (12:37) Well right now, of course, we still use TSET services. We still push the helpline, 1-800-QUITNOW. We encourage anyone that comes in the office wanting to quit to log on

1-800-QUITNOW. Our youth efforts, we have started giving the youth information on the My Life, my Quit. That's also sponsored by TSET.

(music)

- J. Tyree: Oklahomans are fortunate to have organizations like Guiding Right throughout the state that work hard to improve health and wellness within their local communities. You can learn more about them at guidingright.org. And when community partners work with TSET programs and resources, the positive change they help create locally expands that much more.
- D. Jasna: One example of a TSET program that works locally is called YAHL, which stands for Youth Action for Health Leadership. The program is new, but it's already making a big difference for the teens who join and the schools and communities they work to improve. We recently spoke with two YAHL members to discuss the peer and media influences that often surround youth to use tobacco and vape products.
- A. Wenthold: (00:42) My name is Alexis Wenthold. I go to Purcell High School, and I'm a junior.
- C. Goldston: (00:49) My name is Carter Goldston. I also go to Purcell High School, and I'm also a junior here at the high school.
- D. Jasna: Thanks for being with us. What do you think are the main reasons why teens decide to try vaping or tobacco use?
- A. Wenthold: (1:10) In my experience, I think that if their friends are doing it, they want to do it. So it's kind of like peer pressure, and then it's a domino effect. So once one person does it, everybody kind of wants to do it.
- C. Goldston: (1:29) I feel people nowadays see it as a normal thing, and it's like if you do it, it's kind of a fit in thing at the high school level now. If you're a vaper or you smoke, you'll be considered cool and be more accepted, whereas if you don't do it, which I don't recommend that you do vape or smoke, you should ... It's just a high school thing. Popularity is a big thing in high school, and I just see vaping and smoking as being ... since it's bad, kids tend to look towards that and be more accepting to that instead of doing what's right, because what always is right is not always cool, and what is cool is not always right, kind of thing.
- D. Jasna: It seems peer pressure has been a major influence on teens – and adults, for that matter – since the dawn of time. Has advertising also played a role?
- C. Goldston: (5:02) I think they just put it into a more modern, more ... I've seen commercials and stuff where it's all these different flavors. And everything and it reminds me of a candy commercial. Have you seen the Skittles commercials? It's like Taste The Rainbow, and then all these vape products and have all these flavors. And it's like, "Why don't you try this flavor, this flavor, this flavor? And you can find which one is best for you," or whatever. I feel like they're taking it down to the younger generation, which I guess is good for their cause, but it's not good for the younger generation growing. And this has

been nowadays in their life as much as smoking has been in older people's lives. So it's just modernizing of how to use the tobacco products and everything like that.

D. Jasna: That's some serious shapeshifting. What else have you noticed?

A. Wenthold: (4:14) I think that when vaping first came out, it was a big deal. And one of their main things was it's better for you than smoking, and it's just supposed to taste good and it's not supposed to have any health defects. But now I feel like it's harder for them to back that up, because scientists have come out and said that it's bad for you and shown the facts. So I think it's harder for them to back that up.

C. Goldston: (7:56) Yeah, I know a lot of people that whenever vaping first came out, they were very onto it and addicted, kind of thing. But now with what researchers and what YAHL's been trying to get out in the world, how it's changed and their mind's changed, like, "Oh, I do not want to be putting all this bad stuff in my body to where it'll make my health bad in the long term," which no one wants bad health in the long term or now. But with all those bad toxins and chemicals and vapes and tobacco and everything, I feel like the younger generation is finally maturing and seeing all these facts that have come out and deciding to change their mind and not do it anymore.

D. Jasna: You mentioned what YAHL is trying to get out into the world and community. What, exactly, do you do locally to help fellow students quit tobacco and vape use – or avoid it altogether?

C. Goldston: (6:50) During October, we put on a YAHL little convention at our trick-or-treating thing that we do here in Purcell. And we had our little iPads, handing out resumes, having people collect and see what they thought about vaping and how they felt about it, kind of thing. Just trying to get the word out and seeing what other people think about it compared to what teenagers think about nowadays. And YAHL has all these different events and stuff that you can go to. And they try to help and describe all the bad benefits of smoking and vaping to try to get the word out to the younger generation, which helps a lot. And here at Purcell we try to do that daily, really, just push that you don't want the bad things in your life. You want to keep your eyes not focused on the bad stuff.

A. Wenthold: (6:07) I think that there's a lot of good programs and help that you can get through YAHL, and just through any of those programs. It just shows you the facts of what vaping can do to you, and better alternatives.

(music)

D. Jasna: We very much appreciate the work that Alexis and Carter and their classmates do in Purcell, and what all YAHL student volunteers and adult partners do throughout the state. To learn more about Youth Action for Health Leadership in your local community, or information about starting a new YAHL group where you live, visit yahlok.org. That is Y-A-H-L-O-K dot org.

J. Tyree: And to learn about other programs with the TSET Healthy Youth Initiative, visit Oklahoma.gov/tset, go to the TSET Programs menu on the top of the home page and then click on TSET Healthy Youth Initiative. And remember to check out the Shapeshifter videos and learn more about the tobacco industry's harmful impact on Oklahomans and their communities at stopswithme.com.

D. Jasna: We want to thank our guests once again and you, our listeners, for joining us today. We hope you enjoyed this episode, and we invite you to listen to this or any previous episode of the TSET Better Health Podcast wherever you listen to podcasts or by visiting the TSET website. So until next time, this is Dylan Jasna ...

J. Tyree: And James Tyree, wishing you peace ...

D. Jasna: And better health.