

Marketing Flavoured Spit Tobacco to Youth: An Industry Success Story

YOUTH USE OF SPIT AND OTHER SMOKELESS TOBACCO PRODUCTS HAS INCREASED

Spit tobacco is a highly addictive and lethal mixture of tobacco, nicotine, sweeteners, abrasives, salts and chemicals. Spit tobacco comes in two basic forms:

- Chew is a leafy tobacco sold in pouches. Plug tobacco, which is sold in brick form, is also a form of chew;
- Snuff is finely ground tobacco in powder form that is sold in small tins.²

In recent years the tobacco industry has taken to using the term “smokeless” tobacco to describe spit, chew and snuff. The tobacco industry is believed to use the term “smokeless” to infer a positive association with “harmless”³ while distancing itself from the negative connotation of “spit” and “chew.”

Spit tobacco has gone from a product once used predominantly by older men to one used principally by boys and young men. This trend has occurred as spit tobacco promotions have increased dramatically and a new generation of flavoured spit, chew and snuff has entered the market.⁴

National survey data⁵ analyzed by Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada⁶ indicated that 24 per cent of Canadians who reported using smokeless tobacco in the last 30 days were in the 15 – 19 year old age group. Survey data of smokeless tobacco use for youth under the age of 15 is not available but Alberta



“Cherry Skoal is for somebody that likes the taste of candy if you know what I’m saying.”

– Statement from spit tobacco representative¹

Health Services literature (from the former Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission) indicates that spit tobacco users start as early as age nine or ten.⁷ This disturbingly early age for initiation of smokeless tobacco use is supported by internal tobacco industry documents.⁸ The earlier one begins to use spit tobacco and the longer the period of time spit tobacco is used the greater the risk for developing oral cancer,⁹ making early initiation particularly dangerous.

MARKETING FLAVOURED CHEW, SPIT AND SNUFF TO A NEW GENERATION

Product and marketing innovation is key to the success of the tobacco industry.¹⁰ The addition of flavours and aggressive marketing of these spit and other smokeless products has led to their massive uptake by young males.¹¹

The most popular Canadian spit and chew products such as Skoal and Copenhagen are made by United States Smokeless Tobacco (USSTC), part of the Altria (formerly known as Philip Morris) group of companies. The following excerpts from USSTC and American Tobacco strategy documents reveal their marketing plans to attract new, young customers.

Marketing Plan to Attract 15 – 35 Year Olds by Sweetening Spit Tobacco

The goal of “The Lotus Project”¹² was to make spit tobacco products more palatable for new users. Project recommendations included using lower nicotine levels to reduce the sensation of harshness on the gum and mouth, using a “pouch” to help new users who could not keep a pinch in one spot, and adding honey, chocolate or vanilla to sweeten the product.

The “Graduation” Method

This document titled “graduation theory” reveals the strategy of offering mild and flavoured products to ease new users into using smokeless tobacco:

“New users of smokeless tobacco — attracted to the product for a variety of reasons — are most likely to begin with products that are milder tasting, more flavored, and/or easier to control in the mouth. After a period of time, there is a natural progression of product switching to brands that are more full-bodied, less flavored, have more concentrated ‘tobacco taste’ than the entry brand.”¹³

Praise for A Product that Reaches Kids as Young as Nine

American Tobacco was beating USSTC to the kids through the introduction of a sweet flavored, low nicotine brand called “Hawken.” USSTC sent its researchers into the field to find out why...

“The retailers all agree that the majority of Hawken is being used by young kids and young adults. The age of the kids is from 9 years old and up. I believe this to be true because outlets located close to schools (all grades) are definitely the heavier Hawken outlets we visited. Also, the people who knew about mouth tobaccos felt the sweet taste was a definite factor with the kids... It definitely is a fact that Hawken has brought a lot of new consumers into the (spit) tobacco market. I think this brand has reached kids four or five years earlier than we have contacted them in the past. Indications are that some of these new users are moving up to a stronger brand... Hawken may prove to be a very good starter product for Skoal.”¹⁴

HEALTH IMPACT OF USING SPIT TOBACCO

Spit tobacco has over 3,000 chemicals, including 28 known carcinogens.¹⁵ Spit tobacco is not a safe substitute for cigarettes. Using spit tobacco can cause:

- Cancer of the mouth (lip, tongue, and cheek, floor and roof of the mouth) and throat. On average, half of all people who get oral cancer die within five years;
- Leukoplakia (white, leathery sores) that develop where tobacco is held in the mouth;
- Increased heart rate, higher blood pressure, irregular heartbeats and constricted blood vessels;
- Tooth and gum disease.¹⁶

MILESTONES IN THE INCREASED USE OF SPIT TOBACCO

- 1985: USSTC spent \$80 million on spit tobacco advertising in the U.S.
- 1986: The U.S. Surgeon General declared, “the oral use of smokeless tobacco represents a significant health risk. It is not a safe substitute for smoking cigarettes. It can cause cancer and a number of non-cancerous oral conditions and can lead to nicotine addiction and dependence.”
- 1993: Cherry flavoring was added to Skoal long cut.
- 2001: \$237 million was spent on advertising in the U.S.¹⁷ including full-page colour ads in publications popular with young males such as Sports Illustrated and Rolling Stone.
- Sales of smokeless tobacco in the U.S. increased from \$731 million in 1985 to \$2.1 billion in 2001.¹⁸
- In the past several years full-page colour ads promoting smokeless tobacco have appeared in Canadian print media.
- Spit tobacco is promoted at high profile events in Western Canada, including the adult-only venues at the Calgary Stampede.



- Spit tobacco promotions are prevalent at rodeos throughout Western Canada.
- Youth use of spit tobacco is especially problematic in Alberta. Seventeen per cent of Alberta males aged 15-19 use smokeless tobacco, which is almost double the national average rate of 9 per cent for that category (Health Canada, Canadian Tobacco Use Monitoring Survey, 2007).
- Canadian sales data unavailable at publication.

1 Bob Beets, sales representative at US Smokeless Tobacco Company.

2 Alberta Health Services *What Is Spit Tobacco* http://www.aadac.com/87_404.asp accessed May 31, 2009.

3 West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources Office of Epidemiology & Health Promotion, Tobacco Free Website Glossary of Terms <http://www.wvdhhr.org/bph/oehp/tobacco/glossary.htm> accessed June 1, 2009.

4 Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids, Smokeless Tobacco and Kids <http://www.tobaccofreekids.org/research/factsheets/pdf/0003.pdf> accessed May 31, 2009.

5 Health Canada, Canadian Tobacco Use Monitoring Survey 2007.

6 Callard, Cynthia, Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada email May 30, 2009.

7 Alberta Health Services *What Is Spit Tobacco* http://www.aadac.com/87_404.asp accessed May 31, 2009.

8 Doc-Alert (Smokefree.net), 2002-05-04 [http://www.gen-swat.com/documents/CF%20Hawken%20Product%20\(UST\).pdf](http://www.gen-swat.com/documents/CF%20Hawken%20Product%20(UST).pdf) accessed May 31, 2009.

9 Alberta Health Services *What Is Spit Tobacco* http://www.aadac.com/87_404.asp accessed May 31, 2009.

9 Doc-Alert (Smokefree.net), 2002-05-04.

10 Lewis, Jane M. and Wackowski, Olivia, *Dealing With an Innovative Industry: A Look at Flavored Cigarettes Promoted by Mainstream Brands* Am J Public Health. 2006 February; 96(2): 244-251. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2004.061200.

11 Tomar, Scott and Blum, Alan, *Smokeless Tobacco: Marketing Ploy? Wyoming's Through With Chew* Newsletter March 2005 http://www.throughwithchew.com/cms_uploaded/pdfs/2005-03.pdf accessed May 31, 2009.

12 USSTC, The Lotus Project, Bates Number 2023898725, <http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/mhz77e00;jsessionid=81266E0479F1EC311DDEC57F7D40FDF7> accessed June 1, 2009.

13 Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids, Smokeless Tobacco and Kids <http://www.tobaccofreekids.org/research/factsheets/pdf/0003.pdf> accessed May 31, 2009.

14 Doc-Alert (Smokefree.net), 2002-05-04 [http://www.gen-swat.com/documents/CF%20Hawken%20Product%20\(UST\).pdf](http://www.gen-swat.com/documents/CF%20Hawken%20Product%20(UST).pdf) accessed May 31, 2009.

15 Alberta Health Services *What Is Spit Tobacco* http://www.aadac.com/87_404.asp accessed May 31, 2009.

16 Alberta Health Services *What Is Spit Tobacco* http://www.aadac.com/87_404.asp accessed May 31, 2009.

17 FTC Report to Congress: Federal Trade Commission Smokeless Tobacco Report for the Years 2000 and 2001, <http://www.ftc.gov/os/2003/08/2k2k1smokeless.pdf>.

18 FTC Report to Congress: Federal Trade Commission Smokeless Tobacco Report for the Years 2000 and 2001, <http://www.ftc.gov/os/2003/08/2k2k1smokeless.pdf>.