



# Key Messages and Internal Talking Points

*Not for Distribution to Legislative Offices*

Youth Quest 2026 aims to highlight how tobacco companies use deceptive tactics to target young people and disrupt public health initiatives in California communities. Under the theme, **No Friends in the Industry**, the event calls to attention Big Tobacco's disingenuous support of events, organizations, and decision makers to market their products and frame their efforts as community-driven. As tobacco companies manufacture and market products that cause addiction, disease, and death, the industry continues to counter effective public health policies by making their products more accessible, affordable, and acceptable. Instead of accepting responsibility, the industry shifts the blame to young people for using the products and to those struggling with nicotine addiction. California youth are calling on community leaders and policymakers to recognize these strategies and prioritize protecting public health over deceptive partnerships with the tobacco industry.

## Key Message #1

**The tobacco industry works hard to improve their public image. They deceptively sponsor artists, music festivals, cultural gatherings, and community events to promote their brands and companies. Further, they fund community-based organizations to legitimize their business practices. These partnerships and practices aim to make tobacco acceptable, yet they expose our communities to incredible harm. We must expand our efforts to prevent their predatory influence because there are no friends in the tobacco industry.**

- In 2024, Altria's Success360 initiative sponsored a total of \$23.6 million toward programs that focused on youth development, prevention, and tobacco cessation. Programs included 4-H, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Boys and Girls Clubs, Community Schools and First Tee.<sup>1</sup> Between 2023 and 2025, Altria provided up to \$25,000 in sponsorships to Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County and the Inland Empire, which strongly serves at-risk youth and youth of color.<sup>2</sup>
- The industry provides funding to youth serving organizations to convey to the public and policymakers they are doing something to address youth tobacco use. However, researchers have found that these efforts and associated prevention programs are ineffective and may actually promote tobacco use among youth.<sup>3</sup>
- Historically, tobacco companies used brand sponsored events, such as music festivals, musical artists and other social or cultural events to attract vulnerable populations, including youth, young adults, and minority populations.<sup>4,5</sup>
- In 1998, the Master Settlement Agreement (MSA), an agreement between 46 states and the major cigarette companies, prohibited cigarette brand sponsorship of events with large youth audiences. While this settlement was effective at reducing tobacco industry sponsorship of events, the MSA does not apply to emerging products such as vaping devices and oral nicotine pouches.
- Philip Morris International (PMI), who owns ZYN - the leading brand of oral nicotine pouches, has used their new

products to gain popularity and exposure among young audiences by sponsoring musical events and sports. A recent example was an exclusive concert performed by Noah Kahan for ZYN Rewards Members.<sup>6,7</sup>

- FRE nicotine pouches, owned by Turning Points Brand (TPB) announced their sponsorship of the 2026 Professional Bull Riding (PBR) tour. While the finals may be taking place in Texas, tour events are taking place in California cities, including Bakersfield, Palm Desert, Oakland, Fresno, and Anaheim.<sup>8</sup>
- Tobacco companies have aggressively targeted sponsorships within auto racing sports like F-1 and NASCAR, relying on policy gaps to market their new nicotine pouch products. Some of these ads will be promoted to large populations this year in Sonoma and San Diego raceways.<sup>9,10</sup>
- The tobacco industry has a history of developing “starter products” like smokeless tobacco and nicotine pouches to avoid smoke-free policies. These products appeal to young audiences and are often distributed at community events sponsored by tobacco companies. Tobacco companies are using similar tactics to promote nicotine pouches as they used in the early 2000’s to promote smokeless tobacco, like Skoal and Copenhagen.<sup>11</sup>

## **Key Message #2** Tobacco companies target marginalized communities with price discounts, coupons, and reward programs to portray their harmful products as cheap and accessible. These aggressive marketing tactics increase tobacco use in neighborhoods already facing health inequities.

- The tobacco industry uses price promotions to circumvent public health measures that reduce accessibility and to increase their sales for anyone sensitive to higher product prices.<sup>12</sup>
- Neighborhoods with young people tend to have retailers with lower cost tobacco products. Eliminating tobacco discounts from retail locations could reduce youth and young adult’s desire to use.<sup>13</sup>
- Product affordability is directly associated with youth tobacco use. For every 10% increase in price, youth consumption is reduced by 7%.<sup>14</sup> Tobacco companies are aware of this and have embraced new strategies to keep prices low by raising nicotine levels in products, selling smaller pack sizes of cigars, and increasing puff volume of vaping devices.
- A standard cigarette pack with 20 cigarettes provides 200 puffs at approximately \$15.00/pack (with tax), while disposable vapes offer up to 35,000 puffs for around \$22.00/devices (with tax), delivering significantly more nicotine at a lower cost, making them more appealing to youth.<sup>15</sup>
- An analysis looking at mailed ads between 2018 and 2020 found that approximately 96% of tobacco product ads offered price reduction incentives. These tobacco product ads continue today through mail and email communication.<sup>16</sup>
- Coupons are often targeted to specific locations or demographic groups. For example, price promotions for menthol cigarettes are more prevalent in neighborhoods with high concentrations of African American youth.<sup>17</sup>
- Lower income neighborhoods tend to have more tobacco retailer stores, more advertisements, and higher sales - with retailers more likely to be located near schools.
- 42% of public schools in California are within 1,000 feet of a tobacco retailer, with some locations like San Francisco having more than 70% of schools being within 1,000 feet.<sup>18</sup>
- Youth are more likely to begin and continue to use tobacco when exposed to product marketing and price promotions. The more youth frequent local stores with tobacco product marketing, the more likely they are to think more of their peers are using products and to have positive feelings toward specific brand imagery.<sup>19</sup>
- Middle school youth exposed to tobacco products in retail settings multiple times per week are twice as likely to

start using tobacco.<sup>20</sup>

- There are proven ways to restrict value-added promotions such as stand-alone laws that impose conditions on retailer licenses and by including it as an element of local or statewide minimum price laws.<sup>21</sup>

## Key Message #3

**The industry uses 'personal responsibly' as a prominent argument to deflect responsibility for the harms of their products. But tobacco and nicotine use is not an individual issue. Youth and young adults, especially in marginalized communities, are targeted by the tobacco industry through aggressive marketing, leading to larger health inequities. Youth don't need to be criminalized for an addiction - they need well-funded prevention, intervention, and treatment.**

- The tobacco industry's ability to influence our environment is a root cause of health disparities. Because youth from low-income communities and marginalized communities are more likely to be targets of industry marketing, they are also more likely to be impacted by tobacco product use.<sup>22,23,24</sup>
- Rural communities face unique challenges that pressure youth to use substances. Approaches that focus on access to affordable housing, development of local job opportunities, social opportunities and support, compassionate approaches, and acknowledging the importance of pleasure could especially help rural youth aging into adulthood and reduce the likelihood of youth using tobacco products to cope.<sup>25</sup>
- LGBTQ+, Black, brown and youth with low-income backgrounds are more likely to be targeted, arrested, and prosecuted for drug offenses than their white and higher-income peers despite similar rates of use.<sup>26</sup>
- Evidence shows that criminalization does not stop substance dependency or tobacco use. Rather, it makes it harder for youth to access the support they need to quit using substances. We need multi-faceted approaches that avoid criminalization and address the root causes of substance use, including the housing and mental health crises, systemic inequities, and poverty. Prevention and treatment services need to be accessible and designed for youth of all backgrounds.<sup>27</sup>
- California schools backed by dedicated tobacco prevention funding showed stronger education, greater student engagement, and meaningfully lower tobacco use among youth.<sup>28</sup> While tobacco prevention programs have shown to be effective at countering industry strategies aimed at youth, in 2025-2026, there are dramatic cuts to these programs due to the budget deficit.

## Key Message #4

**Join California youth who are leading efforts to prevent the tobacco industry from harming our communities and a new generation of individuals addicted to nicotine.**

- Tobacco remains a leading cause of preventable death and disease in California.
- Tobacco companies are continuing to create new highly addictive products, which they argue are less harmful than cigarettes; however, we have no longitudinal data to support these claims.
- Youth have witnessed the new tactics of the tobacco industry firsthand as companies are making, marketing, and selling emerging products to teens. These important perspectives and experiences make youth specifically suited to be tobacco-free advocates.<sup>29</sup>
- Youth in California continue to be critical leaders and partners in advocating for tobacco-free communities. They are today and tomorrow's leaders who are paving the way for the next generation to become completely tobacco-free.

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