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Companies & Industries

Nicotine Fix

Celebrities Pitching E-Cigarettes Make a Nightmare for Public Health Officials

By John Tozzi June 30, 2014
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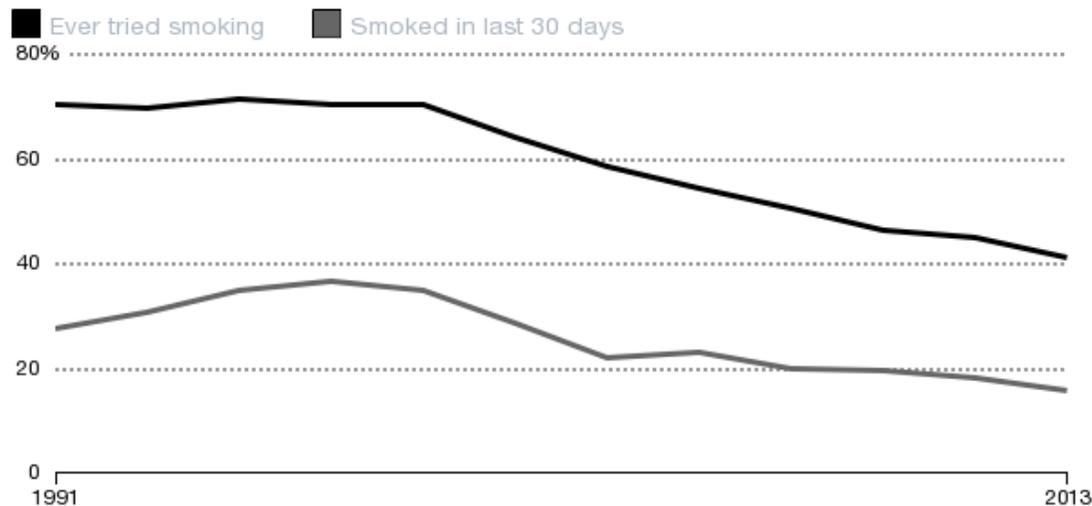
Public health officials have spent decades trying to push smoking to the margins of the culture, and until very recently, had pretty much locked that down. Cigarette makers were barred from TV and radio advertising in [1970](#). State [lawsuits](#) against tobacco companies settled in 1998 ended billboard ads and banished Joe Camel and other marketing toward youth. Since then, tobacco companies have had to settle for advertising at counters and cash registers.

Now, however, celebrities, including those with great teen appeal, have been lining up to endorse the new, largely unregulated e-cigarettes. Rapper Rick Ross is a “[brand ambassador](#)” for mCig, according to a [press release](#) from the company. View co-host Jenny McCarthy was promoting the Blu brand in advertisements that the company pulled from its website, citing the end of her contract, according to a June 20 [Politico story](#). Today, Britain’s *Sunday Telegraph* [reported](#), apparently in error, that Lady Gaga would pitching Blu eCigs in a video. (A Blu spokeswoman now says the company’s U.K. executive “misspoke” and provided wrong information—the company has no relationship with Lady Gaga.)

Celebrities’ embrace of e-cigs—there’s a [Pinterest board](#) devoted to the topic—is a nightmare for public health officials. Images of glamorous people raising small white cylinders to their mouths and exhaling white clouds are once again ubiquitous. Even [Santa vapes!](#) Public health officials fear the change might not just spark e-cig sales but could reverse the decline in cigarette smoking as well.

Smoking Among High School Students

Teen smoking continues to decline



Source: CDC Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System

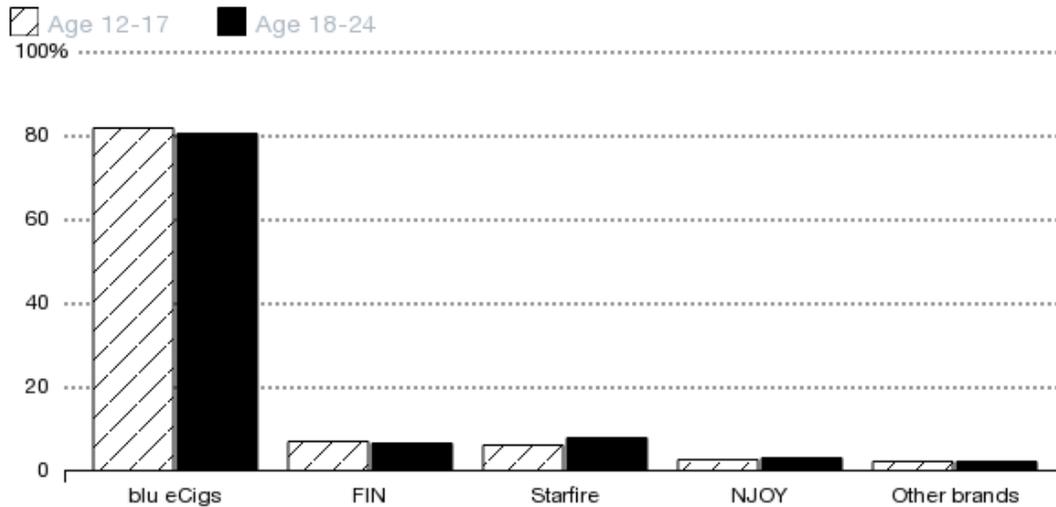
There's no doubt that the master settlement's ban on advertising to teens helped push down adolescent smoking rates. "Since they weren't able to advertise to youth, they shifted their focus more to the young adults," Tom Glynn, outgoing director of Cancer Science & Trends at the American Cancer Society, told me. "We did see [an] uptick in young adults smoking."

Now e-cigarettes are leading a resurgence of advertising, including marketing to youth. Sales of electronic smoking devices in the U.S. reached more than \$760 million in the past 12 months, although the growth rate has slowed in recent months. Blu, which Lorillard (LO) acquired in 2012 for \$135 million, is the top brand in the U.S., with about 39 percent of the market, according to Bloomberg Industries data.

Blu is also responsible for 80 percent of the e-cigarette TV ads that adolescents and young adults were likely to see in recent years, according to an [analysis](#) of Nielsen data published in the journal *Pediatrics* in June. The study concluded that "e-cigarette companies advertise their products to a broad audience that includes 24 million youth, and youth and young adult television exposure has increased dramatically between 2011 and 2013." Blu parent Lorillard did not return a call for comment Monday morning.

Blu Dominates E-Cig Ads That Reach Youth

Share of young people's exposure to e-cigarette TV ads, by brand



Source: Pediatrics; data from 2011 to 2013

Clinical studies haven't yet established the long-term risks of inhaling vaporized nicotine liquid in uncontrolled doses or how effective e-cigarettes are in helping people quit smoking. E-cig promoters sometimes argue that their product is less harmful than cigarettes, and many in the medical community agree. But doctors don't think that vaping is better than not smoking at all.

Yet mass media advertising such as TV ads and celebrity endorsements are aimed more toward expanding a market rather than targeting current smokers to replace their burning leaves with vapor. The Food and Drug Administration recently proposed rules to bar e-cigarette sales to minors, but the agency would still permit TV ads and other forms of marketing.

Still, regulators are concerned by kids experimenting with e-cigs. "Any initiation of any nicotine-containing product is not good for public health," Mitch Zeller, director of the FDA's Center for Tobacco Products, told reporters when the agency proposed its rule in April. "But it's especially damaging if those kids become tolerant to nicotine, they get used to the nicotine, and they then go on to seek their nicotine from combusting cigarettes." It's a less glamorous message, for sure.

Tozzi is a reporter for *Bloomberg Businessweek* in New York.