



# Smoking in the Movies

A look at one of the tobacco industry's most successful youth marketing strategies and what people are doing to fight back



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## A brief history of smoking in the movies

Tobacco companies long ago mastered the art of innovation in advertising to sell their deadly and addictive products. For example, sports trading cards, which were extremely popular with teenagers, were included with a pack of cigarettes in the early 1900s. Today, Big Tobacco may be working to have their cigarettes placed in popular video games. In other instances, they employ viral marketing firms to help them create a “buzz” about a product.

But perhaps the most successful advertising by tobacco companies happens on the silver screen, where product placement and smoking scenes in popular films often reach an audience of hundreds of millions of youth worldwide. Indeed, as the World Health Organization (WHO) noted in 2009, “movies reach every corner of the world.”<sup>1</sup> While youth are the primary target of smoking images, such images also help reinforce the

idea that smoking is a societal norm, which is relevant to both youth and adult smoking.

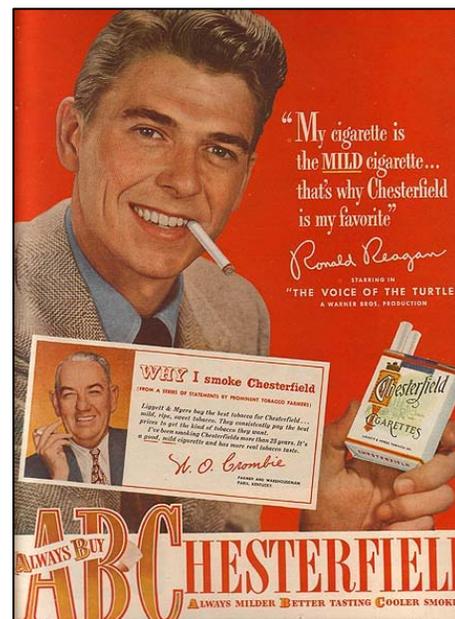
Cigarettes were glamorized on-screen as early as the 1940s (see film *Now, Voyager* from 1942), and the off-screen association between cigarettes and movie stars goes back many decades (see Chesterfield ads below).

Film directors and script writers portray movie stars lighting up to imply a variety of desirable traits, such as being rebellious and cool. Cigarette placement in movies creates a desired association between the sex appeal and charisma of the star who is smoking and the cigarette being smoked.

As the website magazine *Slate* recently reported in a video slideshow chronicling smoking in the movies, over time cigarettes became a versatile form of shorthand for movie makers, “underscoring the venality of outlaws as often as it highlighted the masculinity of heroes.”<sup>2</sup>



This ad featuring actress Ellen Drew (from Paramount's *Reaching for the Sun*) appeared in the May 1941 *Better Homes & Gardens* magazine.



Actor (from the Warner Bros. production *The Voice of the Turtle*) and future president Ronald Reagan appeared in this Chesterfield ad in the March 15, 1948 edition of *Life* magazine.

These depictions impress on young minds the idea that if one wants to be popular and successful like the movie stars themselves or the characters they portray, smoking cigarettes can help one achieve those goals. The value of this marketing cannot be overstated.

“Portrayals of smoking in movies promote the same themes as other tobacco advertising: rebellion, independence, sexiness, wealth, power and celebration.”<sup>3</sup>

Examples of tobacco companies paying to have their products placed in films are numerous. In one infamous pay-off in 1983, Brown and Williamson paid US \$500,000 to Sylvester Stallone to smoke its cigarettes in five films, including *Rambo*. At the time, Brown & Williamson was owned by British American Tobacco, the parent of Canada’s Imperial Tobacco. According to leaked internal company papers, Philip Morris also supplied cigarettes to many films in the 1970s and 1980s, including the popular PG-rated films *Grease* and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, and the G-rated film *The Muppet Movie*. (It is important to note that Canada’s provincial film review boards and the U.S. have different film classification systems; for more information see page 9.)

In 2008, *Quantum of Solace* and *The Incredible Hulk*, at right, featured characters who smoked cigars. Both films were rated PG in Canada.

Beyoncé Knowles, below, smoking in the 2006 film *Dreamgirls*, rated PG.



Tobacco companies “voluntarily” agreed to stop product placement in movies in 1989. As with most voluntary agreements with the tobacco industry, it did not work. So in 1998, the Master Settlement Agreement outlawed tobacco companies in the U.S. from paying to have their products placed in films.

## The situation today: what’s the problem?

Despite this prohibition, smoking in movies has actually increased, especially in blockbuster films. Today it is still very common for leading actors and actresses to smoke, even in films with a PG rating (see examples below). This leads one to wonder whether payments to moviemakers are still being made, however covertly.

About 25% of contemporary movie characters depict smoking in major films, which is about twice as often as smoking was portrayed in the 1970s and 1980s, despite the fact that smoking in the real world has declined significantly since the 1970s. And smokers in movies are different than their real-life counterparts. They are usually white and affluent, whereas in the general population, smoking is disproportionately higher amongst those with a lower level of education and/or lower socio-economic status.

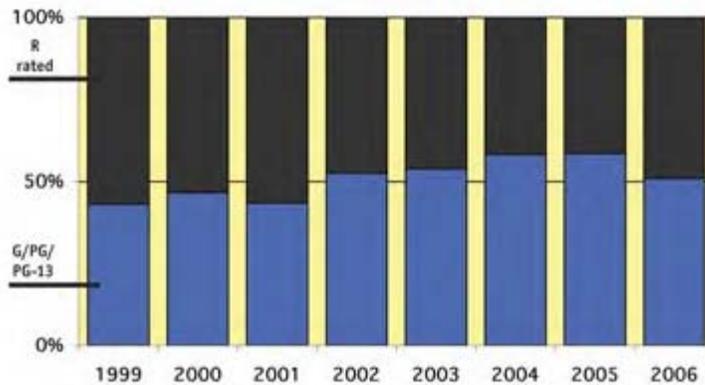
**PG-13 Movies that Included Smoking, 1999-2003**

|    | Studio             | Percentage of releases rated PG-13 that included smoking, 1999-2003 |
|----|--------------------|---|
| 1. | Walt Disney        | 88%   |
| 2. | Viacom (Paramount) | 85%   |
| 3. | News Corp. (Fox)   | 84%   |
| 4. | Dreamworks SKG     | 82%   |
| 5. | Sony Columbia      | 81%   |
| 6. | MGM                | 79%   |
| 7. | Universal*         | 73%   |
| 8. | Time Warner        | 68%   |

Adapted from data in "First run smoking presentations in U.S. movies 1999-2003," UCSF Centre for Tobacco Control Research and Education, March, 2004. Listed by corporate parent. \*GE completes acquisition of Universal in 2004.

Source: New York State Department of Health Tobacco Control Program. "Where There's Smoke: Reality Check Strikes Again. Action Guide." 2004.  
[www.smokefreemovies.ucsf.edu/pdf/WHERE\\_THERES\\_SMOKE.pdf](http://www.smokefreemovies.ucsf.edu/pdf/WHERE_THERES_SMOKE.pdf).

**Percent of all US films with smoking that were youth-rated G/PG/PG-13, 1999-2006<sup>11</sup>**



*Youth-rated, US-produced movies with smoking have outnumbered R-rated films with smoking since 2002.*

Graph taken from: [www.smokefreemovies.ucsf.edu/pdf/NCTOH%20Poster%2011x17.pdf](http://www.smokefreemovies.ucsf.edu/pdf/NCTOH%20Poster%2011x17.pdf).

Source of data: JR Polansky, SA Glantz. "First-Run Smoking Presentations in U.S. Movies 1999-2006." 1 April 2007. Center for Tobacco Control Research and Education. Tobacco Control Policy Making: United States. Paper MOVIES2006. <http://repositories.cdlib.org/ctcre/tcpmus/MOVIES2006>.



Actor Colin Farrell (at right) smoked regularly in the 2006 film *Cassandra's Dream*, directed by Woody Allen. The film was rated PG.

However prevalent smoking is in films, movies rarely portray accurately the long-term health consequences of an addiction to cigarettes. Almost without exception, moviegoers never see on the big screen the illness and death that cigarettes cause.<sup>4</sup>

Research examining the prevalence of smoking in films has accumulated in recent years. The National Cancer Institute (NCI) in the U.S. reviewed this evidence in 2008 and released a monograph which reached the following conclusion:

The depiction of smoking is pervasive in movies occurring in three-quarters or more of contemporary box-office hits. Identifiable cigarette brands appear in about one-third of movies.

### **The impact: a causal relationship between smoking in movies and youth uptake**

Policy makers concerned with public health have good reason to worry about all this smoking. Studies of middle and high school students in the U.S. have found that young teens are perhaps three times as likely to start smoking if they see smoking frequently in movies — “and that the less they see, the less likely they are to smoke.”<sup>5</sup>

Studies such as these conclude that there is a direct causal relationship between



Angela Bassett smokes a cigarette in *Akeelah and the Bee*, a 2006 film rated PG.

### smoking in the movies and youth smoking uptake:

The total weight of evidence from cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental studies indicates a causal relationship between exposure to movie smoking depictions and youth smoking initiation.<sup>6</sup>

Experts estimate as many as half of all new teen smokers start their addiction to cigarettes due to their exposure to smoking in movies.<sup>7</sup> This is significant. With 780,000 new teenagers starting to smoke annually in the U.S., 390,000 of them are delivered to the tobacco companies courtesy of Hollywood. In the decades to come, it is projected that 120,000 deaths per year will occur in the U.S. due to the youth uptake caused by smoking in the movies.

Few studies specific to Canada have been completed thus far, but the vast majority of movies shown here are made in the U.S. So the negative health impacts associated with Hollywood’s love affair with cigarettes are taking their toll in our country, too.<sup>8</sup>



Actress Susan Sarandon in the 2009 film *The Lovely Bones*, rated PG.

## What's been done to reduce exposure?

### *United States of America*

#### **The Smoke-Free Movies campaign**

This campaign is pushing for four voluntary changes to movie industry policy:

##### **1. Rate new smoking movies "R".**

"Any film that shows or implies tobacco should be rated "R." The only exceptions should be when the presentation of tobacco clearly and unambiguously reflects the dangers and consequences of tobacco use or is necessary to represent the smoking of a real historical figure."



Since the majority of money made from films is in the PG or PG-13 categories, the rationale for this measure is that moviemakers would simply stop showing tobacco in youth-rated films in order to ensure their movies are seen by the largest audience possible. It is estimated that an "R" rating for smoking would cut youth exposure to on-screen tobacco use by half.

##### **2. Certify no payoffs.**

"The producers should post a certificate in the closing credits declaring that nobody on the production received anything of value (cash money, free cigarettes or other gifts, free publicity, interest-free loans or anything else) from anyone in exchange for using or displaying tobacco."

The 1998 U.S. Master Settlement Agreement between major tobacco companies and state attorneys general prohibits tobacco companies from paying to have their products placed in films, but since that agreement smoking in films has increased dramatically. Rumours of "arms length" deals between Big Tobacco and movie makers persist. If no payoffs are occurring, producers should have no problem publicly declaring it at the end of their films.

##### **3. Require strong anti-smoking ads.**

"Studios and theaters should require a genuinely strong anti-smoking ad (not one produced by a tobacco company) to run before any film with any tobacco presence, in any distribution channel, regardless of its MPAA rating."

Evidence has shown that airing effective anti-smoking ads helps to inoculate viewers against smoking before they are exposed to smoking on screen. The ads will also help educate the 50% of youth who would continue to see smoking in films with an "R" rating.

##### **4. Stop identifying tobacco brands.**

"There should be no tobacco brand identification nor the presence of tobacco brand imagery (such as billboards) in the background of any movie scene."<sup>9</sup>

Featuring a specific brand in films is akin to advertising and could lead to more youth smoking that brand.

In 2009, the WHO published a paper which recommended that countries enact the four evidence-based policy solutions proposed by Smoke Free Movies.<sup>10</sup>

## **DVDanger**

In November 2007, this initiative was launched with the support of the Smoke Free Movies campaign along with various U.S. national health organizations in an attempt to convince leading DVD retailers to start labeling DVDs with smoking. The labeling would occur in the major retailers' online catalogues and on DVDs on store shelves. The retailers are also being asked to require that film studios include warnings on DVD packaging. Retailers targeted include Best Buy, Wal-Mart, Blockbuster and Target. For more information, see:

[www.smokefreemovies.ucsf.edu/pdf/DVDanger\\_09.pdf](http://www.smokefreemovies.ucsf.edu/pdf/DVDanger_09.pdf).

## **The Entertainment Industry Foundation (EIF)**

In July 2008, work by this organization led to six major studios (Paramount Pictures, Sony Pictures Entertainment, Twentieth Century Fox, Universal Pictures, Walt Disney Company and Warner Bros.) agreeing to include anti-smoking public service announcements (PSAs) produced by the California Health and Human Services Agency on millions of youth-rated DVDs of motion pictures that include scenes with tobacco use. For more info, see:

[www.eifoundation.org/press/release.asp?press\\_release\\_id=207](http://www.eifoundation.org/press/release.asp?press_release_id=207).

## **The Walt Disney Company**

The chain-smoking founder of the company which bears his name died in 1966 after being diagnosed with lung cancer. However, Walt Disney Pictures, Touchstone, and Miramax films, which are all owned by The Walt Disney Company, routinely showed smoking in

their movies into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But, in July 2007, The Walt Disney Company announced that it will no longer show cigarette smoking depictions in Disney branded family films and that it would discourage it in all its films. The company also said it will place an anti-smoking PSA on DVDs of future films that do depict smoking. It will also work with theatre owners to encourage them to show anti-smoking PSAs before the theatrical exhibition of any such film.<sup>11</sup>

## ***Thailand***

A law in Thailand requires that any program or movie broadcast on television showing cigarettes or cigarette smoking must pixilate the cigarettes so as to make them undecipherable. This is similar to what is done to people's faces on television news crime reports, so as to protect the identity of alleged criminals who are innocent until proven guilty.

## ***India***

The Indian film industry is the largest in the world (when considering the number of films produced and ticket sales), so the 2005 announcement that smoking would be banned in films and television programs was met with great resistance from the movie industry. Many within Indian civil society, including the arts community, also voiced opposition to the measure, arguing that the government order was an attack on freedom of expression and artistic rights. In January 2008, India's High Court in Delhi struck down the government order, ruling that depicting smoking was part of an artist's creative license.<sup>12</sup>

## *Canada*

- The **Ontario Tobacco-Free Network** (OTN) organized a meeting with the Ontario Film Review Board (OFRB) in October 2004. The OTN included Dr. Stan Glantz in its delegation and asked for ratings to be increased to '18 A' if there is smoking in films.
- In May 2008, the OTN, along with two youth advocates, met again with the OFRB. The film review board agreed to begin monitoring tobacco use in films. The OFRB is now listing 'tobacco use' under its 'Detailed Observations' of movies on its website.
- Between 2005-2009 youth action alliances held media events at the Toronto International Film Festival to raise awareness of their concerns with smoking in the movies. There have also been a lot of youth activities at the community level across Ontario, usually in February leading up to the Academy Awards, as part of International Week of Action for Smokefree Movies.
- The **"Don't be a target!"** campaign was run by seven public health units in central west Ontario in 2009. The campaign tried to raise awareness amongst youth and their parents that there is a causal relationship between smoking scenes in movies and youth smoking initiation. The campaign included short warning clips aired before movies at 11 Cineplex theatres, including in Brantford, Hamilton, Kitchener, Waterloo, Guelph, Oakville, Orangeville and St. Catharine's. For more info, see <http://youthtarget.ca>.
- In 2009, the **Quebec Council on Smoking and Health** launched a campaign with comedian Jici Lauzon to draw attention to the problem of smoking in the movies. People are asked to visit the French website [www.filmsansfiltre.ca](http://www.filmsansfiltre.ca) to nominate Quebec and foreign films for their responsible portrayal of smoking (Oxygen award) and for their exaggerated and unrealistic portrayal of tobacco use (Ashtray Award). The Oxygen and Ashtray Awards are part of a multi-component campaign launched by the Quebec Council in the fall of 2008, to raise awareness about the true impact of on-screen smoking on youth. The group Commando Oxygen will be working to increase participation in the campaign among high school students. In January 2010, the Council ran ads before films began in 18 movie theatres throughout Quebec as well as magazine ads and ads on various websites. The Council has also met with Quebec film directors in an effort to raise awareness and gain support. If enough public support can be generated, the Council may push for legislative change, such as an automatic '18 A' rating for films depicting tobacco use.

## Possible future options for action in Canada

- Conduct a letter writing campaign to the provincial ministers responsible for film review boards in Canada. Organize a delegation and presentation (including a high profile Canadian actor) to educate the minister about smoking in movies. Ask for '18 A' ratings for films that have smoking (in order to see the films, persons younger than 18 would have to be accompanied by an adult).
- Conduct a letter writing campaign to the film review board in your province. Organize a delegation and presentation (include a high profile Canadian actor) to educate board members. Ask for '18 A' ratings for films that have smoking.
- Ask your local/regional theatre managers to voluntarily show health-related tobacco advertising before films that depict smoking. Or, have your local health unit make media buys in theatres to show health-related tobacco ads before films.
- Send letters to the heads of the Ontario theatre chains; ask them to show anti-tobacco advertising before films that depict smoking (AMC Theatres, Alliance Atlantis Cinemas, Cineplex Entertainment, Empire Theatres, IMAX Theatres, Rainbow Cinemas, Stinson Theatres).
- Lobby the Motion Picture Theatre Associations of Canada and ask them to require all theatres to show anti-tobacco advertising before films that depict smoking.
- Sign the Global Petition to *Keep smoking out of youth-rated movies*:  
<http://www.thepetitionsite.com/takeaction/870523336?z00m=21617&z00m=21617>.
- Write the president of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA, [www.mpa.org](http://www.mpa.org)) and demand that smoking be eliminated from G, PG and PG-13 movies. To ensure that your letter is not thrown in the garbage, send a copy of your letter to the editor of *The New York Times*, who will undoubtedly be writing more editorials on this subject.

## Difference between the U.S. and Canadian rating systems

Canada’s provincial film review boards and the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) use different but similar systems when rating a film’s suitability for audiences (see below). To further illustrate the similarities in these ratings, consider this OFRB comparison of its ‘18A’ classification to the MPAA’s ‘Restricted’ rating:

“In Ontario, no one under 18 years can attend the exhibition of a Restricted movie. In the U.S., while their NC-17 rating restricts admittance to persons 18 years or older, anyone under the age of 17 years can go into a Restricted movie as long as he or she is accompanied by an adult. This is similar to Ontario’s 18A classification.”

It is also important to note that most provinces and territories in Canada have their own film review boards; each classifies films somewhat differently. Some provinces and territories avoid duplication by using the film review board of a nearby province to classify films. For more information visit the [Media Awareness Network](#) website.

Discussions related to harmonizing the rating systems, by creating one federal classification board in Canada, have taken place, but not all provinces are supportive.

| Motion Picture Association of America rating system   |   | Ontario Film Review Board rating system  |  |
|---|---|--|--|
| General Audiences<br>            | Nothing that would offend parents for viewing by children.  |  Suitable for all  | Suitable for viewers of all ages.  |
| Parental Guidance Suggested<br>  | Parents urged to give “parental guidance.” May contain some material parents might not like for their young children. |  Parental guidance advised                               | Parental guidance is advised. Theme of content may not be suitable for all children.   |
| Parents Strongly Cautioned<br>   | Parents are urged to be cautious. Some material may be inappropriate for pre-teenagers.                               |  Persons younger than 14 must be accompanied by an adult | Suitable for viewing by persons 14 years of age and older. Persons under 14 must be accompanied by an adult. May contain: violence, coarse language and/or sexually suggestive scenes.                               |
| Restricted<br>                   | Contains some adult material. Parents are urged to learn about the film before taking their young children with them. |  Persons younger than 18 must be accompanied by an adult | Suitable for viewing by persons 18 years of age and older. Persons under 18 may attend but must be accompanied by an adult. May contain: explicit violence, frequent coarse language, sexual activity and/or horror. |
| No One 17 And Under Admitted<br> | Patently adult. Children are not admitted.  |  Restricted to persons 18 or older                       | Admittance restricted to persons 18 years of age and over. Content not suitable for minors. May contain: frequent use of sexual activity, brutal/graphic violence, intense horror and/or other disturbing content.   |

## Websites and other resources for further information

- Smoke Free Movies. Organizing Tools. [www.smokefreemovies.ucsf.edu/actnow/organizing\\_tools.html](http://www.smokefreemovies.ucsf.edu/actnow/organizing_tools.html)
- Scene Smoking: Thumbs Up! Thumbs Down! <http://scenesmoking.org/>
- Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada. Tobacco In Movies. [www.smoke-free.ca/movies/index.htm](http://www.smoke-free.ca/movies/index.htm)
- Health Canada. Smokin' Movies. [www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hc-ps/tobac-tabac/youth-jeunes/scoop-primeur/indust\\_cinema-eng.php](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hc-ps/tobac-tabac/youth-jeunes/scoop-primeur/indust_cinema-eng.php)
- Ontario Tobacco-Free Network. Smoking in Movies. [www.theotn.org/index.php?id=37](http://www.theotn.org/index.php?id=37)
- Tobacco Free California. Undo Smoking in Movies. [http://tobaccofreeca.com/undo\\_tobacco\\_near\\_you.html#undo-smoking-in-movies](http://tobaccofreeca.com/undo_tobacco_near_you.html#undo-smoking-in-movies)

## Video Resources

- Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. Test movie trailer. <http://ca.youtube.com/watch?v=21FxWHP73J4>. This clip is intended to be shown in theatres before films that depict smoking. For more info, see: <http://ladph.blogspot.com/>. Read section "Movie trailer test," 14 November 2007.
- Tobacco Free California. See the "Icons" ad, which began appearing on youth-rated DVDs in the U.S. and Canada in 2008. [http://tobaccofreeca.com/undo\\_tobacco\\_near\\_you.html#undo-smoking-in-movies](http://tobaccofreeca.com/undo_tobacco_near_you.html#undo-smoking-in-movies).
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## Recommended reading

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- Stupid.ca. “Big Lies. Exposing big tobacco on the big screen.” Government of Ontario.  
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