

Story of Inequity

About this Website

Introduction

The California Tobacco Control Program (CTCP) launched the *Story of Inequity* website in May 2018. The *Story of Inequity* website paints a picture of the tobacco use problem among several of California's vulnerable populations and serves as a tool to hold CTCP accountable for preventing and reducing tobacco use among these groups.

The tobacco industry spends hundreds of millions of dollars each year promoting images of attractive, sexy, successful, and powerful people smoking, vaping, and chewing tobacco products. The *Story of Inequity* seeks to challenge that image through an untraditional approach combining arresting imagery, quotes from tobacco industry documents, and evidence-based stories for each population that explain why inequities exist.

In designing the website, we purposefully sought to create a user experience which engenders discomfort through dark, foreboding images that illustrate the tobacco industry's true motivations and intent as told through industry documents. The imagery brings the industry's words to life. It is intended to create a visceral response to heighten awareness about the tobacco use problem within vulnerable populations and the tobacco industry's predatory practices, which lure people into using its addictive, lethal, albeit legal product.

To learn more about how the website was developed and the imagery used, please read further.

Task

The *Story of Inequity* website was created in response to stakeholder input received from a statewide [Health Equity Summit](#) in 2013 and four subsequent regional [Advancing Health Equity Roundtables](#) in 2014. Premised on the adage, "what gets measured gets changed," stakeholders expressed a need for accessible data describing tobacco-related disparities in California and a tool to promote accountability for making progress toward health equity. As we dove into the task, we discovered it was complex and challenging.

Vision

Our vision was to create a tool that would provide meaningful information about the tobacco use epidemic among California's vulnerable populations, engage the user, and be useful as a tool to monitor progress towards reducing and eliminating tobacco-related disparities.

Solution

Identifying the Vulnerable Populations to Highlight

The *Story of Inequity* website focuses on eight populations and communities. The eight groups were narrowed from a list of 13 priority population groups identified in the Tobacco Education and Research Oversight Committee (TEROC) [2015-17 Master Plan: Changing Landscape – Countering New Threats](#). Stakeholder input obtained through an electronic survey and listening sessions, a review of data availability, and planned CTCP statewide tobacco-related disparity initiatives were used to prioritize the groups highlighted. Important vulnerable groups identified in the *TEROC Master Plan*, such as people who were formerly incarcerated, active duty military and military veterans, and persons with disabilities were not included, largely because CTCP surveillance systems currently lack large enough sample sizes or a means to identify some of these groups. The eight groups focused upon in the *Story of Inequity* website are as follows:

1. African American/Black
2. American Indian
3. Asian/Pacific Islander
4. Hispanic/Latino
5. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ)
6. Low-Income
7. People with Mental Health Challenges
8. Rural Communities

Identifying the Tobacco-Related Data Indicators to Highlight

The next challenge to be solved was the selection of tobacco-related indicators. We wanted the data to tell a story, but it was crucial that the data relate back to CTCP's tobacco control efforts and overall program evaluation. A review of CTCP's logic model identified 30 indicators. In keeping with the idea that the data needed to tell a story, the indicators were categorized into five groups. To avoid overwhelming website users with data, feedback from a stakeholder survey helped prioritize the data and reduced the indicators to 18. The indicators were grouped as follows:

1. Adult Tobacco Use
2. Youth Tobacco Use
3. Secondhand Smoke
4. Availability of Tobacco and Tobacco Industry Influence
5. Cessation

The indicator data are cited and a methodology report further identifies the data sources and methodology used to create the measures displayed.

Data Visualization

The original data visualization concept was to present the data in the form of a *Report Card*. Multiple health and tobacco control report cards from around the nation were reviewed and analyzed. We developed many methods for determining the grading methodology for each indicator and then for displaying the data. Several report cards presenting grades and heat maps were mocked-up. However, negative stakeholder feedback resulted in abandoning this concept. Overwhelming, the *Report Card* format was perceived as “grading” the population, blaming them for the tobacco use problem, and pitting one population group against another.

With this in mind, the concept evolved to placing the tobacco-related disparity data into context. First, we wanted to expose the root cause of the tobacco use problem by shedding light on the tobacco industry’s use of philanthropy, community sponsorships, misleading research, predatory advertising and placement practices, distribution of free cigarettes, and co-opting of cultural practices, icons, and imagery to promote and sustain tobacco use among vulnerable populations. Tobacco industry documents, focus groups, and stakeholder listening groups were crucial in selecting the stories and refining the imagery used throughout the website.

For users to understand the relevance of the data, we felt that population-specific data needed a comparison measure. Since we learned from stakeholder input that comparing one group to another was perceived negatively, we searched national data sets and prevention agendas such as [Let’s Get Healthy California](#) and [Healthy People 2020](#) to identify comparison data or targets that might be used as a comparison, (e.g. Healthy People 2020 target for adult smoking prevalence is 12.0%). However, our review of these sources found that they lacked comparable data or targets for most of the selected *Story of Inequity* tobacco-related indicators. Especially lacking were comparisons for tobacco industry influencer indicators (e.g., the portion of stores that sell menthol cigarettes) and community level indicators (e.g., the density of tobacco retailers).

The solution we arrived at was to compare each vulnerable population specific data indicator against that of the general population. The general population data reflects a composition of all the targeted audiences. We considered creating a general population metric minus the specific vulnerable population, but this was overly complex and posed a barrier to updating the website’s data. The general population data comparison is not ideal, as the general population data do not necessarily reflect positive health outcomes. However, these data provide a reasonable comparison and a means for the website user to put the population-specific data into context.

Color coded thumbs highlight when a data point for the vulnerable population group is better or worse than the general population. A green “thumbs up” means the data are better than the general population and a red “thumbs down” means that the data are worse than that of the general population.

Website Imagery

Overall

A great deal of thought and research guided the imagery used in the website. The *Story of Inequity* website uses a sharp contrast between how people who identify within these populations may see themselves with how the tobacco industry has referred to these groups in industry documents.

- **Use of light and dark imagery:** The “How You See You” photos are purposefully light and use positive imagery to show populations as they may be in their everyday life, while the “How the Tobacco Industry Sees You” photos are purposefully dark and use sinister imagery drawn from real stories describing how the tobacco industry targeted each group.

- **Use of metaphors:** Photos metaphorically depict egregious acts by the tobacco industry. For example, the American Indian page describes how the tobacco industry co-opts American Indian culture and icons to market tobacco products. The “How the Tobacco Industry Sees You” page depicts a stereotypical representation of American Indian culture including a “Pocahontas Doll” representation of an American Indian woman, a traditional Plains Indian headdress, and other cultural symbols. The tobacco industry’s use of cultural appropriation and stereotypes in their own advertising and marketing showcases, at best, a lack of cultural responsiveness, and at worst, perpetuates racist ideas.
- **Data driven:** Casting for the images to represent each population group was evidence-based featuring an individual from a sub-group within each population with the highest smoking prevalence rate. For example, a woman is featured on the LGBTQ page because people who identify as lesbian have higher rates of smoking than men who identify as gay.

Using Imagery To Help Tell The Story

The Story of Inequity begins with our hero -- a young girl who personifies the light vs dark symbolism used throughout the website. In one image, she is portrayed as a healthy young girl and in the other image, as the target of Big Tobacco, which wants to get her to start smoking, and to start as young as possible.

As the user scrolls the webpage, each vulnerable population segment begins with a light image of “How You See You” and a brief description of one of the most egregious tactics perpetrated against the population by the tobacco industry. The intent behind the tactic is exposed when the user scrolls over the “See the Full Story” button to reveal the dark imagery of “How the Tobacco Industry Sees You.”

The website describes historical and recent tobacco industry tactics. We felt it was important to include historical tactics because the consequences of these tactics is reflected in today’s tobacco use problem. The symbolism used to portray the tobacco industry’s true sentiment toward each population is described below.

1. **American Indian:** This narrative and imagery depict how the tobacco industry misappropriates American Indian cultural icons to sell commercial tobacco products. The imagery contrasts an attractive, healthy professional woman with the tobacco industry’s portrayal of the “Pocahontas Doll” stereotype, traditional headdress, and other cultural symbols.
2. **African American/Black:** This narrative and imagery depict the tobacco industry’s excessive targeting of African American/Black communities with deceptive ads, price discounting, sponsorship of events, and links to prominent African American leaders. The imagery contrasts a distinguished man overwhelmed by the bombardment of tobacco industry marketing seeking to addict him or maintain his addiction to this deadly product.
3. **Asian/Pacific Islander:** This narrative and imagery depict how the tobacco industry perceives the diverse groups within the Asian/Pacific Islander population as a single, clone-like group that is “genetically predisposed to smoking” instead of an amalgam of diversity. The imagery contrasts an individual exercising his healthy passion for a sport with a group of clones who are unable to exercise their choice to be free from a deadly addiction to tobacco products.
4. **Hispanic/Latino:** This narrative and imagery depict the tobacco industry’s subversive use of lobbying and philanthropy to buy goodwill within the Hispanic/Latino population which contributes to product discounting that maintains the affordability of tobacco products. The imagery contrasts a community leader with one who has unwittingly become a puppet of the tobacco industry.

- 5. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ):** This narrative and imagery expose how the tobacco industry creates relationships and goodwill with the LGBTQ community by sponsoring community and pride events, while secretly using derogatory terms such as “scum” to describe this community in their marketing plans. The imagery contrasts an empowered, serious-minded Lesbian woman with a darker one where she would be considered a “wrong-doer” in society or “scum” the way that the tobacco industry describes this group in their documents.
- 6. Low Income:** This narrative and imagery depict how the tobacco industry targets low-income populations to addict those who can least afford their product by discounting products, or even giving them away for free in public housing. The imagery contrasts a hardworking, blue-collar man with one who is dejected by an endless supply of tobacco products and whose income vanishes under a pile of cigarette packs.
- 7. People with Mental Health Challenges:** This narrative and imagery highlight how the tobacco industry promoted smoking in psychiatric settings by providing cigarettes, blocking hospital smoking bans, and funding misleading research in order to say smoking can relieve anxiety and stress. It contrasts an active alert middle-aged woman with a symbolic representation of the tobacco industry’s promotion of smoking as a “medication” to relieve anxiety.
- 8. Rural Communities:** This narrative and imagery highlights how the tobacco industry exploits rural cultural values such as independence and freedom to market its products. It contrasts a rugged rural man with symbolic imagery conveying that the tobacco industry is literally choking the life out of rural communities.

Website Functionality

- To promote equity, the website includes a random sort of the population groups that reorders the groups so that no one group remains at the top or the bottom of the webpage.
- Photo galleries with examples of the tobacco industry’s targeted marketing and advertising are displayed on each population group’s page to showcase the stark difference between the images we see out in the world with how the tobacco industry actually describes these groups “behind closed doors.”
- A downloadable print report function provides the opportunity to share the information through educational outreach activities.
- Engagement is promoted through a social share feature and the ability to send letters to local elected officials.

Target Audience Engagement In Developing The Story Of Inequity

There was extensive engagement of representatives from the populations featured in the *Story of Inequity* website to select populations featured, tobacco-related indicators, tobacco industry stories and review imagery and website copy. Additionally, public health professionals who work with these groups and advocates provided valuable feedback. Input was provided through an electronic survey, focus groups, face-to-face meetings, and webinar style listening sessions.