

# “A Billion Dollar Lie: We must not take our eyes off Big Tobacco”

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9/28/2017

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Sep 27



Is anything less believable than Big Tobacco investing in a smoke-free future? It’s the latest publicity gambit—a billion dollar lie—from Philip Morris International, Inc. (PMI) which is looking to rebrand themselves as fighting for health.

Tobacco kills seven million people a year—the leading cause of preventable death—and global tobacco-related deaths will number one billion this century without urgent action by governments. For more than fifty years the tobacco industry has used misleading tactics to fool consumers into buying addictive and deadly products. Just recently they have been exposed targeting the world’s most vulnerable—from [war-torn countries](#) of Africa and the Middle East to marketing to children in low-income countries.

But the industry has a problem. Consumers and governments are catching on to decades of deceit and corruption and they are losing influence. Countries are implementing proven policies like smoke-free laws and taxation and trying new ones, like plain packaging. Now, Philip Morris International, Inc., (PMI) recently made its most cynical bet yet—announcing \$1 billion investment in a “healthier future.” They are donating \$80 million a year for twelve years to a new “Foundation for a Smoke-Free World.” This billion dollar investment represents about one dollar for every person tobacco will kill this century. Meanwhile, The Tobacco Atlas calculated that Big Tobacco earns about \$5000 in profit for each annual death that occurs.

This formidable-sounding investment is masterful public relations, as it actually represents just .1% of their

annual \$80 billion revenue. Just last year, PMI spent a whopping \$6 billion in marketing, administration and research with aim to sell deadly cigarettes. Given their profits, a billion dollars is an easy price for the tobacco companies to pay to regain the credibility they need to sell to consumers and influence government regulation.

There's a proven path to a smoke-free future, and it's the tobacco industry that is standing in the way of proven, sensible public health interventions. If they are really concerned with a smoke-free future, they should stop marketing deadly products to children and opposing government regulations.

We must not take our eyes off the tobacco industry.

We've seen this script before—the tobacco industry announces a new initiative proclaiming it wants to reduce the health impacts of its deadly business, but really only promotes its products. A look at PMI's 2016 Annual Report shows their true priorities—the vast majority of the effort, revenues, profits and brand equity are tied to combustible tobacco.

Let's be outraged, yes—but not surprised. In the 1950s, tobacco companies scrambled to add filters to cigarettes in response to scientific reports showing just how dangerous smoking could be. But despite ads claiming these filters were safer, the filters actually contained asbestos and turned out to add to the toxic product. In the 1990s, the public was outraged to see tobacco industry executives lie under oath to U.S. Congress, claiming cigarettes were not addictive, all while hiding decades of evidence that proved otherwise. Today, PMI's investment in the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World is just another 'Big Lie' out of the Big Tobacco playbook.

Consumers and governments shouldn't fall for PMI's 'investment in a healthier world,' nor should organizations working towards a truly smoke-free world lose sight of the billion dollar investments that are still being made in selling dangerous products to the world's most vulnerable groups. This latest public relations move is a mechanism to distract the public from the industry's bottom line: making profit off of selling a deadly product to as many people—and as quickly—as possible.

The stories we hear everyday—stories of lost loved ones and children stricken by cancer and other tobacco-related diseases—are a direct result of the industry's neglect for the basic human right to lead a healthy life. Low- and middle-income countries in particular are paying the price for the tobacco industry's aggressive marketing of products that lead to illness, poverty and premature death.

This recent announcement is an urgent reminder that we need to dramatically increase our efforts in implementing proven tobacco control measures and that the hard work must continue as we fight for a tobacco-free world.

*Jose Luis Castro is President and CEO of [Vital Strategies](#), a global health organization that seeks to accelerate progress on the world's most pressing health problems. Castro also leads [The International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease](#).*