Tobacco firms to begin airing court-mandated, self-critical ads

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Oct. 3 (UPI) -- Major tobacco companies will begin airing self-critical ads on television as part of a settlement of a 1999 lawsuit with the Justice Department.

Altria Group Inc. and British American Tobacco will run the commercials, between 30 and 45 seconds long, in prime time five days a week for 52 weeks mostly on ABC, CBS or NBC, according to The Wall Street Journal on Monday. They also will include campaigns in newspapers and on company-owned websites.

These ads will look like disclosure statements at the end of a pharmaceutical ad, displaying court-mandated text in black on a white screen with a voice narration. There won't be any graphic images.

The advertisements confront smoking's addictiveness, the health risks of smoking and secondhand smoke, cigarette engineering designed to promote optimal nicotine intake and the insignificant or non-existent health benefits of "low-tar" and "light" cigarettes.

One reads: "More people die every year from smoking than from murder, AIDS, suicide, drugs, car crashes, and alcohol, combined."

Altria estimated it will spend $31 million on the ad spots. Altria is the parent company of cigarette-maker Philip Morris USA, which includes top brands Marlboro and Virginia Slims. British American Tobacco's top brands include Kent and Lucky Strike.

Altria and British American Tobacco were defendants in the original 1999 lawsuit, which said the tobacco firms' statements on cigarettes and their health effects were deceptive dating to 1953.

In 2006, U.S. District Judge Gladys Kessler ordered the cigarette-makers to publish the corrective statements after an eight-month civil trial.

The lawsuit initially sought up to $280 billion but a federal appeals court threw out the monetary claims.

Murray Garnick, Altria's executive vice president and general counsel, said in a statement that "this industry has changed dramatically over the last 20 years, including becoming regulated by the FDA, which we supported. We're focused on the future and, with FDA in place, working to develop less risky tobacco products."

Tobacco companies have long been preventing from buying advertisements for their products on television or on billboards.

Altria Group Inc. and British American Tobacco are among the biggest tobacco corporations, which also include Philip Morris International, Japan Tobacco and Imperial Brands. Altria spun off its non-U.S. brands as Phillip Morris International in 2008.