

WARNING LABELS

Countering Industry Arguments

Claim: health warning labels are ineffective.

TRUTH: Health warning labels in many countries are ineffective because they do not meet size, message, or graphic image requirements. Instead, they are small, unnoticeable and provide unclear or misleading information. The most effective warning labels are large, clear, and cover at least 50% of the package’s principal areas (front and back of the product package). Messages should include the magnitude of specific risks and should include pictures, especially to cater to audiences with low literacy.^{2,3} Research shows that effective warning labels increase knowledge about risks associated with smoking, and can persuade smokers to quit.^{4,5}

Claim: Smokers already know the risks of smoking.

TRUTH: Studies show that a large proportion of smokers have an inadequate knowledge of the health effects associated with smoking and underestimate the severity and magnitude of those risks.⁶ An understanding of both the risks and severity of smoking are important factors in motivating smokers to quit. Picture-based warnings can be effective in conveying the severity of those risks.^{7,8,9,10,11} Smokers report that they receive more information about the risks of smoking from the tobacco product package than from any other source except television.^{12,13}

Claim: Graphic warnings ‘demonize’ smokers.

TRUTH: Graphic warnings do not ‘demonize’ smokers. Studies show that large pictorial warnings are supported by a majority of non-smokers and most smokers.^{14,15} Graphic warnings provide smokers with helpful information on the health effects, and support for large graphic warnings actually increases over time.¹⁶ Smokers living in countries that already have large picture warnings, such as Canada, report wanting to see more health information on their packages.¹⁷

Claim: Large graphic health warnings violate tobacco manufacturers’ right to property, including trademark protections.

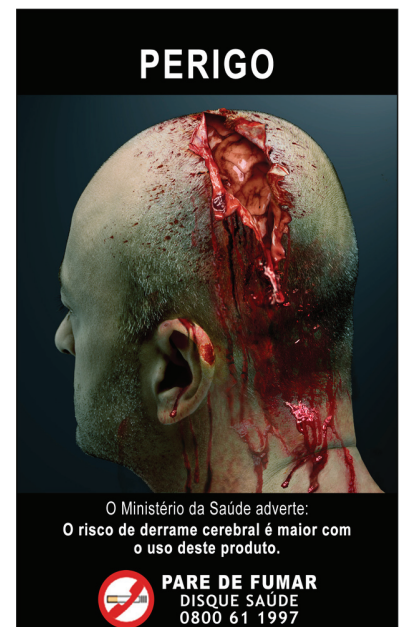
TRUTH: Although the tobacco industry makes this claim, governments in many countries have rejected it and have enacted strong laws requiring large, pictorial warnings. This has been done, in the vast majority of instances, without legal challenge from the tobacco industry. Rather, legal challenges based on these claims have been rare, and courts have ruled against the tobacco companies. For example, the European Union Court of Justice ruled against the British American Tobacco (BAT) and Japan Tobacco International (JTI) argument that the Directive’s¹⁸ decision to require large warnings and ban misleading information violated the right to property, including trademark protections.¹⁹ The Canadian Supreme Court rejected

“Tobacco manufacturers respect the right of health officials to offer opinions on matters relating to public health. Under the circumstances, tobacco companies feel that warning labels are redundant and unnecessary.”¹

—The Tobacco Institute, 1980



Warning label, Egypt



Warning label, Brazil

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a tobacco industry claim that pictorial warnings violated their freedom of expression under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, finding no unjustifiable infringement.^{20,21}

Claim: People here buy single cigarettes, they won't even see packages.

TRUTH: Warning labels should be adapted for all types of tobacco packaging not just the cigarette pack.²² If the health messages are large and clear enough, people will see them when they are displayed for sale, when they are taken out of smokers' pockets and purses, and when they are discarded. Warning labels are one of the cheapest and widest-reaching forms of public education available, whether people are buying single cigarettes or packs.^{23,24,25}

Claim: Many people can't read so warning labels won't work.

TRUTH: Pictures must accompany text messages. Pictures can graphically illustrate the health harms of smoking and secondhand smoke and can be understood even without text.^{26,27,28}

Claim: Rotating messages can be too expensive and difficult to maintain.

TRUTH: The technology required to print color warnings is widespread.²⁹ Tobacco companies change their packaging all the time to promote new products, new flavors, and other new forms of deception. It is no more difficult or expensive to add new warning labels.³⁰

Claim: If the government wants to put out health warning messages, it should use billboards or TV commercials.

TRUTH: Tobacco packaging has universal reach, and the cost of package warnings is paid for by tobacco companies, not government. Further, the combination of a mass media campaign and enhanced package warnings is more effective than a mass media campaign on its own.³¹



Warning label, Singapore



Warning label, Thailand

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