Beware of Tobacco in Sheep’s Clothing

By Drenda Niemann
Lewis and Clark County Health Officer

You’ve gotta give the tobacco industry credit: it’s innovative and persistent. Unfortunately, it’s devious too.

With the success of public health efforts to discourage smoking, tobacco manufacturers are focusing their efforts on hooking new customers. And who better to entice than our children, who have many years of tobacco use ahead of them – at least until they succumb to its poisons.

The tobacco industry has determined that 90 percent of tobacco users start before the age of 18. So, they target much of the $1 million an hour they spend on advertising in this country toward our kiddos.

Since it’s now against the law to advertise cigarettes on TV, they spend most of their ad budget in the stores that sell their products, like gas stations, convenience stores, pharmacies, and grocery stores. This is known as “point-of-sale advertising.” They make their products even more attractive by using product placement, candy flavors, bright colors, and price discounts.

Product Placement

When you walk into a place that sells tobacco, you may notice that you’re practically drowning in tobacco marketing. Some places even devote a “power wall” to all those products. Others are displayed on the counter and near candy and snacks. Signs and ads are often placed lower than 4 feet, at eye level for children.

According to the U.S. Surgeon General, the cigarette industry spends $726 million a year on product placement, while the smokeless tobacco industry spends $64 million. The reason is obvious: placing tobacco products next to candy makes them more visible and appealing to children.

Candy Flavors

Another tactic you may notice are tobacco products, including e-cigarettes – that look and taste like candy, with flavors like fruit punch, strawberry milkshake, and blue raspberry. Tobacco magnates know that kids will be tempted to try them.
In fact, flavors are one of the biggest reasons why kids start using tobacco. Helena School Superintendent Tyler Ream, a member of the City-County Board of Health, confirmed this at a recent meeting. He said that, in his administrative experience, almost all tobacco products confiscated from students in our local schools are flavored.

The board went on to support unanimously a City of Helena proposal to ban self-service displays of tobacco products and the sale of flavored tobacco in stores other than those that cater to adults only.

If anecdotal evidence isn’t enough for you, the nonprofit Truth Campaign surveyed tobacco users aged 12 to 17 and found that about 80 percent reported that the first product they used was flavored.

**Packaging Colors**

Tobacco products packaged in bright, neon colors are another point-of-sale tactic. The vivid hues make tobacco look harmless, like gum and candy. Packaging designs mimic those of snacks and mints. Tobacco marketers know this will attract young people’s attention.

**Price Discounts**

Have you ever looked around a store and seen buy-one-get-one discounts for tobacco products? How about coupons?

According to the Truth Campaign, “The tobacco industry spent over $7 billion on price discounts and coupons for cigarettes in 2014 – its largest marketing expenditure that year.”

Lowering the price of tobacco products makes them more affordable for youth to begin using. A 2012 Surgeon General report concluded that “the industry’s extensive use of price-reducing promotions has led to higher rates of tobacco use among young people than would have occurred in the absence of these promotions.”

Coupons, discounts, and other price-reducing promotions make it easier for youth to afford tobacco products.

**Unfortunately They Work**

Colors, flavors, price discounts, product placement – unfortunately these point-of-sale tactics work to get children to try tobacco. A 2010 study reported in the journal Pediatrics found that teens are twice as likely to start smoking if they visit a store with point-of-sale tobacco advertising at least twice a week.

Don’t be fooled by the tobacco industry’s tricks! Tobacco is no treat!

The variety of flavors, brightly colored packaging, and youthful styling are all marketing tactics to get our children addicted to nicotine. It’s our job to support policies that protect our children and teach them to make healthy decisions that will serve them well for the rest of their lives.