



HHS Public Access

Author manuscript

Tob Control. Author manuscript; available in PMC 2024 July 01.

Published in final edited form as:

Tob Control. 2023 July ; 32(4): 528–529. doi:10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2021-056899.

Cross-Promotion of Nicotine Pouches by Leading Cigarette Brands

Eugene M. Talbot, MPH¹, Daniel P. Giovenco, PhD, MPH², Rachel Grana, PhD, MPH³, Mary Hrywna, PhD, MPH^{1,4}, Ollie Ganz, DrPh, MPH^{1,4}

¹Rutgers Biomedical and Health Sciences, Rutgers Center for Tobacco Studies, New Brunswick, New Jersey, USA

²Department of Sociomedical Sciences, Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, New York, New York, USA

³Division of Cancer Control and Population Sciences, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland, USA

⁴Department of Health Behavior, Society and Policy, Rutgers School of Public Health, Piscataway, New Jersey, USA

Tobacco-free nicotine pouches are a new class of smokeless tobacco products that experienced precipitous sales¹ increases since their national US market entry in 2016². Between 2016 and 2019, annual unit sales of nicotine pouches increased from approximately 100,000 to over 46 million. The pouches contain a powdered mix of nicotine, flavoring, sweeteners, and binders; are used in a manner similar to snus (i.e., placed between the lip and gum); and are sold in a variety of nicotine strengths and flavors. These products are marketed as containing “tobacco-derived” or “tobacco-free” nicotine and nicotine salts, and are described in product marketing as “spitless,” “smokeless,” and “tobacco leaf free.”³ The most prominent brands in today’s marketplace are owned by leading tobacco companies⁴: Swedish Match owns Zyn, British American Tobacco sells Lyft and VELO⁵ (soon to be consolidated under the single branding VELO), and Rogue is owned by Swisher International. In 2019, Altria acquired and began international marketing of the brand on!⁶

Recently, crossover advertising of nicotine pouch products was observed among leading brands of combustible cigarettes. For example, on November 4th, 2020, routine website surveillance captured a banner ad for on! nicotine pouches on the Marlboro website. The product is described as a “smoke-free alternative” and a convenient way to find “[nicotine]

Corresponding author: 303 George St, Suite 500, New Brunswick, NJ 08901 USA, et304@cts.rutgers.edu.

Contributors DPG and OG conceptualized the idea. EMT wrote the first draft and DPG, RG, MH, and OG provided input on subsequent drafts. All authors contributed equally and have approved the final manuscript.

Publisher's Disclaimer: Disclaimer The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of NIH or FDA.

Competing interests None declared.

Patient consent for publication Not required.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

satisfaction” while socializing indoors. The image shows a mixed group of younger adults, enjoying drinks and snacks in a relaxing indoor environment (Figure 1).

Similarly, a direct email sent to Camel consumers in April 2021 included promotional materials for both Camel’s weekly coupon offerings and an invitation to “explore the nicotine options from our friends at VELO” (Figure 2). The image shows a person surfing, an intense activity where using combustible tobacco would not be possible; as the advertising mentions, VELO can be used “anytime, anywhere.” The ad further states that VELO is available in “4 [nicotine] strengths and 14 amazing flavors” and offers a price reduction on a VELO Welcome Bundle. “VELO” branding is used for nicotine lozenges, as well as pouches, and both are pictured in Figure 2.

Cross promotion has been used before with noncombustible products, particularly in direct-to-consumer marketing. On various direct mail items collected in the Trinkets & Trash archive (www.trinketsandtrash.org), Camel Snus has been advertised alongside Camel Crush cigarettes. Before the brand switched to digital coupons, direct mail would include coupons for both its snus and cigarette lines⁷. A similar crossover campaign was launched for Grizzly moist snuff and Vuse electronic cigarettes, both owned by Reynolds American Inc. Emails and direct mail from the company combined coupon offers for both its smokeless and e-cigarette products. An analysis of cigar direct mail advertising found that over 70% of Swisher Sweets direct mail ads included promotions for e-cigarettes⁸.

With the co-marketing of Marlboro/on! and Camel/VELO, Altria and Reynolds American Inc. are taking advantage of combustible tobacco traffic and their large combustible tobacco customer base to advertise these newer products. Moreover, amid declining cigarette sales, tobacco companies may be attempting to shift their consumer base from cigarettes to other nicotine-containing products. Both companies have submitted Premarket Tobacco Product Applications (PMTA) for their nicotine pouch products. If they ultimately gain FDA marketing authorization, they may also seek FDA authorization to market the products as reduced risk, following Swedish Match’s success in gaining Modified Risk Tobacco Product (MRTP) authorization for General Snus. As such, adults who use the companies’ tobacco products may be persuaded to switch to the companies’ non-combustible products. Adult tobacco users who switch completely from a combustible product to a less harmful non-combustible product could experience health benefits. Conversely, the co-promotion of the companies’ combustible products with the non-combustible nicotine pouches could exacerbate tobacco-related health harms if the marketing encourages dual use and/or discourages quitting combustible tobacco use (e.g., if individuals only use the noncombustible product to circumvent smoke-free policies, or in other situations where they can’t smoke)⁹. Indeed, VELO’s website explicitly notes that the pouches “are not intended to be used as a smoking cessation aid,”¹⁰ which may impact consumers’ use behaviors.

Sales of nicotine pouches are increasing rapidly in the US tobacco marketplace¹¹ at a time when potential new product standards (i.e., a menthol ban, low nicotine standard) may further challenge cigarette sales. This context may contribute to consumers’ perceptions of advantages conferred by pouches, including the availability of multiple flavors, nicotine strengths, and reduced social stigma surrounding their use (e.g., absence of odor and

exposure to second-hand constituents)¹². As the modern oral nicotine market expands, systematic monitoring of advertising and promotional practices, as well as epidemiological trends, are critical to assess the potential public health impact of these new nicotine-containing products and inform appropriate regulation.

Funding

This work was supported in part by National Cancer Institute and Food and Drug Administration Center for Tobacco Products under grant U54CA229973. OG was supported by the Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey under grant P30CA07270. DPG was supported by a grant from the NIH Office of the Director (award number DP5OD023064).

References

1. Marynak KL, Wang X, Borowiecki M, et al. Nicotine Pouch Unit Sales in the US, 2016–2020. *JAMA* 2021;326(6):566–68. doi: 10.1001/jama.2021.10366 [published Online First: 2021/08/11] [PubMed: 34374729]
2. Delnevo CD, Hrywna M, Miller Lo EJ, et al. Examining market trends in smokeless tobacco sales in the United States: 2011–2019. *Nicotine & tobacco research : official journal of the Society for Research on Nicotine and Tobacco* 2020 doi: 10.1093/ntr/ntaa239 [published Online First: 2020/11/27]
3. Czaplicki L, Patel M, Rahman B, et al. Oral nicotine marketing claims in direct-mail advertising. *Tobacco control* 2021 doi: 10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2020-056446 [published Online First: 2021/05/08]
4. Robichaud MO, Seidenberg AB, Byron MJ. Tobacco companies introduce ‘tobacco-free’ nicotine pouches. *Tobacco control* 2020;29(e1):e145–e46. doi: 10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2019-055321 [published Online First: 2019/11/23] [PubMed: 31753961]
5. BAT strengthens its US New Category portfolio: Announces acquisition of Dryft Modern Oral business. www.bat.com: British American Tobacco Press Office, 2020.
6. Altria Enters Growing Oral Nicotine Products Category with on! Pouch Product. <http://www.businesswire.com>: BusinessWire, 2019.
7. Brock B, Schillo BA, Moilanen M. Tobacco industry marketing: an analysis of direct mail coupons and giveaways. *Tobacco control* 2015;24(5):505–8. doi: 10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2014-051602 [published Online First: 2014/07/24] [PubMed: 25052861]
8. Ganz O, Teplitskaya L, Cantrell J, et al. Direct-to-Consumer Marketing of Cigar Products in the United States. *Nicotine & tobacco research : official journal of the Society for Research on Nicotine and Tobacco* 2016;18(5):864–8. doi: 10.1093/ntr/ntv190 [published Online First: 2015/09/18] [PubMed: 26377513]
9. Richardson A, Ganz O, Stalgaitis C, et al. Noncombustible tobacco product advertising: how companies are selling the new face of tobacco. *Nicotine & tobacco research : official journal of the Society for Research on Nicotine and Tobacco* 2014;16(5):606–14. doi: 10.1093/ntr/ntt200 [published Online First: 2014/01/01] [PubMed: 24379146]
10. Velo.com FAQ [Available from: <https://www.velo.com/footer-links/faq#pouches> accessed 8/31/2021.
11. Prokop H Nicotine Pouches: Tobacco’s Fast-Growing Subcategory. *CSP Daily News* 2020 10/16/2020. <https://www.cspdailynews.com/tobacco/nicotine-pouches-tobaccos-fast-growing-subcategory> (accessed 6/29/2021).
12. Nicotine Pouches, A Viable Alternative to Smoking? <http://euromonitor.com>: Euromonitor International, 2020.

The advertisement features a black header bar at the top right with a red arrow icon, the text "1,650 pts", and a hamburger menu icon. Below the header is a large white box with the text: "WARNING: This product contains nicotine. Nicotine is an addictive chemical." The main image shows a group of four people (two men and two women) sitting around a round wooden table in a social setting, holding drinks. To the right of the image, the text reads: "In the moments that matter, satisfaction is still an option." Below this, it says: "Enjoy the convenience of on!® nicotine pouches. Your smoke-free alternative." The product packaging is shown in four colors: yellow (4 MG), green (4 MG WINTERGREEN), blue (4 MG MINT), and red (CINNAMON). The "on!" logo is prominently displayed, along with the text "NICOTINE POUCHES" and a "SHOP ONLINE" button. At the bottom right, a small disclaimer states: "Site limited to tobacco consumers 21 years of age or older."

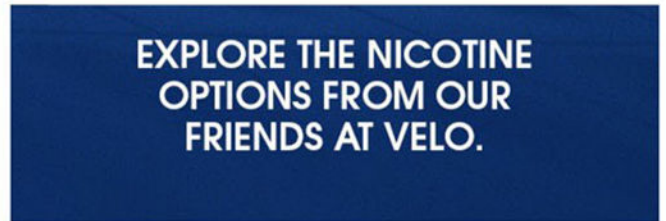
Figure 1.
Marlboro website capture 11/04/2020 (Source: <https://www.marlboro.com>).

Author Manuscript

Author Manuscript

Author Manuscript

Author Manuscript



CIGARETTES

SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING: Cigarette Smoke Contains Carbon Monoxide.



UNDERAGE SALE PROHIBITED NICOTINE PRODUCTS

WELCOME TO VELO

4 STRENGTHS and 14 AMAZING FLAVORS. VELO'S got you covered.

Use VELO virtually any time, anywhere. It's designed to **FIT YOUR LIFESTYLE.**

Learn more about VELO nicotine pouches and lozenges and **save over 60%** with a VELO Welcome Bundle.

CHOOSE YOUR BUNDLE

*LIMITED TIME OFFER. VOID WHERE PROHIBITED. CONDITIONS APPLY. WEBSITE AND OFFERS RESTRICTED TO AGE 21+ NICOTINE CONSUMERS. ©2021 MBI

Figure 2. Direct email from Camel received 04/2021 (Source: Trinkets & Trash)