

# ST E P P

STATE TOBACCO EDUCATION  
& PREVENTION PARTNERSHIP

## Straight To Work Qualitative Research October/November 2006

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### Executive Summary

During October and November of 2006, Market Perceptions, Inc. conducted five focus groups, one in-depth interview and one dyad (two participants) on behalf of Cactus Communications and the Colorado State Tobacco Education and Prevention Partnership. The purpose of the research was to support efforts to build a communication campaign aimed at Colorado's Straight To Work (Straight To Work) population, defined as smokers who are 18-24 years of age and have chosen to go Straight To Work rather than obtain a college education.

The results of this research were both complex and interesting. First and foremost, we learned that this population is far from homogenous. The participants in our focus groups had radically different histories, personalities and perspectives. Interestingly, their reasons for smoking were familiar, citing relaxation, boredom, and social interaction, and their reasons for quitting were equally familiar – with concerns about their health, money and children. In this respect, most were very much like their college bound counterparts, saying they can quit any time, that they will quit when they are ready, but that they just are not ready yet.

But while we saw similarities, the differences among the members of the Straight To Work population we spoke with, as well the differences between this population and others we have stud-

ied, ultimately make all the difference in terms of how we reach and affect them. Most of the Straight To Work participants described hardship in their past, a future lacking any anticipated milestones, and generally exhibited a sense of fatalism about their lives. This difference clearly requires different strategies for communication than with similarly-aged youth who instead are now in college. Admittedly, most of the Straight To Work participants were unreachable with respect to cessation. But for some, especially those who considered themselves to be in control of their lives, we identified two points of leverage:

- First, they reacted surprisingly well to confrontation, as we suggested that they might not be able to quit, even if they wanted to.
- Second, a few seemed to realize as they participated in the discussion that they are very much like the other participants in the discussion. This seemed to be a moment of realization, often not liking what they heard and saw from the other participants in the group, leading them to change their minds from needing nothing to help them quit to asking for the phone number or website address of the QuitLine, as well as thanking us at the end of the discussion for the experience.

It appears that cognitive dissonance, either through confrontation or reflection, brings them to realize that they are not who they want to be and that there is something they can do about it.

## Objectives

Cactus Communications has been charged with developing a communication campaign aimed at Colorado's Straight To Work population, defined as those 18-24 years of age who have not gone on to college and instead chose to go Straight To Work. Within the Straight To Work population we were interested in speaking with those young adults who are current smokers (having smoked within the past 30 days and having smoked more than 100 cigarettes in their life) and do not foresee pursuing a college education at this time in their lives.

The purpose of this research was to explore how 18-24 year-old Straight To Work adults think about their reasons for smoking, their reasons for quitting, the goals for and direction of their lives, and what type of message would prove most effective in getting their attention and hopefully bringing about a change. Two avenues, based upon past research with young smokers, were up for consideration as we began this exploration with the Straight To Work population:

1. "I Do It," an effort to heighten awareness for all the reasons and excuses people give for smoking to help them realize these are just excuses and that now is time to quit doing it. This was the approach used with college students and early results of the campaign showed that the approach was very effective.
2. "You vs. You," to help young adult smokers recognize that the battle against smoking is not with anyone but themselves and it is up to them to either win or lose that battle. This follows along the lines of the Youth Prevention and Cessation efforts with the campaign focusing on making good choices. For the Straight To Work population, if this approach is pursued it will likely be more specific, focusing the choice decision largely around tobacco.

What we needed to learn from our focus group participants was whether either of these approaches would serve as an appropriate strategy for them, or if the Straight To Work population will need to be reached in a different manner.

## Methodology

The methodology for this research was qualitative, consisting of five focus groups and two small-group interviews (one IDI and one dyad). Three of the focus groups and both of the small-group interviews were recruited from the Denver Metropolitan area while the two remaining focus groups consisted of participants from the Greeley area.

The "Straight To Work Literature and Background Review," a report prepared by the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children in conjunction with Caliber (May 31, 2006) identified several key industries where the Straight To Work population is more prevalent, and of these, three stood out as particularly interesting from a research perspective – retail, restaurant and construction. Believing that these industries would provide opportunity for understanding how Straight To Work adults look at smoking as a part of their life, their work and their daily rituals, we focused our efforts on the types of employment fitting into these or similar categories.

Part of the challenge for thinking through the focus group dynamic was making sure participants would be comfortable and willing to be honest and forthright with us and their peers, even when talking about their ambitions and motivations, which they were likely to recognize as lower in aspirational intensity than their college-bound

counterparts. Two ways in which we maximized participants' comfort level and honesty were to:

- a) **Recruit participants who were as similar to one another as possible.** If they find themselves among a true peer group, a few would be more willing to express honest opinions, making others more likely to follow.
- b) **Keep the group size small and more intimate.** If the group gets too large, it is easy for some to try to get lost in the crowd by not participating or doing so only as little as possible. Conversely, too large of a group can encourage others to become a "peacock," trying to show off and over-compensate, especially when the conversation gets too close and personal.

To recruit participants, we sent our interviewers out to meet with potential participants in person, stopping outside of restaurants, bars, shopping centers, hospitals and health care facilities, and construction sites, looking for young people who smoke. We recruited eight or more people for each of the sessions expecting to see five or six show up at each. Participants received \$125 as an incentive to get them to attend.

Recognizing that there might be dramatic differences between urban and rural youth, we conducted two focus groups among Straight To Work young adults in Greeley, though not recruited from any particular industry, to look at a broader cross-section while focusing our inquiry on potential differences and similarities between urban and rural participants.

## Research Findings: The Straight To Work Population is Diverse

Although all members of the Straight To Work population who we spoke with share the common attribute of not planning to go to college, we learned quickly that this population is far from being homogenous. Instead, the participants in our focus groups and small-group interviews had radically different histories, personalities and perspectives.

Beyond the obvious differences, such as gender and type of employment, we saw a variety of personalities. For example, while they were all between 18 and 24 years of age, some were a *very young* 18 and others were a *very old* 24. Their attitudes about life, about smoking, and about quitting reflected this range, as those who had just finished high school not long ago were typically working on getting out of the house, getting a job, and living life, whether that meant going out to clubs every night or just enjoying their newfound freedom. Others who had been out in the world for a while described life's "trials and tribulations," as one participant put it. The youngest were comfortable with their smoking, at least at the beginning of the discussion. The oldest were often thinking that someday, often someday soon, they should try to quit.

The diversity was particularly evident in Greeley, where participants were recruited from every category of employment. We saw different personality types, all of whom are Straight To Work personalities, yet very different from one another in terms of their self-image, ideas about life and attitudes about smoking. Specifically, across all of the interviews we did, we found five distinct personalities emerge:

1. One personality type was that of often our *youngest* participants who had just finished high school and are still quite naïve about what the world is like and where they're going. Completing high school and moving out of their parents' houses stands out as their greatest achievement. Although they did not know what to expect after high school, they knew they knew it was mostly about getting a job and partying, with little in mind beyond that.
2. Another type of personality we saw was slightly older in age and in many ways, very *similar to the college students* we interviewed a year ago, having similar ways of thinking about themselves and their futures. Their defining moment has not arrived yet, which for this segment is usually perceived as getting a "good" job. They believe they can quit smoking whenever they want and it will be a decision **they** make. The difference between this group and the college students is that they have no clear moment in the foreseeable future for when that decision to quit would make sense.
3. A third personality consisted of "*bad kids*," kids mixed up in drugs, violence, and the wrong crowd. Some of them talked about jail time and probation while others just talked about wasted time (in both senses of the word). But these participants had something in common that we had not seen quite as clearly before. Whereas the college students look forward to defining moments, such as graduating, these participants had their defining moment already – they survived youth, escaped the life they were leading, and see life as now just a plateau, and now being perceived as relatively easy compared to where they came from.
4. A fourth group we heard from was *young parents* who had characteristics in common with the bad kids. Like the bad kids, these participants described their younger years as being hard and often laden with trouble, but unlike the feeling of having reached their plateau from which they would now coast for the rest of their lives, these young parents typically emerged from their hardship with a new sense of purpose, with a focus on bettering themselves in order to provide greater opportunities for their children.
5. The last personality we saw was the *blue collar* personality, one we expected to find among this demographic. At least one participant in each of these groups described their lives in terms of some vocational aspiration, whether that meant being an aviation mechanic or opening a body shop. This usually led to greater aspirations and goals than we saw with the other personalities.

## Reasons for Smoking and Quitting

The reasons for smoking were familiar, as our Straight To Work participants cited stress relief/relaxation, a way to reduce boredom and a way to create social interaction. And just as we found with college students, a few once again described smoking as something they **really** like to do. One of our interview participants described smoking as “awesome/totally sweet.”

*“I think smoking goes with like every emotion for me. Like, if I’m happy I smoke. Pissed, I’ll smoke. If I’m sad I’ll smoke, so it kind of depends on the emotion.”*  
(Greeley 6 pm Group)

And like college students, they wanted us to believe that this is something they *choose* to do. None of them said that they smoke *only* because they are addicted. It is important to them that they believe they have control over their lives.

Their reasons for wanting to quit were also familiar, as they typically cited their personal health, expense and children. Despite the emphasis on *choosing* to smoke, they also recognize that smoking is not good for them and is not a particularly good choice. This was evident both in terms of consideration they seemed to hold for those people who tell them they should not smoke, as well as the admiration they have for those who have successfully quit smoking.

Almost all of the participants were very supportive of the smoking ban, at least in restaurants, most not liking to be around others’ secondhand smoke themselves. Many admitted initial frustration with the ban, however, feeling singled out and discriminated against, and a few continue to see the smoking ban in bars as unfair.

Regardless, they all accept the fact that they are smokers. Smoking is something they do, knowing well that it is not good for them. They know it is impacting their health in terms of their athleticism, the strength of their immune system, causing them to cough and hack as their lungs attempt to expel the tar they are inhaling, and ultimately they accept the likelihood that their decision to smoke will shorten their lives. They also know that the smoke makes them “stink,” that others don’t like and/or approve of their smoking, that it is an expensive habit, and most say they would be better off all around if they did not smoke.

## Similarities and Differences

The similarities between the college students and the Straight To Work population have to do with attitude, both saying they can quit anytime they want, that they will quit when they are ready, but that that time to quit just not happen to be today and probably not tomorrow. But their paths in life look very different, especially as they look to the future. While they acknowledge, intellectually, all of harmful aspects of smoking, some even saying that they *want* to quit, few admitted they are likely to do so. Many say they will probably do so when they are ready, but cannot give an estimate of when that event will likely occur.

With the college students, we found a paradoxical sort of reasoning. They said they will quit when they are ready, but they will know when they are ready to quit only when they actually quit. Still, the reasoning is not irrational, just passive and optimistic. They believe that something in their lives will *make* them want to quit, and that will be at a moment when they are ready, which is when

the choice will happen. And there are plenty of milestones in the future that support this belief – graduation, getting a job, getting married, having kids, etc.

With the Straight To Work population, their milestones are either absent or in the past. Graduation meant graduating from high school. They see themselves in the job or career that they will likely have for a while, or at best, leading to the job they want. Some are already married, and many already have children. Most importantly, nothing in their future will likely *make* them do anything. They have survived what they see as the greatest challenges they will likely have to face, and find themselves stronger and more in control of their lives as a result.

*“See, I’ve quit a lot of other things so there’s really no point in me stop smoking, you know. I’ve already achieved my goal and stopped doing drugs, you know. So I’m good.”*

(Denver 4 pm– Construction Workers)

#### **Your biggest achievement?**

*“I think for me it was graduating high school with a baby, I guess, because I had my daughter when I was two weeks after my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday.”*

(Denver 6 pm Group – All)

*“I’d have to say making it through my younger years. My mentality when I was younger was really juvenile and like I didn’t think through everything. I didn’t look at the outcome so it was the fact that I didn’t look at all my choices.”*

(Greeley Noon Group)

*“Well, I got in trouble in Kansas City so I had to leave there and do jail time there then came down here.”*

(Greeley Noon Group)

For many of these Straight To Work participants, there is little in their life to make the benefits of a longer, healthier life worth the sacrifice of not smoking today. It helps with stress. It provides them with something to do when there is little else. It creates a social connection with others who are in situations like theirs. It provides a solitary pleasure in contrast to a life often lacking joy. And on several occasions, smoking and sex were associated – from something to do after sex to something that helps you get sex (women find guys who smoke sexy) to even something you do when you are trying to quit smoking. While smoking might not be pretty, it is seen as somehow sexy. There is an element of risk and danger, and, to quote a famous songwriter, it is sometimes better to burn out than to fade away.

Their futures are vague and their attitudes somewhat fatalistic. They have worked hard to get where they are, but are now faced with the rest of their lives – a mid-life crisis at the age of only 20. What this means in terms of smoking is that they see themselves smoking until they die, and for some the preference is to die sooner, rather than later.

*“I live my life one day at a time. I mean you never know when you’re going to go so it’s really you’re going to go when it’s your time.”*

(Greeley Noon Group)

*“You could die tomorrow. I think it’s stupid cause like anything, pretty much how we eat and stuff is something. So yea, it’s like cigarettes are bad but there’s a lot of other stuff that non smokers could do that are bad. So I think it’s just stupid. You’re going to die whenever you’re going to die.”*

(Greeley 6 pm Group)

*“Well, I don’t want to live that long. I don’t want to be old. If I could die when I’m around forty or fifty I’d be happy... It’s depressing to watch yourself getting old.”*  
(Greeley 6 pm Group)

This was particularly clear in with the construction workers we talked to. What they almost all had in common was a story about how they were in the process of emerging from adversity. From getting into trouble with the law to gang activity, drug addiction and the war in Iraq; all were dealing with fairly serious life issues. In fact, three of the five were on probation. When we asked about what they had accomplished in life and where they were headed, all described their greatest achievement as just surviving, getting through the next day. When we talked to participants about what it would take to quit smoking in the future, the responses were ambivalent, dismissive, and contradictory, or less than completely serious, but always with a firm conviction that it is up to them.

*“You can’t make somebody quit. They have to want to do it by themselves.”*  
(Greeley 6 pm Group)

*“I can promise that I can quit. I can’t promise I want to. That’s life.”*  
(Denver 4 pm– Construction Workers)

## Different People Require Different Strategies

This difference requires different strategies for communication. Admittedly, most of the Straight To Work participants seem unreachable if we want to convince them to quit smoking. But for some, especially those who considered themselves to be in control of their lives, we identified two points of leverage.

First, they reacted surprisingly well to confrontation, as we suggested that they might not be able to quit, even if they wanted to. Because they see themselves in control of their lives, the suggestion that smoking is not an example of being in control seemed to force the issue, leading them to think about whether *actually* being in control is more important than pretending that they choose to smoke.

*“If people are like, ‘Oh, you can’t do that,’ you’re going to do it. If you put your mind to it and you want to do it, you’re going to do it.”*  
(Greeley 6 pm Group)

*“I’ve made some drastic actions in my life and I have control of my life. And for somebody to tell me that I don’t have control of my life, it would probably involve slapping them in the face or a verbal confrontation. I stand for what I believe in. I have control over my life and nobody else does. I am responsible for all my own actions and I can change if I want to. And no one knows what you can and can’t do.”*  
(Denver 4 pm Group – Construction Workers)

Second, a few seemed to realize as they participated in the discussion that they are, in fact, just like the other participants in the discussion. This seemed to be a moment of realization, leading them to switch from needing nothing from anyone to asking for the QuitLine number, website address and thanking us for the experience.

*“I have a strong resolve. Like I have a good balance between the choices I make in my life, but when it comes to smoking? No.”*  
(Denver 6 pm Group – All)

A participant in our first group had a strange, conflicted explanation about being in control or

not being in control. Cigarettes are a sign of weakness, but something he chooses to do. Another participant described how smoking is a kind of freedom, even though it is an addiction that controls her. She reacted aggressively when we suggested that she would not be able to quit even if she tried, and, as with our participant in the first group, she was the one most interested in the QuitLine.

They think they will be able to quit when they want to, but it looks more like they will never want to quit – they just don't realize it yet. And as they listened to others in the discussion, they seemed to realize it just enough to change their attitude. It appears that cognitive dissonance, either through confrontation or reflection, brings them to realize that they are not who they want to be and that there is something they can do about it.

## Resources and Communications

Many participants had tried quitting before, but usually not with a 100% effort or long-term success. The consensus was that one must quit “cold turkey,” a reflection of their belief that one must *choose* to quit. But they were confronted with the pros and cons, having a difficult time convincing themselves to be non-smokers.

*“I tried. I quit for six months. That was my goal actually. I quit for six months. And then it stressed me, I kid you not, that got to me so bad. I kept lighting my ex-girlfriend's cigarette up and then one time I held it and I was like, ‘Hell no!’ So I pushed it away and kept doing it and it's like my body was like gimmee, gimmee, gimmee, you know. You make a relationship with the smoke.”*  
(Denver 4 pm – Construction Workers)

Interestingly, awareness of the QuitLine was relatively high, although often with limited knowledge of what services and tools are available. But even with a more detailed explanation of what it is and has to offer, few of these participants were motivated to call. Hypnosis, acupuncture, and ideally, a pill you could simply take to eliminate all desire to ever smoke again, seemed like better alternatives for quitting, as soon as they reach the point in their lives when they *want* to quit. The mention of free nicotine replacement therapy patches, which fits along these lines of an easier way to quit, was the received the best, and was something none were aware of as being available through the QuitLine. The challenge, of course, is that they say that they can quit as soon as they want, without any help, but as they talk about it they seemed to be saying that nothing will ever make them want to quit.

What message makes a difference? They are very aware that they smoke, and therefore will not likely be stirred by the “I Do It” message. But they are relatively unreflective about *why* they do it. In the transition from surviving youth, they haven't quite started thinking about what's next.

However, they are at a point where they are ready to rethink who they are. They have a clear idea of the contrast between where they *were* and where they are today, making them who they are. But they do *not* have a clear sense that there is more to come and that possibilities in the future can be as powerful as necessities were in the past. The idea of “You vs. You” captures this notion of a possible future. Life is easier now than it used to be, as they won most of the battles against earlier versions of themselves, but there are rewards to continuing the fight and continuing to change. If only they could see that.