

Smokers Go Cold Turkey in Nicorette Online Series

'Smober Up,' a 10-Part Reality Program on YouTube, Follows Eight Canadians Looking to Kick the Habit

by Rich Tomaselli
From Advertising Age
June 28, 2010



NEW YORK (AdAge.com) -- While the pharmaceutical industry wades cautiously into digital marketing, Johnson & Johnson's Nicorette is taking a deep dive with an unusual 10-part webisode reality series that follows eight Canadians trying to kick the habit. The "Smober Up" series is to anti-smoking what NBC's "The Biggest Loser" is to anti-obesity efforts and was produced by the Toronto office of content and integrated production agency Evidently.

"Everyone knows someone who has smoked or wanted to quit," said Evidently VP-Head of Planning Marisa May Caple, who noted that this is less about a brand point of view -- Nicorette is by far the market leader in Canada, where the reality series is taking place -- and more of "a story about choices."

The program also uses social media with an interactive community on Facebook and Twitter, along with the webisodes that premiered on a dedicated YouTube channel this month. They document everything

from each smoker's initial decision to quit to the reactions from friends and family. (Be warned: The first webisode is emotional and bit of a tearjerker.)

Fellow Canadians can also get involved by entering the Smober Up YouTube contest to be eligible to win one of 60 Nicorette "Quit Kits," and they can also create their own YouTube video highlighting their reasons to quit smoking and post it on YouTube.

Big leap

It's something of a stroke of bold marketing for Big Pharma, which is known for conservative advertising that won't run afoul of Food and Drug Administration guidelines, even for over-the-counter medications like Nicorette. "For any brand doing it for the first time, it's a little bit scary to have that open dialogue like a reality series," Ms. Caple said.

But J&J was motivated by an Angus Reid Public Opinion Survey it commissioned on behalf of Nicorette that found 75% of smokers have tried to quit more than once and failed.

Evidently CEO Daniel Saul Zeff said there was never a consideration to try to package the webisodes into longer form and try to sell it for TV. "YouTube was a good choice for the Canadian audience because it has a huge reach," he said. "It was sort of an easy answer. Asking ourselves if we should go the broadcast route, it becomes a more complicated question and, frankly, for this first season I don't know if we would have made it this quickly or this effectively if we had chosen to do it on TV."

Mr. Zeff said that alternative forms of smoking cessation beyond Nicorette are shown.

He insisted that none of the participants are actors nor were they given lines to read. All eight have compelling stories of trying to quit, including Fraser, who describes himself as being a hard-core smoker for 23 years who also happens to be a youth lacrosse coach -- a strange juxtaposition that is highlighted in the series. "I coach young kids, and I know that some of them probably have an idea that I smoke, because I probably stink," he says in the first webisode. "In the past I've had kids ask me if I smoke, and I've straight-out lied to them."

The Angus Reid survey results show that smokers believe lighting up has had a variety of negative impacts on various aspects of their lives, including their health (48%), fitness (46%) and finances (37%).

While 85% of smokers say they want to quit smoking, only one-third (32%) believe they will be successful.

The series is hosted by Ray Zahab, a reformed pack-a-day smoker turned ultra-marathoner.

"I've been there, and I know how it feels to want to quit. Quitting isn't a single big choice you make; it's a lot of little choices you make every time you decide not to light up," he said. "That's why having the support of the Smober Up community can help smokers find the willpower to achieve their goals."