

# New Study Documents Joe Camel-like Tactics to Transform Youth Drinking Behavior

By [James F. Mosher, J.D.](#) | January 20, 2012 | [Leave a comment](#) | Filed in [Alcohol](#), [Legislation](#) & [Marketing And Media](#)

Underage drinkers have made a dramatic shift in the last decade. Beer, once the beverage of choice for young people, is being replaced by distilled spirits, particularly “white” drinks including vodka, tequila and rum. Why did this shift occur and what implications does it have for public health and safety? The January 2012 edition of the American Journal of Public Health has published a new study – “[Joe Camel in a Bottle: Diageo, the Smirnoff Brand, and the Transformation of the Youth Alcohol Market](#)” – addressing these questions. It focuses specifically on the successful marketing tactics of Diageo, a British company and the world’s largest distilled spirits producer.

The British multinational had daunting obstacles to overcome in reversing the steady decline of distilled spirits among young people in the U.S. Beer producers have three key regulatory advantages over distilled spirits domestically: lower taxes, easier availability and access to electronic media advertising. These advantages had contributed to a steady decline in distilled spirits popularity, particularly among younger generations. Diageo was nevertheless determined to reverse this trend and take distilled spirits to a dominant position in the U.S. market.

**As a first step, Diageo introduced Smirnoff Ice, an alcopop treated as a beer for regulatory purposes. Gaining “beer” status was key to the strategy and appears to violate most state laws because a product that mixes distilled spirits and beer is usually classified as a distilled spirit. Alcopops contain distilled alcohol, and their beer base is transformed through a chemical process so that they lack any beer characteristics.**

Having succeeded in convincing regulators to allow the new beer classification, Diageo gained the regulatory advantages associated with beer when it introduced Smirnoff Ice in 2001. It embarked on an ambitious marketing campaign that combined youth-oriented advertising, placement in youth-oriented media outlets, and a new product design that catered to youthful tastes. **Smirnoff Ice and other alcopops became popular among young people, particularly girls, transforming Smirnoff from a dated and stodgy brand to a youthful, hip drink.**

Diageo coordinated its Smirnoff Ice and Smirnoff Vodka marketing strategies (using similar sweet flavors, containers and marketing strategies), and the buzz created with Smirnoff Ice energized Smirnoff Vodka, resulting in a dramatic increase in its sales.

**Diageo launched a sophisticated public relations campaign that coincided with the introduction of Smirnoff Ice to convince regulators, policy makers, and the public that it was committed to preventing underage drinking.** The company built partnerships with medical and public health organizations and government agencies, touted its self-regulation code, funded prevention programs that did not interfere with its marketing strategies, engaged lobbyists to fight public health-oriented regulatory proposals, and broadcast “responsibility” advertisements. **These tactics were all designed to shield the company from criticism and investigation.**

Although the shift in youth preference from beer to distilled spirits and Diageo’s marketing tactics can be documented based on government surveys, industry data and marketing studies, the role marketing played in this shift and its impact on youth alcohol problems remains unclear. As noted in the article, data on youth brand preferences is scarce despite being a key variable in determining the impact of particular marketing campaigns on youth consumption and problems. Brand data is routinely collected for youth tobacco use. **The Joe Camel youth brand studies of the 1980s provided an important impetus for more focused studies on tobacco marketing and for significant changes in tobacco control. A similar focus on youth**

**brand preferences, alcohol marketing and alcohol policy reform should be top priorities for the public health field.**

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