Menthol messaging

Findings from an influencer audit

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FRAME WORKS

Contents

Executive Summary

To deepen what advocates already know about effective outreach and advocacy communications to reduce the availability of menthol tobacco products, FrameWorks queried a panel of recognized experts in Black health, heart health, and tobacco-related health disparities.

In a small-group discussion and in individual interviews, these influential spokespeople critically reviewed a number of potential messaging strategies that health advocacy organizations could adopt in campaigns to restrict the sale of menthol tobacco. Participants, who all identified as Black or African American, spoke directly to issues related to cross-racial messaging efforts, including the history of campaigning on this issue, the challenges of multi-racial coalitions and allyship, and attitudes in the Black community.

All responded positively to the potential for a wider set of organizations -including white-led organizations – to support efforts to end the sale of menthol flavored tobacco products. Yet, they also offered advice and cautions to be mindful of when engaging in advocacy, outreach, and education on this issue with Black audiences.

Key messaging recommendations for building understanding and support in the Black community include:

— Focus on tobacco industry practices rather than health behaviors like initiation, use, or cessation.

— Emphasize the distinctive characteristics of menthol.

— Avoid messaging that could be heard as paternalistic.

— Be ready – not reluctant – to address opposition arguments.

Introduction

For the potential of work toward tobacco flavor restrictions to be realized, its rationale and recommendations need to be persuasive to multiple stakeholders, especially communities who are most affected by health disparities driven by flavored commercial tobacco products. With federal action underway, now is the time for more robust communications and outreach. Without broader understanding and more enthusiastic support for restrictions on the sale of menthol, such policies are vulnerable to mischaracterization by the tobacco industry and misinterpretation by the public.

Recent research – both studies conducted by the FrameWorks Institute and by other leading organizations in tobacco control and prevention – offer guidance on framing the issue of flavored tobacco products in general and on menthol in particular. (See, for example, the 2020 brief *Justice in the Air: Framing Tobacco-Related Health Disparities.)* Yet, it can be hard to know how to best adapt general guidance to a more specific messenger, context, or topic. The American Heart Association perceived the field's need to communicate with greater confidence and efficacy, and generously sponsored this research as a shareable resource.

This report aims to bridge the gap between general evidence-based recommendations on tobacco disparities and more specific messaging needs. In particular, it offers insights that will help health advocacy organizations land on the right voice, tone, and messages for ongoing state and local advocacy and education on restricting the sale of menthol tobacco products. To develop these insights, FrameWorks researchers and strategists worked with a panel of respected, influential leaders who are from and who work with Black communities on health issues.[1] Panelists were asked to assess the strength of various messages and to offer their opinions on which messages seemed appropriate and apt for non-Black organizations or messengers to use in conversations in Black communities.

In this report, you will find:

— Messaging recommendations for building understanding about why restrictions on the sale of menthol are being proposed, paired with evidence from the influencer audit that led to the recommendation

— Guidance on how "outsider" messengers can best respond to concerns and opposition that can arise in community-based work

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[1] More detail on the composition of the influencer panel and the message auditing process is provided in the Appendix to this report.

Messaging Recommendations

FrameWorks' previous research yielded a recommendation that tobacco control advocates consistently point to the causal pathways that connect tobacco and health disparities, including the tobacco industry's practice of adding flavors to entice new users to try their products.

The following recommendations help to tailor this general recommendation to communicate with greater confidence and impact when talking about menthol restrictions with various audiences in Black communities.

RECOMMENDATION #1

Focus on tobacco industry practices rather than health behaviors like initiation, use, or cessation.

Findings
Messages that pointed out industry targeting were viewed as both important and persuasive. Examples of message prompts that were viewed as persuasive include:

— *Menthol brands spend millions of dollars to keep their highly addictive cigarettes cheap and visible in Black communities.*

— *The tobacco industry has pushed menthol in Black communities since the 1960s.*

— *The more Black children who live near a store, the more likely it is that menthol tobacco products will be advertised near candy displays.*

Tobacco control influencers observed that in their experience, sharing the history and power dynamics of the menthol issue is an effective tactic for building policy support among Black organizers and voters. Influencers who worked in other areas of health equity were not familiar with all of the menthol information, but found it compelling and drew parallels to the power of history and critical analysis in their own areas of expertise.

In contrast, messages that focused on the links between menthol products and initiation or cessation did not resonate. Such messages were ranked as less persuasive and were described as stigmatizing or paternalistic.

Takeaways

Consistently point to the tobacco industry practices as the reason that Black people who use tobacco tend to use menthol products, but don't assume that the public knows what those tactics are or how they work. Give specific examples of how tobacco companies heavily promote their products in Black neighborhoods, at Black cultural events, and in publications with primarily Black readers. Include and acknowledge history, but don't leave the impression that this problem is in the past. Draw a line from the culturally tailored menthol marketing strategies of previous eras to contemporary variations on the theme. Also draw a line from what industry is doing to the implication for policy-level change. By focusing on the bad practices of the industry, you set up the need for community resistance and action.

In talking about industry tactics, keep these guidelines in mind.

— Don't imply that people are helpless victims. People strongly reject the idea that individuals have no agency. Be clear that industry tactics matter, but don't leave the impression that they are all that matters.

— Don't frame industry as being so powerful that change is impossible. If the public concludes that industry influence over government is so entrenched that there's no hope for change, fatalism will sap engagement and support will falter. Build a sense of efficacy by pointing to examples of how communities have organized effectively, highlight promising directions, and keep a can-do tone.

RECOMMENDATION #2

Emphasize the distinct characteristics of menthol.

Findings

Messages that pointed out the distinctive characteristics of menthol were viewed as both important and persuasive. One influencer noted that unless communicators build a strong case about menthol specifically, it's easy for Black audiences to assume that policies are ill-intentioned.

Three distinctive characteristics that were consistently viewed positively were:

— Adult Prevalence: Data about the proportion of adult Black smokers who use menthol

— Policy Gap: Other flavors have been/are being restricted, but menthol is typically left out of those policies.

– Menthol Mechanism: Cooling effect of menthol makes smoke easier to inhale

Messages that explained the immediate effects of menthol accounted for three of the five highest-ranked messages. Samples include:

– *Menthol makes it easier to inhale deeply, which leads to a bigger dose of nicotine and a stronger addiction as compared to other cigarettes.*

– *Tobacco companies add menthol to cigarettes, chew, and other products because it makes them seem less harsh. If they are easier to use, it's also easier for people to develop an addiction.*

Takeaways

Information about the disproportionate use of menthol in Black communities can help audiences grasp the scope of the issue, but such data can't stand alone. The story needs to be about much more than prevalence. Focus on explanation, showing the links between social factors (like industry tactics and uneven policies), biological factors (like how cooling allows for deeper inhalation), and health outcomes (like higher rates of use and related health problems.)

In longer communications, consider using the three distinctive characteristics (mechanism, prevalence, policy gap) as your organizing framework. In shorter communications, connect two of the three. Taking this advice need not mean that every message is lengthy. It can be as simple as a statement that tobacco companies add menthol to products because it makes them more addictive. Or, it could involve noting that while other flavored cigarettes were banned years ago, menthol – the product that causes the most harm in Black communities - has been left out.

RECOMMENDATION #3

Avoid messages that could be heard as paternalistic.

Findings
The idea that menthol restrictions are "about" protection from manipulation is unpersuasive at best, and potentially offensive.

In an exercise that explored the persuasiveness of different facts about menthol:

– Messages about "menthol myths" (for example, the fact that people incorrectly believe that menthol cigarettes are easier to quit) were among the lowest-ranked arguments.

- Messages that highlighted the number of Black youth who use menthol products were consistently ranked lower than other types of arguments.

- Messages that highlighted studies indicating that if menthol were taken off the shelves, substantial numbers of Black smokers would quit were ranked lower than other arguments

- Messages that used words like *loophole* or *purposeful* to talk about tobacco industry actions were ranked lower than other types of facts about the tobacco industry.

These results are in line with concerns raised by influencers about the risk of sounding paternalistic – that is, suggesting that benevolent, powerful forces are taking actions that they deem to be in the interests of vulnerable groups.

Takeaways

- **Don't over-rely on protection framing.** There's no need to avoid the word 'protection' altogether, especially if it is used as a synonym for policy, regulation, ban, or restriction. That said, be careful not to stray into a 'rescue from harm' story that subtly positions tobacco control advocates as heroic figures who are stepping in to protect a vulnerable community from a dastardly villain.

- **Take the stance of standing in solidarity with issue leaders.** Avoid overstating the role that mainstream or white-led organizations play on this issue. Talk about the work as amplifying the concerns raised by Black experts and leaders. Back up this talk with genuine partnerships with those leaders, elevating and working with Black researchers and experts whenever possible.

Addressing Frequent Concerns

Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids has observed that most opposition messages miss the mark on the issue of menthol tobacco restrictions. The influencer panel agreed, expressing confidence that there are effective responses to the most frequent objections and misperceptions from Black audiences. Yet they also expressed the need for the message to fit the messenger, and offered suggestions for how a mainstream, white-led organization might respond in a different style than they adopted themselves.

The takeaway: Be ready – not reluctant – to address opposition arguments. Opposition messages on this issue are familiar, but underpowered.

The table below summarizes insights from this conversation. It presents six types of opposition to menthol restrictions, a suggested framing of a response, and notes on what *not* to say.

Responding to Concerns and Objections about Restrictions on Menthol

These responses are designed for interpersonal, two-way conversations in settings like community meetings. In some cases, these "live" talking points differ slightly from guidance on what to include and avoid in written communications.

Objection	Suggested Response	What to Avoid
Police interaction: "If we ban menthol, we are only giving police more opportunities to harass Black people on the streets."	**Propaganda.** "That's a talking point put out by the tobacco industry. It's designed to tap into real concerns about policing to undermine a regulation that would cut into their profits. We understand and share the call for police reform, so we think it's shameful that it's being exploited in this way."	– Don't imply or try to "prove" that the fear of police interaction is unfounded
Paternalism: "We don't need politicians telling the Black community what is and isn't in our own best interests. That's paternalistic."	**Black-led.** "We believe that every community should be informed and equipped to shape its own future. The push to take menthol off the shelves is led by Black scientists and activists who have been calling for more attention to this issue for decades. We're standing in solidarity with them."	– Don't imply or try to "prove" that this policy is, in fact, in their own best interests
Questionable Priority: "Of all the problems that are facing the Black community, why are we worrying about menthol?"	**Critical, but overlooked.** "This policy is only one part of a much larger movement to advance fairness and justice in health. Other flavored cigarettes were banned years ago, but the flavor that causes the most harm in Black communities was left out. If we had acted then, more than a quarter million Black lives would have been saved by 2050. It's time to act now."	– Unless people ask about the details, don't dilute the main point by getting into the weeds about how and when different flavors/products are regulated

Unfair Focus: "Why are they banning menthol, the flavor of cigarettes that Black people like? It's part of our culture."	**Critical, but overlooked.** "Other flavored cigarettes were banned years ago, but the flavor that causes the most harm in Black communities was left out. If we had acted then, more than a quarter million Black lives would have been saved by 2050. It's time to act now."	— "Outsider" messengers should take care in making claims about what is/isn't "really" part of Black culture
Personal choice: "People should be able to choose whether they smoke or not, and if they want to smoke menthols, it's none of the government's business."	**Dangerous product.** "As a society, we have an obligation to restrict the sale of dangerous products. Menthol makes tobacco easier to inhale, so people inhale more deeply, get a bigger dose of nicotine, and develop stronger addictions. This is about setting the right rules for industry. They shouldn't be allowed to make their products more addictive and more deadly."	— Don't say or imply that tobacco use isn't "really" a personal choice because of tobacco industry influence
Woke meets smoke: "This is just another instance of 'woke' culture going too far. This ban is just about looking like you're doing something on race. It's just a show."	**Dangerous product.** "As a society, we have an obligation to restrict the sale of dangerous products. Menthol makes tobacco easier to inhale, so people inhale more deeply, get a bigger dose of nicotine, and develop stronger addictions. This is about setting the right rules for industry. They shouldn't be allowed to make their products more addictive and more deadly."	— This question is designed to distract. Don't let it bait you into defending your commitment to racial equity – that makes the conversation about you, not the policy.

Concluding Thoughts

This targeted study adds to the tobacco prevention and control movement's ability to communicate effectively during efforts to restrict the sale of menthol tobacco products at the local and state levels.

We hope that it also adds to the equity-focused conversation about how mainstream organizations can leverage their influence and power to advance social justice.

It is one thing to strike the right notes in particular messages. It is another to participate, with respect and humility, in a larger "choir" of voices working to eliminate disparities.

The issue of menthol restrictions offers an opportunity for mainstream and/or white-led organizations to model what it looks like to support community-led movements as an ally. At times, that may mean lending prestige, reach, and resources to those who live and work in closest proximity to the problem. At others, it may mean being a bolder voice in rooms where such problems are rarely discussed. Through both types of efforts, we can reframe not only the issue of menthol-flavored tobacco products, but also start to redefine the way advocacy organizations collaborate to advance health equity and justice.

Appendix: Research methods

Black Influencer Panel Composition

To learn more about the potential effects of various messages and messengers about menthol restrictions with Black audiences, FrameWorks identified a small panel of Black professionals who work on one or more of the following topics:

- o Menthol tobacco disparities

- o Black health equity/disparities

- o Black cardiovascular health

All panelists were highly visible spokespeople, defined as having had appeared multiple times in mainstream media coverage of the relevant topic within the last twelve months.

Research Settings & Methods

Four participants were interviewed in a virtual small group setting in July 2021. Two participants were interviewed individually in August 2021, also via Zoom.

Participants were informed that the purpose of the research was to learn more about how a white-led, legacy non-profit could be "more effective in the fight against menthol" and that researchers were particularly interested in their view because of their experience and expertise on messaging on issues of tobacco control and issues of health equity in Black communities.

The small group sessions were divided into three messaging exercises described below. Exercises were substantially similar for the small-group and individual sessions. Researchers took advantage of individual interviews to probe more deeply on questions that emerged from the small group session.

Fact ranking exercise

Two dozen fact-based statements about menthol, each 140 characters or less, were developed based on peer-reviewed studies. Slightly varying iterations of the same basic facts were developed on the following themes:

- Menthol Mechanism: Cooling effect of menthol makes smoke easier to inhale

- Industry Targeting

    o Practices that target Black communities generally

    o Practices that increase exposure of Black youth to menthol branding

- Policy Gap: Other flavors have been/are being restricted, but menthol is typically left out of those policies

- Misperceptions: Percentage of people who incorrectly believe myths about menthol, such as they are healthier or easier to quit

- Benefits of Restrictions

    o Life: Projections of number of Black lives that would be saved by restrictions

    o Quitting: projections of number of Black smokers who would quit if restrictions were enacted

- Prevalence Statistics

    o Adult: proportion of adult Black smokers who use menthol

    o Youth: proportion of Black youth who use or prefer menthol

Participants were shown to pairs of facts and were asked to select the data point that they found most compelling and that they would include in a presentation if they had a limited time in front of an audience. Facts were presented multiple times, in a randomized order, with a different pairing appearing each time.

After participants spent five minutes ranking the data points, researchers probed about why they chose certain facts over others and why they found certain facts more compelling and effective. A record of all responses was captured by the software and a score/rank was assigned to each fact. This data was analyzed for patterns after the sessions concluded.

Responses to Sample Messaging

In the second exercise, we showed participants three versions of a fact sheet that an organization might distribute in community settings in Black communities (i.e. health fairs or in small businesses).

The fact sheets included a headline, an image, and three informational points about menthol under the heading, "Menthol: The Basics." how and why menthol is more addictive than other flavors, the history of tobacco industry targeting in Black communities and the rates of death and tobacco-related health problems among Black people. While the information stayed relatively consistent, the fact sheets were in the following frame/tone/voice:

> Baseline: Key messages focused on general facts about menthol.

> Moderate 'justice' frame: Key messages mentioned the Black community specifically and highlighted industry targeting & uneven protections as the causes of tobacco-related health disparities

> Strong justice frame: Key messages called on audiences to 'join the movement' and asked "why aren't we protected?" Industry responsibility & uneven protections were described in more provocative terms.

After exposure to each fact sheet, researchers asked participants to imagine the kinds of conversations it might spark, how different groups within Black communities might respond to the fact sheet, and to share their opinion on whether the fact sheet seemed like an appropriate and authentic voice from a white-led organization.

Responses to Opposition Messages

For the final exercise, we presented participants with the following set of arguments opponents have used to push back on the restrictions on the sale of menthol listed below. Participants were asked whether they were familiar with this line of argumentation, how they have countered the arguments if they were familiar, and whether they felt their counterarguments were effective.

> Police interaction: "If we ban menthol, we are only giving police more opportunities to harass Black people on the streets."

> Paternalism: "We don't need white politicians telling the Black community what is and isn't in our own best interests - that's paternalistic."

Questionable Priority: "Of all the problems that are facing the Black community, why are we taking on the issue of menthol cigarettes?"

Questionable Timing: "Why are we making menthol cigarettes an issue now? It seems like a distraction from the bigger issues that the Black community has raised."

Questionable Motives: "Why are they banning menthol, the flavor of cigarettes that Black people like? It's part of our culture."

Personal choice: "People should be able to choose whether they smoke or not, and if they want to smoke menthols, it's none of the government's business."

Woke Meets Smoke: "This is another instance of "woke" culture going too far. The people behind this ban are more interested in their reputation as so-called "allies" than they are about Black health."

The small group session and one-on-one interviews were analyzed for common themes and patterns.

About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a non-profit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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