

UCOP RGPO Conflict of Interest Case Study

Paul Pre-award Analyst has tried everything to kick his cigarette habit. One day while processing incoming grant applications, Paul notices an application entitled, “Ending the Habit Forever: A non-addictive synthetic nicotine substitute for use with electronic cigarettes.” Intrigued, Paul reads on to learn that research non-profit “Smoke-for-All” is requesting funds to conduct a clinical trial regarding the use of a nicotine substitute that mimics the sensation of smoking, with no adverse health effects.

Filled with hope, Paul immediately contacts Smoke-for-All and orders the Electronic Cigarette “starter kit,” complete with two drug replacement cartridges for only \$49.95 (including tax and express shipping). Paul makes sure to have the kit delivered C.O.D. to RGPO so that he can try it out during his morning cigarette break. To Paul’s surprise, when the starter kit arrives the delivery person informs him that the kit is free-of-charge, due to a special trial offer. Paul quickly loads the cigarette, and rushes to his break.

Several weeks go by and the impact of the fake cigarette drug is dramatic. Paul no longer has to force himself out of bed every morning, he feels, looks, and smells marvelous. In the elevator one morning fellow RGPO staffer, Tina Tobacco Research Program Director comments, “What have you done? It’s like we have a new, younger employee here at RGPO!”

Paul explains to Tina that this dramatic change is due to the Smoke-for-All drug, and invites Tina to a free lunch that Smoke-for-All will be giving that afternoon. Never one to pass up a free lunch, Tina agrees to come along, and also invites her office buddy from the Breast Cancer Grant Research Program, Penny Program Officer.

As Tina, Paul and Penny enter the Seven Seasons hotel for the lunch, Paul notices that there are several Smoke-for-All vendor booths set up. As they stroll by the booths, they all put their business cards in fishbowl raffle containers, and load up on the free give-aways; pens, desk clocks, key chains, tote bags, calculators and other branded office supplies. Penny also snags a stylish designer bag that has a subtle “SfA” clasp—no one would even notice that it is a vendor give-away. “What luck!” thinks Penny.

At the last booth Paul sees a sign that says “Research Subjects Needed.” Apparently Smoke-for-All is seeking feedback from new users of their synthetic drug, and will provide a six-month supply of Smoke-for-All (and nominal compensation) to all who would be willing to stay after the lunch for 45 minutes to fill out a survey questionnaire and participate in a focus group meeting. Realizing that he is nearing the end of his drug supply, Paul signs up to participate.

After a sumptuous five-course two-hour lunch (including an engaging presentation about the benefits of the Smoke-for-All drug) Tina and Penny say their good-byes to Paul and head toward the door. At the exit they see a sign that says “Raffle Award Winners.” Amazingly enough, both Penny and Tina see their names on the winner list. They head over to the award table to find that Penny has won a free weekend stay at the Seven Seasons, and Tina has won a new iPod and Smoke-for-All “starter kit” and six month supply of the Smoke-for-All drug.

“Well, the iPod is great, but the kit is of no use to me because I don’t smoke,” complains Tina. “But, I think my teenage son may have started smoking with that new group of friends he is hanging out with lately. So I will just leave this kit in his room as a subtle nudge.”

As Tina and Penny leave the hotel to head back to the RGPO Office, Tina comments, “That was a really interesting presentation and a great lunch; we should do this more often.”