



We Card: 25 Years as a Trusted Resource

For a quarter century, The *We Card* Program has trained and educated retailers and consumers alike.

BY SARAH HAMAKER

Since 1995,

customers have encountered the bright red-and-yellow *We Card* logo in convenience stores, tobacco retail outlets, grocery stores, pharmacies and other locations that sell tobacco products. “The impact of The *We Card* Program has been remarkable over its 25-year history,” said Doug Anderson, president of *We Card*.

Government studies around the time of *We Card*’s founding showed a 40% violation rate, which meant four out of 10 underage buyers were successful in buying tobacco. “*We Card* set out to correct that by educating the retailer and consumer,” Anderson said.

That year, the Coalition for Responsible Tobacco Retailing—made up of tobacco retailers and wholesalers, manufacturers and other industry groups—established The *We Card* Program to train and support retailers in selling tobacco products. “Now, the latest government study in 2018 found that only one out of 10 underage buyers were successful in buying tobacco—that’s evidence of the positive impact *We Card* has had,” Anderson said.

For the past 25 years, *We Card* has offered its national, comprehensive program to help retailers successfully sell age-restricted products. The iconic logo adorns stickers at checkout counters, posters on break room walls, tip sheets for managers and training materials for associates. Throughout its storied history, *We Card* has stayed true to its



mission to serve the nation’s retailers of tobacco, alcohol, e-cigarettes, vapor products and other age-restricted products.

“The U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) expects retailers to follow the law and take measures to ensure an individual purchasing tobacco products is 21 or older, including manually checking IDs,” said Mitch Zeller, J.D., director of the FDA’s Center for Tobacco Products. While the agency halted its compliance check inspection program in mid-March due to the COVID-19 outbreak, Zeller reiterated the importance of compliance. “The FDA had begun using people under age 21 in its nationwide compliance check inspection program to determine retailer compliance and expects retailers will continue to verify the age of anyone under the age of 27,” Zeller said.



Training and awareness: For over 25 years the iconic *We Card* Program materials have had powerful, positive impact.

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Retail Viewpoint

We Card changed the retail landscape by providing a comprehensive program to educate employees on how to sell—and consumers on how to purchase—age-restricted products. “It’s an effective way to ensure all of our associates have quick, easy tools and training in order to maintain compliance,” said Toni Doran, organization and operations training manager for Casa de Montecristo Inc., a chain with 20 locations. “I love the online training and the tracking software that helps us keep up with who needs recertification, etc.”

Wawa has been working with *We Card* for years. “We find *We Card*’s resources extremely helpful in making sure we are getting the full picture of our compliance needs,” said Jason Homola, Wawa director of category management. “It’s great having a trusted partner that is only a phone call away.”

The Kroger Co. has integrated The *We Card* logo into its virtual training. “This is a mandatory training course for all associates in a cashier role,” said Tracy MacDonald, compliance manager/product manager for The Kroger Co. “*We Card* fits in to our mission to take proactive steps to protect the health and safety of our associates, customers, and communities. The company has a continuing commitment to responsible marketing of age-restricted products and to the health and welfare of our nation’s youth.”

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Kroger displays *We Card* signage at the entrances, tobacco product displays, employee break rooms, and at each point of sale in each store. “The brand notoriety associated with the *We Card* logo provides a consistent and recognizable point of reference for both associates and customers. This aids our associates by providing a visual representation of the law during customer interaction,” MacDonald said.

Manufacturer Support

From *We Card*’s start, it relied on a broad cross-section of industry players, many of whom at the time had their own company-specific programs. For example, Altria partnered with *We Card* to get the message out. “The organization has been very proactive in asking us and other stakeholders for

ideas and suggestions in order to keep *We Card* on the cutting edge of technology and at the forefront of the issues surrounding age-verification programs,” said Kimberlee Pepple, senior director of corporate responsibility for Altria. “It’s been a very collaborative partnership that has allowed *We Card* to evolve and grow over its 25-year history.”

Because *We Card*’s overall objective is similar to tobacco manufacturers, the nonprofit company has found widespread support in the industry. “*We Card* has been a strong partner for us as we work together toward the same goal of ensuring tobacco products don’t get into the hands of youth,” said Kaelan Hollon, senior communications director for Reynolds American. “Their relationship with retailers has been essential to the success of the program.”

John Ostronic, director of external affairs for ITG Brands, sees the program as “the most outward example of the seriousness in which the retail and manufacturer tobacco industries take toward preventing underage consumers purchasing and possessing our products.”

That level of commitment contributed to the program’s status in the eyes of retailers and consumers. “*We Card* has been a key partner to

ensure retailers comply with age-verification requirements to keep all tobacco products, including vapor, out of the hands of those underage,” said JUUL Labs Chief Regulatory Officer Joe Murillo.

The longevity of the program has also helped enhance *We Card*’s status in the industry. “Long before government regulators realized how important it was for retailers to have these resources, *We Card* was there, filling the gap on how to properly age-verify tobacco and vapor products,” said Emil Weiss, regulatory affairs manager for Japan Tobacco International USA. “*We Card*’s responsible approach to eradicating underage purchasing of tobacco products has made it a trusted resource in this fight.”

Industry Partnerships

From its inception, *We Card* has asked industry organizations and associations for input and suggestions. “They have done an outstanding job of creating a standard within retail through their training, logo and materials,” said David Gaudet, president of The Bars Program, which conducts compliance shops at retail locations. “If I need to think about selling tobacco, I think about *We Card*.”

“*We Card*, their signage and entire program has made it commonplace for legal age adults to simply produce their ID without being asked when they want to purchase tobacco products,” added Thomas Briant, executive director of the National Association of Tobacco Outlets. “*We Card* also educates customers on the importance of providing their ID when buying tobacco products.”



Accessible Training: Starting in 2002, The *We Card* Program began offering award-winning online training programs furthering the cause.

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Senior Director of Corporate Responsibility
Altria Client Services



The stellar training materials from *We Card* supports retailers from managers to frontline employees. “We needed a program to effectively train our members on how to abide by the tobacco compliance laws, and We Card’s program met that need,” said Lyle Beckwith, senior vice president of government relations at the National Association of Convenience Stores. “I’ve been around since *We Card*’s founding and have seen how the program moved from classroom training to VHS to DVDs and now into interactive online modules.”

For Jim Calvin, president of the New York Association of Convenience Stores, the secret to *We Card*’s longevity and success lies in its consistent yet adaptable approach to its mission. “*We Card* has done a very good job monitoring the needs of the retail community and responding to them quickly, as it did with the federal Tobacco 21 compliance,” Calvin said. “*We Card* anticipates changes in the regulatory landscape and is ready with the tools retailers need to make any transitions and ensure compliance.”

The Future

We Card continues to innovate by adding more online training and working with the industry and retailers on solutions to social sourcing of tobacco products. “Minors are getting adults to purchase tobacco and vaping products for them, and as retail compliance continues to improve, social sourcing will continue to increase,” Anderson said. “Part of *We Card*’s future will be about how to raise awareness of social sourcing and how to find approaches to address the problem.”

These industry groups, retailers and manufacturers all agree that *We Card*’s willingness to engage in constant communication with retailers, manufacturers, trade associations and others on the issues surrounding age-restricted products is the reason the program continues to serve retailers and the public.

“*We Card* has been successful for a quarter century because we don’t stray from the fundamentals of making sure retailers and customers know how to legally purchase age-restricted products,” Anderson said. “And we continue to work with retailers through difficult situations, such as COVID-19 pandemic, to keep on mission. I feel confident that *We Card* is well-positioned to continue its work well into the future.” ●

Sarah Hamaker is a freelance writer based in Fairfax, Va.

We Card By the Numbers

In its 25-year history, *We Card* has gone from a startup nonprofit 25 years ago to the go-to organization for training materials and age-verification tools for retailers. During that time, the words ‘*We Card*’ transitioned to an action verb, a retail company policy and a corporate social responsibility program.

Overall, *We Card* was a major reason retailers moved from a 40.1% violation rate in 1997 to a 9.6% violation rate in 2018.

Here are some of the numbers telling just how far-reaching *We Card* has become.

- More than **1.1 million *We Card* kits** have been sent
- More than **500,000 retail employees trained** directly—who in turn generally train an additional 1:1 co-workers
- **90% of retail locations** selling tobacco have *We Card* signage.
- *We Card* has provided retailers:
 - + **4.3 million age calculation tools**
 - + **7 million training tools**
 - + **60,000+ monthly website hits** providing retailers with tools, law summaries and other key information needed to prevent underage sales.



The *We Card* Program is a national non-profit organization focused on ensuring that age-restricted product retailers are fully educated, trained and prepared to reject underage sales. For responsible retailing resources and more info visit www.wecard.org.

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