

## Until Her Last Breath, She Fought to Warn Others

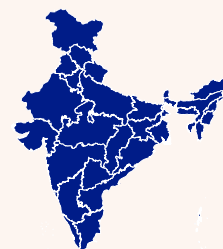
Sunita Tomar, from Madhya Pradesh, India, began using smokeless tobacco at the age of 22 and was diagnosed with mouth cancer just six years later, at the age of 28. Sunita was forced to leave her three young children at home to travel frequently to Mumbai for treatment at Tata Memorial hospital, where she underwent a lifesaving surgery to remove a large tumor from her jaws and cheeks. The surgery saved her life but left her permanently disfigured. Sunita's family struggled financially to be able to afford her treatment.

Vital Strategies' team met Sunita for the first time just before her operation and discussed collaborating with her on a testimonial campaign to warn others about the deadly harms of smokeless tobacco. Sunita believed that, like herself, many young people fall prey to tobacco, unaware of the life-threatening harms associated with it.

Sunita agreed to become the face of an anti-tobacco campaign as she witnessed the excruciating battle her family faced against tobacco-induced cancer. Sunita was passionate that a video testimonial could become an inspiration for millions of Indians to quit using tobacco. Sunita narrated her own story, and a national mass media campaign titled "Sunita" was launched in August 2014. The mass media campaign was aired for a period of five weeks in 17 languages on government and private TV channels and radio stations across India.

In a 30-second public service announcement (PSA), Sunita spoke openly about tobacco use leading to her disease and devastating her family. The PSA highlighted the financial, physical and mental trauma that Sunita and her family endured. On April 1, 2015, two months after the campaign launch, the government announced, new, larger tobacco pack warnings would be implemented.

April 1, 2015 is also the same day that Sunita died. As a parting appeal, she left behind a letter to Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, requesting larger graphic pack warnings on all tobacco products. Though the initial date of implementation was delayed after interference from the tobacco industry, a second social media campaign aptly called, #AnswerSunita, included her last letter to the prime minister.



### Population

1.35 billion

### Smoking Prevalence

19% of men, 2% of women, 11.2% of boys and 3.7% of girls currently smoke tobacco<sup>1,2</sup>.

### Tobacco Control Policies

Smoking is banned in many public places including hospitals, schools, government buildings and on public transport. Advertising through most forms of media is prohibited, including advertising tobacco products through sponsorships or promotions. Health warning labels are mandated on all packaged tobacco products. E-cigarettes were banned in 2019.

### Milestone

India's film rule specify that all films and TV programs produced after 2012 that depict tobacco include the following:

- Tobacco control health public service announcements at the beginning and middle of the film or TV program.
- Anti-tobacco "health warning" as a prominent message during the period of display of tobacco products or their use.

<sup>1</sup> Global Adult Tobacco Survey, 2009

<sup>2</sup> Global Youth Tobacco Survey, 2009



*#AnswerSunita social media campaign in India*

Sunita's initial testimonial served as a "framing tool," allowing advocates to portray the human side of the issue and the devastating health costs. The #AnswerSunita social media campaign, hosted on Facebook and Twitter, also included a "death clock" which represented the deaths caused every 30 seconds due to the delay in implementing larger health warnings, as well as a "profit clock" which showed the simultaneous profit the tobacco industry made since April 2014, while the number of deaths increased. With the help of civil society advocacy, the #AnswerSunita campaign generated over 200 media stories in its first three days.

Our advocacy efforts were able to counter the tobacco industry's delay tactics and led the way for the Indian government to implement larger—85%—graphic health warnings on all tobacco products. Sunita's brave fight against tobacco was instrumental in yielding this result.

This case study is part of a series highlighting our work with the Bloomberg Initiative to Reduce Tobacco Use in priority countries.

### **About Vital Strategies**

Vital Strategies is a global health organization that believes every person should be protected by a strong public health system. We work with governments and civil society in more than 70 countries to design and implement evidence-based strategies that tackle their most pressing public health problems. Our goal is to see governments adopt promising interventions at scale as rapidly as possible. To find out more, please visit [www.vitalstrategies.org](http://www.vitalstrategies.org) or Twitter @VitalStrat.