Below are the top ten reasons why we, as creators or performers, choose to portray the use of tobacco in our movie and television productions.

10. **What will I do with my hands?**
   Tobacco is a great prop. It gives the actors something to manipulate in their hands or, shall we say, a "bit of business." Because film and television are visual media, actors look for bits of business to keep busy in a scene, helping them to stay in character, and providing additional movement as visual stimulus for the audience. Otherwise, it might as well be radio.

9. **It gets me places.**
   Tobacco makes for a great transitional device. Looking for cigarettes, matches, a lighter, an ashtray, and so on are all great excuses for somebody to move around a room… or exit a room… or enter a room. Plenty of motivation for transporting characters in and out of a scene as needed, or to keep that visual motion happening when things get a tad too talky.

8. **Look Ma, no air.**
   Tobacco creates a great visual look when your director of photography reflects light off the smoke in the air. But to have all that smoke in a scene, you need a logical source… usually, we turn to cigarettes and cigars, throwing them into the hands and mouths of any actors and extras we happen to have handy.

7. **A picture is worth a thousand words.**
   Tobacco use is a great shorthand for conveying certain character traits with as little screen time as possible: rebellion, anxiety, machismo, adulthood, obsession, self-destruction, evil, hyperactivity, and many more. In the words of Jimmy Durante, "We got a million of 'em." The reason this sort of shorthand works so well is that we've seen a multitude of characters defined this way over the years. Why not take advantage of it? Can you say "cliché?"

6. **I smoke, therefore I am.**
   Smoking under certain circumstances is a great symbolic image representing sexuality, grittiness, dirt, grime, darkness, death, and…well…to paraphrase Sigmund Freud, "Sometimes a cigarette is just a cigarette." Yes, but in the movies and on TV, that's rarely the case. And the new frequency of cigar smoking on-screen…well…Freud must be blushing.

5. **It gets me where I'm going in time.**
   The time in which the story is set places certain obstacles in the way of the audience's suspension of disbelief. Any device that can be used to convey a sense of reality that is true to the era in which the story is set will be pulled out of the filmmaker's bag of tricks. Tobacco use, as an anachronism from the not-so-distant past, is one of many such devices. It enhances realism and that essential suspension of disbelief.
4. **To be true to myself.**
   There is sometimes a point to be made by tobacco use that is true to the tone of the film or the story or the character. Perhaps the smoking provides a touch of pointed irony. Perhaps it serves as that touch of contradiction or enigma or counterpoint called for at the moment. Perhaps it is an essential plot point for the story.

3. **Sometimes a cigar is a cigar.**
   There could be an anti-tobacco message attached to the smoking portrayed on-screen through dialogue, nonverbal reactions to smoking, or signs or posters used as set decorations.

2. **I can’t help it!**
   Sometimes the actors doing the smoking on screen are addicted to tobacco in real life. If an actor is addicted to tobacco, there is at the very least an increased likelihood that he or she will consider tobacco use as a creative choice in bringing the third dimension to his or her character. Let’s face facts: if you smoke, you’re likely to view your characters from the mindset of how a smoker responds to life’s developments.

1. **I’m a consumer like you!**
   The creators and performers who produce movies and television grew up watching the same classic movies as the rest of the public. Every day, they’ve been exposed to the magazine ads and billboards that were designed to convince the public—young people in particular—that smoking is a positive and normal behavior. Those persuasive messages have influenced the belief systems of people in all walks of life, including our creative community. On top of that, some tobacco use on screen is actually there to pay homage to the classic cinematic images of the past.

As creators, we make all sorts of conscious creative choices in the evolution of a film, television show, or performance. These choices range from the vast (such as setting, locale, and character gender) to the miniscule (unique character behaviors). One choice we deal with all too frequently is whether a character will smoke or use a tobacco product.

Over the years, tobacco use has become a kind of shorthand icon that symbolizes a wide variety of character traits, emotions, settings, or even entire genres (film noir, for example). It has become such an automatic tool in our creative bag of tricks (thanks to generation after generation of on-screen portrayals) that we often lose sight of the power such an image wields.

If we do our jobs effectively as creators, we weave a seamless fabric that becomes the audience’s reality for a period of time. For younger audience members, we not only reach them with hope, inspiration, or tragedy, we also model certain behaviors, attitudes, and styles, lending a certain legitimacy, normalcy, importance or desirability. In the case of tobacco, we may have provided the tobacco manufacturers with a valuable form of unpaid product placement which reinforces for children the commonly held myths that smoking is linked to sex, happiness, popularity, success, adulthood, and other qualities to which they aspire.

There are many possible alternatives to tobacco use which we might consider. Some of these alternatives have appeared on screen. Others have yet to be explored. When we search for a prop or a behavior to define a mood or character, have we settled for the easy creative solution by resorting to the old
standby of tobacco? Is there something out there just as effective in conveying that mood or character trait that we haven’t taken the time to develop?

These are essential questions to keep in mind as you approach each creative choice you face in your career in entertainment. There are no right and wrong choices. Armed with the facts, why not take the time to make more informed, carefully considered creative choices, arrived at on a case-by-case basis, rather than quick, easy, blanket choices. If you haven’t taken the time to fully consider all possible alternatives before settling on tobacco use for your production, you may not have fully done justice to your work, your creative vision, and your fertile imagination.