

# **The Good Guys Club**

## **Using Survey Methods and Positive Promotion to Encourage Retailer Compliance With Youth Access to Tobacco Laws**

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### ***Abstract***

The Good Guys Club (GGC) was developed to encourage tobacco retailers to comply with state youth access to tobacco laws and to voluntarily reduce tobacco advertising in their stores. A focus group of tobacco retailers was utilized to develop educational materials and positive recognition media products for retailers who agreed to participate in the GGC. Community members and leaders were provided information and asked to encourage tobacco retailers to reduce tobacco advertising and youth access to tobacco.

Approximately two years after inception, the GGC coordinators commissioned a telephone survey of tobacco retailers on their tobacco advertising practices, their level of understanding of the GGC and how the GGC could “wean” them off of tobacco industry support. Survey results showed that almost half of the retailers support restrictions on tobacco advertising and self-service tobacco displays in the interest of protecting children. Information gathered from the telephone survey was used to design the current restructured program which is funded by the State of California, Tobacco Control Section through June 2000.

### ***What’s the Problem?***

More than half of all smokers begin before the age of 14 and 90% by the age of 19. Numerous studies have shown that tobacco industry advertising and promotion lead the way in creating the demand for tobacco products by youth. Since the American Lung Association (ALA) recognizes tobacco use as a primary source of lung disease, working on reducing youth access to tobacco and promotion of tobacco products is a

national priority for the ALA.

The Superior branch of the ALA is located in Chico, CA; a rural northern California city where agriculture and cattle lead the economy. While many of the tobacco industry-preferred advertising venues such as billboards, busses and bus shelters, taxis signs, etc. are not found in this area, the tobacco industry has certainly infiltrated local retail markets. In many areas, “slotting fees” from tobacco companies to display and/or promote their products make the difference on whether a retailer makes a profit from one month to the next.

In 1995, the American Lung Association of California, Superior Branch received funding from the State of California, Tobacco Control Section to implement a positive merchant recognition and education program in three communities in northern California. Because current research literature suggests that tobacco retailers are a key group to target in reducing youth access to tobacco and tobacco advertising, a program was designed to encourage merchants to (1) comply with state youth access to tobacco laws, and (2) to voluntarily reduce retail tobacco advertising in their stores. This program became known as The Good Guys Club.

### ***Getting Started***

The first step in implementation was to build support among key opinion leaders throughout the three communities. The American Lung Association made presentations to business groups throughout the service area to heighten enthusiasm and support for the Good Guys Club as well as worked to obtain program endorsements from local law enforcement agencies and Chamber of Commerce. Program introduction letters and copies of endorsements were then mailed to a random selection of tobacco retailers as a recruitment tool.

### ***Gathering Data***

The second step in program implementation was to recruit, train and compensate youth and adult volunteers to survey a statistical sample of retail stores in the three cities for (1) tobacco advertising placement and number of ads, and (2) illegal

youth access to tobacco rates. During the survey, data on the number of, placement of and brands of interior and exterior tobacco ads were collected. This survey, known as “Operation Storefront”, was developed and disseminated by the State of California, Tobacco Control Section. Data on illegal youth access to tobacco was collected through youth purchase surveys throughout the service. The Operation Storefront survey showed that all three cities had a higher number of tobacco ads (37.6 images per store) than the statewide average of 25 images per store. Youth purchase rates were as high as 34%, as compared to the current state rate of 37%. While the illegal youth sales of tobacco rate in the service area was lower than the state average at that time, the percentage was still unacceptable. Program staff set a goal of reducing youth access to tobacco to no more than 20%.

### ***Spreading the Word***

After the baseline surveys on retail tobacco advertising and illegal youth tobacco purchases were completed, a focus group of several tobacco retailers was conducted by the American Lung Association of California, Superior Branch to develop the educational and merchant recognition materials for the program. The merchants gave invaluable information on tobacco industry practices. For instance, their contracts with the industry require that they allow the tobacco industry representative place advertising and promotions where they see fit. Failure to allow the "rep" his freedom resulted in “fines” levied against their slotting fees (estimated at \$ 200 and up to \$ 1,000 per month depending on the store) and a higher wholesale price for tobacco products. The merchants recommended certain media products to promote their business such as paid newspaper ads. They also let us know that it was going to be tough road- many retailers simply cannot afford a decrease in their slotting fees or to pay more for the product. Replacement point-of-purchase items such as open/closed signs, penny cups, clocks, etc. were welcomed as was signage on youth access laws for them to post in a variety of areas.

The American Lung Association’s first task was to design an informational brochure for the general public about tobacco advertising and youth access to tobacco

laws. This information was based on our own recent surveys, data collected from other organizations working on the issues as well as a review of the literature published in professional journals. The “call to action” brochure was disseminated through targeted mailings to community groups such as the Elks Club, Rotary, etc. and distributed at community events and public sites such as libraries. The brochure specifically requested that community members speak to listed retailers about their tobacco advertising practices. The American Lung Association received about six telephone calls from angry retailers who said that people had told them to stop promoting tobacco to kids!

### ***Involving Youth***

While staff fielded angry phone calls, youth groups were trained and compensated to recruit area merchants to the Good Guys Club program. The packets included much of the same information previously mailed to the retailers but added a special appeal from area youth. The requests were simple: (1) either remove tobacco advertising altogether or place at a minimum of 3' away from candy and snacks and above 3' and, (2) comply with the state-required youth access to tobacco signage laws by either educating employees on youth access to tobacco laws or allowing GGC staff to provide employee training.

By Winter 1996, 24 merchants had joined the Good Guys Club; agreeing to reduce or eliminate tobacco advertising in their stores as well provide their employees with information packets and training on youth access to tobacco.

To further involve the community in efforts to reduce retail tobacco advertising, the Good Guys Club conducted an art contest for elementary-aged youth in one of the cities in the project area. The focus of the contest was to appeal to the community to educate tobacco retailers on tobacco advertising. The artwork was displayed at the only shopping mall serving the three surrounding counties.

### ***The Media Package***

During the summer of 1995 and winter of 1996, Good Guys Club merchants

received paid media and promotional items to recognize their efforts to reduce or eliminate tobacco advertising. Media and promotional items included: In/Out door stickers, quarterly Chamber of Commerce newsletter inserts, radio public service announcements, paid newspaper ads, feature stories and letters to the editor in surrounding newspaper. Staff also operated booths at community events highlighting Good Guys Club members and distributed promotional items such as Good Guys Club balloons, bags and paper pads as well as brochures naming the Good Guys Club members in each area with a request for their patronage. The most significant media items however, were two television public service announcements (PSAs) rewarding two merchants who *eliminated* exterior tobacco advertising and severely restricted in-store tobacco advertising. The 60-second PSAs featured the merchant asking other merchants not to sell or promote tobacco to kids. Both PSAs also “starred” a local youth group thanking the merchants for their commitment to the health of children. The PSAs ran for two months on a local television station that produced the commercials and ran them free of charge. Both merchants reported being “quite pleased” with the spots and had received a lot of positive feedback from their customers (including smokers)!

### ***More Data Collections***

In January 1996, another youth purchase survey was conducted in the three cities to assess the success of the GGC program; the survey showed that illegal sales to minors had dropped to an average of 9.8%. Another Operation Storefront survey was conducted to assess what, if any, change had been made in tobacco advertising placement. Results showed little change from the baseline. Although tobacco-advertising practices had not changed much, much progress had been made in reducing the youth access to tobacco rate. In light of pending federal regulations for merchants regarding tobacco advertising and tobacco sales to minors, it was recommended that the Good Guys Club be re-funded with stricter requirements for Good Guys Club membership and more media benefits. The new program would also include assisting merchants in complying with the new federal regulations. That grant was accepted and funding started in January 1997.

In early 1997, the program contracted with California State University at Chico, Survey Research Center to conduct a telephone survey of all tobacco retailers in the service area and a control community to determine retailer attitudes towards tobacco advertising, interventions to help them reduce or eliminate advertising and knowledge of the Good Guys Club. The telephone survey yielded an 85% cooperation rate assuring program staff that the results were significant. Following is a summary of the findings:

- ◆ The majority (55.8%) stated that they use exterior and point-of-sale tobacco advertising however only 25.4% stated that they had tobacco advertising lower than four feet or within four feet of candy or snacks. Our Operation Storefront results yielded a 57.3% rate of advertising within these two limits!
- ◆ Almost half (48.5%) stated that they had other types of tobacco advertising such as open/closed signs, clocks, penny cups, etc.
- ◆ Many (58.9%) stated that they receive money from tobacco companies for tobacco product displays and tobacco advertising. Unfortunately, only 33% received money from vendors of other types of products such as soft drinks, etc.
- ◆ The majority (70.6%) stated that they have tobacco displayed on the counter and 29.1% acknowledged having self-service displays for tobacco; despite numerous studies showing a higher rate of theft from these methods than “clerk-assisted” methods such as behind or above the counter.
- ◆ Almost half (46.2%) had heard of the Good Guys Club however many did not know how to become a member of the club. Those who had heard of the club and knew how to join stated that benefits include: improved public image, timely information and materials on tobacco regulation and free advertising.
- ◆ About one-third (34.7%) stated that financial incentives are the best way to help them reduce tobacco advertising.
- ◆ When asked about proposed regulation of tobacco: Nearly half (46.3%

and 43.8%, respectively) stated that they would **support** a ban on tobacco displays and restrictions on the placement of retail tobacco advertising. The primary reason was to protect children.

### ***The New, Improved Good Guys Club***

As a result of this informative survey, the Good Guys Club was revised to include: (1) a quarterly merchant newsletter with updated state and federal regulations regarding tobacco advertising and access to minors; (2) increased media and promotional benefits including live radio remotes and point-of-purchase items such as penny cups and check writing pads; and (3) paid program representatives recruited and trained from a local university to visit members to ensure compliance and recruit additional members.

### ***Lessons Learned***

The lessons learned from this project are numerous and constantly changing. A short list would include: (1) Local tobacco advertising restrictions are a necessity. While many merchants support restrictions on tobacco advertising, most will not voluntarily institute these store policies. The financial incentives from the tobacco industry to advertise and display the product are simply too great to refuse; (2) Positive merchant recognition programs in relatively small, rural areas are a great way to involve several levels of the community: merchants, youth, community groups and media, all had input in the GGC and really helped create a community “buy-in”; (3) Don’t believe anybody. Many stores report that they comply with youth access to tobacco signage laws but upon inspection, most do not. Most stores report having very little tobacco advertising; especially at the eye level of small children (at or below 3'). Inspection proves otherwise; (4) Train and compensate volunteers to lead the program, not just participate in it. Compensating a Rotary group to take the program out “peer to peer” may have resulted in more members and, (5) Don’t rely on federal regulations. A few merchants cooperated with us because of pending federal regulations by the FDA. We held onto them when the regulations were delayed in 1996 because it was thought that they would

go into effect in the very near future. In August 1998, the 4<sup>th</sup> U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals determined that the FDA cannot regulate tobacco advertising, leaving us with no federal regulations to assist merchants in complying with and fewer reasons for them to participate in the Good Guys Club.