

North Valley Region: Chico

Voluntary Approach to Ads in Stores

Background

Chico is a rural college town located in northern-central California at the north end of Sacramento Valley. The median family income in town is \$28,000; in the surrounding agricultural areas it is \$22,000. The median age is 25 and the current population of 43,000 is comprised of 88% Caucasian, 5.6% Hispanic (almost all of Mexican descent), 3.5% Southeast Asian, 1.6% African American, and 1% Native American. Many residents are involved in a high level of physical activity including walking, roller blading, biking, and running. Bidwell Park, located in downtown Chico, is the 2nd largest municipal park in the nation.

Chico is viewed as progressive; new trends catch on quickly and are readily accepted. Large numbers of educated people produce high voting rates and involvement in civic issues. The general population is receptive to tobacco control issues. Chico was the second city in Butte County to pass a restaurant ban on smoking and is the only city in the county with an exterior signage ordinance and a ban on smoking in bars.

The staff of the American Lung Association (ALA) assessed **community readiness** using three methods. Community opinion surveys, key leader interviews, and merchant surveys documented local opinions about the influence of tobacco advertising on the community and the types of restrictions that would be supported by residents to counter pro-tobacco advertising. In the Fall of 1995 the data were synthesized by ALA staff who wrote the following in their action plan.

The community is aware and concerned with the number of tobacco ads and promotions but favors intensive education and attempts at voluntary change prior to ordinances. Data suggest that merchants may be willing to make some voluntary change. Community leaders voice a concern over prohibiting speech and advertising rights.

Based on this assessment of community readiness, the tobacco control program set the following **objective**:

By 6/15/96, have at least a 25% increase (from baseline measurements) in the proportion of intervention stores in Chico who a) have no tobacco ads or promotions within 4' of candy and snacks, b) have no tobacco ads or promotions at/below four feet and c) have the state required age-of-sale signs i.e., CA Penal Code Section 308 and STAKE Act posted.

Chronology of Events and Key Players

Between February and April of 1996, the project made six *observations* at retail outlets at two week intervals to document the amount and type of tobacco signage. A total of 78 stores sold tobacco in Chico. These stores were randomly assigned to intervention and control groups with 39 stores in each. College interns and coalition members conducted observations and continued to monitor the same stores for the duration of the project.

After the initial measurement, project staff conducted *merchant education* by sending personalized letters to merchants in the intervention group that explained the goals of the campaign. Subsequent observations prompted additional letters that either thanked the merchant for changing signs or ads or explained how to become compliant with the program goals. During the course of the project, a coalition member or high school age volunteer met with the owner or manager at every intervention store to explain the importance of complying with the established standards of reducing ads or posting appropriate signage.

One coalition volunteer stated, "The project made people aware that advertising of tobacco companies is targeted toward younger generations. Ads are often positioned and placed near candy and snacks and below four feet. Many vendors and store owners are now aware of ads targeting children; before they weren't."

In addition to direct merchant education, this project conducted a number of other activities to educate the community about the influence of pro-tobacco advertising and provide opportunities for informed individuals to voice their concerns to merchants and the community-at-large.

The project distributed *brochures* to over 100 community groups and encouraged people to talk to merchants about advertising practices. Brochures included the names of stores not in compliance, a description of the problem, and suggested actions that residents could take. Four store owners who were approached by residents called the project office to voice displeasure at being listed in the brochure and three of the four became compliant with the project goals.

The project held a *poster contest* with local school children on the theme "Tobacco Ads Target Kids". Flyers were sent out to local school art teachers describing the contest. Project staff also asked children at the Boys and Girls Clubs to make posters and supplied them with art materials. Sixty posters were displayed at the local shopping mall and the event was publicized by the mall manager. The high visibility location created an impact on the community with many smokers as well as non-smokers stopping to praise the posters. The mall manager reported receiving many positive comments from mall visitors, as did the project staff.

Project staff composed a *'letter to the editor'* and requested that members of the community submit a similar letter to the local newspaper. The sample letter demonstrated how to write a letter to the editor, stated the current statistics on tobacco advertising, listed the Phase II local findings, and provided the names and addresses of the editors for the two local newspapers. The Chico State Health Professionals Club, coalition members, and ALA board members were encouraged to write letters yielding at least six submissions, three of which were printed in two local newspapers, *Chico News and Review* and *Chico Enterprise Record*.

Both project staff and agency interns made *community presentations* on tobacco advertising and placement to students, parents, and staff of the Boys and Girls Club and students, parents and teachers at two parochial schools. At least 100 people were in attendance. After each presentation a letter was sent home with kids along with a "Camels Don't Smoke" sticker from the American Cancer Society.

Outcomes

The project was very successful in getting intervention stores to post required signs (Stop Tobacco Access to Kids Enforcement [STAKE Act] and age-of-sale signs) relative to control stores. Sixty-four percent of the intervention stores that did not have signs posted at the baseline measurement had STAKE Act signs posted after the intervention compared to 18% of control stores, a statistically significant difference. Seventy-one percent of intervention stores had age-of-sale signs after the intervention compared to 38% of control stores, a difference which approached statistical significance. The results were less dramatic, but still encouraging on measures of the presence of ads near candy. In the intervention stores, 30% fewer stores had signs near candy compared to 16% fewer control stores with ads near candy. On the measure of ads below four feet, there were 27% fewer intervention stores and 29% fewer control stores with those ads.

A manager of a large retail outlet voiced the opinion, "It was an easy thing to do to accommodate the guidelines as far as signage. The store wasn't going to lose anything because the signs above 4' for adults could still be up."

Nine merchants claimed to need corporate authorization prior to making any changes. Of the 9, two made changes but project staff did not know if they requested corporate approval. One of the remaining seven stores who refused to post a STAKE Act sign was cited for selling tobacco to a minor and received an additional penalty for not having the sign posted. The merchant now has the sign posted. Merchants who didn't remove ads below 4 feet and within 4 feet of candy and snacks gave the following reasons: this is the only place to put it; they are still working on it; no one asked them to move it; it is a corporate decision; it is a natural placement for ads.

An evaluation of merchant attitudes about ordinances, conducted at the end of the project, showed that 76% would support a ban on self-service displays of tobacco products, and 53% would support a restriction on the placement of ads below 4 feet or to at least 4 feet from candy or snacks.

Challenges and Solutions

In working with retailers, it is often difficult to identify and meet with the store owner who may only be present during limited periods. Store management may be handled by an employee or clerk with no authority to comply with the program goals, and in several instances, decisions are said to be made at the corporate level. There were some language and cultural barriers encountered with some foreign born retailers resulting in communication challenges.

A future strategy will encompass hiring program representatives, similar to product representatives from tobacco companies. This mechanism will be employed through the ALA "Good Guys Club" as a means to develop relationships with store owners for the long term.

Recruiting volunteers proved to be a challenge. Working with the Chico State Health Professional Club proved to be a valuable alliance. Students helped with the observations and received class credit for their participation.

Lessons Learned and Implications for Tobacco Control

The initial merchant letter set a positive the tone for the project. The letter cited Phase II statistics along with resident comments including information on how to work together to make the community more healthy. The letter closed by reminding merchants that the project staff wanted stores to be profitable. Repeated contact with merchants was crucial to maintaining project momentum and visibility. Project staff thought personal visits to merchants by volunteers and coalition members were more effective than multiple letters. This opinion was based on the positive interactions with merchants as well as by comments from merchants that they preferred face-to-face contact over annoying letters.

While merchants may be willing to cooperate in voluntary programs, project staff are aware that merchants won't maintain the changes without ongoing education. Since it is impossible to continue the level of outreach indefinitely, this may demonstrate the need for an ordinance.

The brochure was an effective strategy of informing community residents and encouraging residents to speak with merchants about advertising practices. The brochure provided statistics about tobacco advertising along with a list of merchants in the intervention group and gave residents ammunition they could use while talking to merchants about reducing ads. Five merchants called the project office to ask why they were listed in the brochure which provided yet another opportunity to reinforce the project goals.

According to project staff, the visibility of the poster contest also had an impact on the community and raised awareness of the issues.

Project staff reported feeling successful in their community education efforts because many volunteers learned about the impact of tobacco advertising and promotions for the first time. One coalition member noted, "If someone is concerned about how tobacco advertising is affecting people in general, they would get a lot out of this project as a volunteer in helping be part of the solution. If you don't do anything, you become part of the problem, not part of the solution."

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