

---

## DOCUMENT THE PROBLEM: The Political Environment

*Just as it is important to understand the public health problem imposed by tobacco marketing and sales to minors, it is important to understand the political environment.*

All aspects of the political environment must be investigated, no matter which public health issue is selected. It is the investigation of the political environment that tells us how easy or difficult it will be to win the desired policy and how to build an effective strategy to pursue it.

Think about the kinds of questions that will come up in a group discussion about whether to go for a licensing policy. What other tobacco control ordinances has the council passed? What are the attitudes among community leaders about regulating local retailers? Who would have to enforce such an ordinance? What are the attitudes of the mayor and council members to such an idea? Would the local paper endorse it? The answers to these questions about the political environment are as critical for the campaign as are public health data.

The leadership group will need to explore three different aspects of the political environment when it comes time to decide the issue focus of the campaign:

- Opinion leader perceptions of the issue
- The governmental record
- Background on key decision makers/office holders

### *Opinion Leader Perceptions*

---

Begin by reviewing existing research. The three-year, Proposition 99-funded, Educating Key Opinion Leaders Project is a good place to start. The project generated two statewide surveys and a number of key informant interviews seeking to describe key opinion leader perceptions on critical issues including: licensing, tobacco advertising in stores, youth access to tobacco and penalties for businesses that sell tobacco to minors. Opinion leaders' attitudes are broken down by categories of opinion leaders such as elected officials, nonprofit organizations, health, business, education, community services, government, law enforcement and media. For further information, see the following reports and interview protocols:

- [American Lung Association of California, Key Opinion Leader Survey, Year One Report, June 2000](#), prepared by Harder + Company Research, 41 pages
- [American Lung Association of California, Key Opinion Leader Survey \(Large Sample\), Year Three Report, 2002](#), prepared by Harder + Company Research (not completed)
- [American Lung Association of California, Key Opinion Leader Survey \(Small Sample\), Year Three Report, 2002](#), prepared by Harder + Company Research (not completed)

---

The American Lung Association of California (ALAC) research breaks down the data into 15 regions, making it possible to anticipate local opinion leader perceptions in most communities. Statewide surveys, however, cannot replace interviews of local opinion leaders, conducted by local prevention activists, using a questionnaire designed to explore the specific problems and policy solutions from the retail store environment. The questionnaires used in the ALAC research can help if the local campaign is designing its own survey.

The goal of opinion leader research is to assess the receptivity of community leaders to the issues and solutions you are proposing. We know that the values of opinion leaders are an important part of the political environment which gives direction to decision makers. When conducting key informant interviews with local opinion leaders, make sure to talk with leaders from the business community, law enforcement and the media. A collateral benefit of conducting such interviews is the opportunity it affords to identify new and powerful supporters who might otherwise have remained unknown.

## ***The Governmental Record***

---

Some key questions that can be answered from governmental records include:

- What tobacco-related policies have been passed by the local government? What policies have been proposed but not passed?
- Who is responsible for enforcing them?
- How well are they being enforced?

Most of these key questions can be answered with a little research at city hall, police headquarters or the county government building. Knowing when an ordinance was passed, who voted for and against, and any concerns registered by department heads can be helpful. For example, some of those who voted on an earlier ordinance may still be in office. (For more information, see Bobo K, Kendall J, Max S, "Tactical Investigations," in *Organizing for Social Change, Midwest Academy Manual for Activists*, Seven Locks Press: Santa Ana, 2001, pp. 232-274.)

The record of enforcement is very important. The department enforcing the ordinance keeps records of warnings, citations and other enforcement actions, but it may be organized haphazardly and difficult to compile. Interview the employee or officer responsible for enforcement as part of the investigation. You want to get enforcement statistics, but you also want to get a statement from the chief enforcement officer about whether they are committed to enforcing tobacco control laws, and what specific problems they encounter in their enforcement activity.

---

Veterans of past tobacco control efforts or retired elected officials, who were our champions during previous campaigns, can also provide important guidance. They can give a unique perspective on how city or county government may handle our current requests. Begin the investigation of the government record by talking with the veterans first. Often their advice will save time and a lot of frustration.

## ***Background on Key Decision Makers***

---

In general, tobacco prevention activists are unfamiliar with who's who in local government. The first step is to go on the local government web site where the rosters and biographies of the elected officials are usually available. Even the short biographies can be helpful because they reveal what the elected officials have done in their business or professional careers before being elected to public office. It is important to know whether a council member was a teacher, a nurse, or ran a retail grocery store in town. You need to know whether the council member sits on the board of the chamber of commerce or is high up in a Parent Teacher Association. You will not get everything you need off the web, but it is a very good start.

You also want to know how strong the officeholders are in their own districts. One measure of that strength is vote totals in previous elections. The goal of this effort is to begin the process of selecting a champion and identifying the key target, the person you have to convince.

- Who did they run against?
- What was the margin of victory?
- When is each officeholder's next election?
- Who is termed out and who will be running again?
- What is their voting record? (With a little more digging you can determine who among the current council members has a voting record on past tobacco issues that have come before the council.)
- What do your key informants say about each of them? Someone in the core group may know a lawyer who lobbies at city hall. What is the lawyer's opinion about who would be for or against an ordinance?
- Will the councilman's office tell you what his/her position would be?

The target (decision maker) may not be the most out front opponent of your issue. For example, the liberal mayor who has ambitions for higher office and relies on business contributors may be the real obstacle to passing a policy, while the cigar smoking, cattle rancher may be the most visible opponent. If the mayor is brought around to support the policy, the cigar smoker simply does not get enough votes.

---

An obvious line of inquiry in the early research is to investigate and identify the council members' major campaign contributors. Are real estate interests prominent in the contribution reports, or is it mostly local attorneys? Are there any contributions from outside the community? Since some contributions will be coming from individuals, it is important for the person reviewing these records to have a thorough background and knowledge about who's who in town. Checking the background of the targeted officeholder may reveal a conflict of interest or some lie or half-truth that undermines their credibility and influence. While it is rare to find this kind of information, it can be valuable information when designing a campaign strategy because it reflects political weakness among opponents.

The goal of collecting this information is to complete the picture of the political environment you will operate in as you pursue the policies or interventions under consideration. Knowing the backgrounds and histories of the office holders will not reveal whether a particular campaign will win, but it may tell you that "Issue #1" has two out of five likely "Yes" votes while "Issue #2" has four out of five likely "No" votes. This intelligence is invaluable in choosing your future direction. As you begin designing your campaign strategy later, this information will be central to selecting your issue campaign, identifying your target officials and developing your tactics.

**[Back to DOCUMENT THE PROBLEM: Political Environment](#)**