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## IMPLEMENT ACTIVITIES: Merchant Education

### *Lessons from Past Efforts*

From numerous case studies, it is clear that merchant education can be an important component in the process of eliminating tobacco sales to minors and reducing tobacco advertising in retail outlets. Voluntary merchant education programs alone, however, are not sufficient to affect permanent change in your community. To achieve positive results, it is necessary to include additional intervention strategies along with merchant education programs. Merchant education should be viewed as the first step toward developing, implementing and enforcing strong local ordinances to ensure that store environments do not become marketing tools for the tobacco industry.

While merchant education programs alone tend to yield a relatively small reduction in illegal sales of tobacco products to minors, they often do result in broad community support and can set the stage for the more punitive action of police department enforcement. Educating the merchant and the community at large about tobacco control laws usually demonstrates to the enforcement agency that a serious effort was made to obtain voluntary compliance with the law. As a result, when educational strategies fall short of project goals, enforcement agencies are more likely to take action.<sup>1</sup> (A broad-based coalition and support from local media and community leaders can be beneficial when enforcement decisions are being made.)

### *Merchant Education Outreach*

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This section describes different approaches for working with your merchants as well as tips that have proven successful in previous merchant education efforts. The structure of your project will be based on factors including your budget and time constraints, the nature of your community and the level of commitment you perceive from your staff and volunteers. Three of the most common merchant education approaches include indirect contact, direct contact and employee training. Many groups choose to use a combination of these three, depending on resources and the specific goals of the project. Following are brief descriptions of each approach.

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#### **Indirect Contact**

This approach is often used by businesses among themselves. For instance, local business groups (i.e., Chamber of Commerce and service clubs) often have regular meetings to communicate with their constituencies. They also use newsletters and emails to communicate their messages to a larger number of organizational members. Time constraints, however, restrict these businesses from regular attendance at meetings, rendering indirect contact minimally successful.

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## Direct Contact

This is the most commonly used merchant education strategy. It is the most personal approach and most often uses packets with educational materials to train and educate retailers. Here are the steps to follow:

1. **Document the problem.** Survey the stores and assess the community. (Youth coalitions and volunteers are good resources.)
2. **Identify the objectives.** Be clear and specific about the changes that need to be made. With well-defined objectives, it is easier to select activities that help achieve goals.
3. **Select the target stores.** Campaigns can be community wide or area specific. For example, in Operation Storefront, the San Francisco Coalition targeted stores on certain blocks within the Mission District.
4. **Build community support.** This step is critical for a successful campaign. It shows retailers the broad base of concern and interest in seeing that changes occur. (See *Getting Media Coverage* in [Develop a Strategy](#) section for more details.)
5. **Develop the message.** Campaign materials should be clearly written and brief. Determine the method for delivery of materials to vendors—mailing or hand delivery by a coalition or community volunteer. Determining packet content is vital.
6. **Contact retailers—again and again!** Successful merchant education programs should involve multiple mailings, multiple visits or both. Tips for visits include:
  - Make frequent eye contact with the retailer
  - Personalize your presentation by mentioning the person's name
  - Speak slowly and enunciate your words
  - Be polite
  - Leave a handout or poster
  - Provide promotional items
  - Be concise and specificContacting the merchant is important to the success of merchant education strategies. It requires consistent and frequent contact with the retailers. Unfortunately, retailers themselves are often too busy to allow this frequent contact to occur.
7. **Evaluate your impact.** Success is measured by the amount of change that has occurred. Repeat the survey that was conducted before the campaign began. This evaluation helps to:
  - Determine the effectiveness of the campaign efforts
  - Identify merchants that made changes
  - Provide feedback (impact and successes) to the community
  - Give a sense of accomplishment and pride to those who worked on the campaign

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Remember, *Getting Media Coverage* (see [Develop a Strategy](#)) is a good way to get your results communicated to the community.

**8. Reward merchants who have changed a specific behavior.**

Recognition is important and can be given in a number of ways, including:

- Sending a letter of appreciation to the store owner (see [Follow-up Letter](#) and [Merchant Recognition Certificate](#))
- Featuring the merchant in a regular monthly mailing to retailers
- Securing media coverage of the retailer
- Encouraging community members to support those stores that have made changes

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## Merchant and Employee Training

Providing training for merchants and their employees is another method to affect permanent behavioral changes. However, employee-training programs can be time intensive and very expensive. The retailer focus groups found that many merchants prefer not to attend trainings or to send their employees. Employee training programs are often too time consuming to be considered worthwhile. While we do not recommend conducting training programs for retailers, if you choose to incorporate employee training into your merchant education program, you should consider including the following topics:

- State, local and federal laws
- Information on the effects of tobacco on the health of minors
- Requesting IDs from those appearing younger than 25
- Learning to identify fake IDs
- Improving refusal skills
- Eliminating all self-serve tobacco displays

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## Intervention Tips

Following are ideas on how to better understand and work with the retailer community.

### ▼ Establish Relationships with Merchants

Establishing relationships with merchants and repeat contact is crucial to maintaining project momentum and visibility. Developing relationships with retailers prior to making requests of them both increases the overall effectiveness of the project and makes it easier to have constructive interaction with them. A good example of establishing relationships with merchants can be found in the San Francisco Tobacco Free Project case study, [Health Promotores](#).

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### ▼ Understand Your Retailers

Try to understand that for retailers, making voluntary and legislated changes can have real economic impact. Storeowners often receive incentives or slotting and placement fees for promoting certain brands of tobacco. They receive useful items that help defray costs such as shopping baskets, clocks, penny cups, writing pads, door entry signs, etc. They may be paid to place tobacco advertisements in their windows. Retailers who seem reluctant to reduce advertising may fear real financial loss from reduced sales. Offer them alternatives (incentives) when possible. Merchants can feel pressure from their tobacco industry representatives. Often merchants feel strongly that what they sell in their own stores (as long as its legal) is up to them and that no one should be allowed to dictate otherwise. They may react strongly to tobacco control advocates asking them not to sell tobacco products.

### ▼ Develop Your Materials

When developing your materials or information packets, state clearly what you want from the retailer. Be specific about which types of ads you are asking them to remove and from which areas. Do not change your request part way through the program. Localize the information including materials on local ordinances and local youth purchase rates when possible. Emphasize that this is a community-oriented effort to help merchants feel part of a proactive project and less like they are being attacked or blamed for a problem they do not consider their fault or responsibility. Frame the issue in a positive manner; make it personal. Asking, “Do you have kids?” usually gets merchants attention faster than accusing them of doing something wrong. Merchants are members of the community and want to be seen as “good neighbors.”

Your packets should reflect your community. Here are possible materials that might be included in your merchant education packets:

- A *cover letter*, with a brief introduction of your project including project goals, information on how to use the packet materials, and a list of supporting agencies and organizations. (The cover letter may be co-signed by your local chief of police or city/county attorney.) See [Sample Cover Letters](#).
- *Copy of federal and state laws and local ordinances* along with guidelines as to how they apply to the retailer. For a summary of state and federal laws, see [Tobacco Control Laws Affecting Retail Businesses](#). Brochure also available through TECC, (800) 258-9090, ext. 103 or 230.
- A *STAKE Act sign*, for posting at each cash register stating it is illegal to sell tobacco to minors, and naming the law. STAKE Act signs are *required* at all cash registers in retail locations selling tobacco. (“We Card” and other tobacco industry issued signs are not sufficient under the law.) Available through TECC, 800-258-9090, ext. 103 or 230.

*Take a community-oriented tact when approaching businesses.*

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- *Pledge statements* to be signed by both the store owner/manager and employees stating that, in complete compliance with the law, this establishment does not sell tobacco to minors. It should be placed in a conspicuous place for all employees to read. See [Merchant Pledge](#).
  - *Tip sheet* on tobacco use by teens, including youth purchase survey results from your community. The sheet can also contain information about the influence of cigarette advertising among children. See [Just the Facts: Illegal Tobacco Sales to Minors and In-Store Advertising](#).
  - *Copy of a resolution* from the community's City Council or Board of Supervisors in support of your program. See [Resolutions of Commendation](#).
  - *Check ID card* with guidelines on how to accurately check a person's age on their ID as well as identifying fake IDs. (Contact TECC Resource Center, (800) 258-9090, ext. 161, for samples of what other CDHS/TCS-funded projects have created.)

#### ▼ Deliver Your Packets

There are several options for delivering materials. Again, how you present the packet depends on the size of your community, the scope of your project and the various resources you have at your disposal. Some projects have asked volunteers to hand deliver the materials; others have had the police deliver them to stores. Sending well-trained youth volunteers to deliver materials can be an effective way to win the attention and support of merchants. (Though there are no significant statistical differences between the post-test results of stores who had their materials hand delivered and those who received material by mail, there is anecdotal evidence that merchants responded well to the volunteers who delivered them.) As mentioned before, developing a rapport with the merchants makes your work easier and less stressful, even if compliance itself is not necessarily affected.

Mailing your packets is also an option. Use a distinctive envelope (one project used envelopes with a police department return address) to minimize the chances of the materials getting lost in the shuffle of junk mail. See if your city or district attorney will allow the materials to be sent using their return address. Merchants indicated in focus groups conducted in 2001 that unless envelopes have an official appearance, they often will not take the time to read them.

#### ▼ Approach the Merchant as an Ally

It is important to give some thought to your in-person visits; having the merchant as an ally is far more useful than antagonizing him/her. While you do not need to give the store advance notice of your visit, keep in mind that the retailer is at work and likely to be busy. Be prepared with a brief three to five minute introduction. Make sure anyone visiting a merchant is well versed in the project goals as well as in

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state and local laws; the impression they make will reflect on the rest of the project. All interactions should be conducted in a non-threatening but confident manner. Please see [Merchant Education Protocols](#) for helpful ideas on in-person visits to merchants.

#### ▼ Merchants' Preferences for Receiving Information

In focus groups conducted for *The STORE Campaign*, retailers explained that they often get information on tobacco laws from a variety of sources, including their tobacco industry representative. This is confusing and inconvenient for them; many said they would prefer that the information come from only one source. When possible, retailers indicated they would also prefer information be hand-delivered. If mailed, they expressed a desire to see the information come in clearly marked envelopes so as to distinguish them from junk mail. A few retailers suggested alternative sources of information such as e-mail, web sites, and videos; however, most retailers indicated they are too busy to utilize these resources. (See [Document the Problem: Merchant Education](#) section for further details.)

### *Only a Component of Your Overall Strategy*

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A variety of merchant education strategies have been used throughout California to help reduce both youth sales rates and tobacco advertisements in stores. We cannot stress enough that if your community is considering a merchant education strategy to effect real permanent change in your store environments, you must include other components such as media strategies; policy development and implementation; and strong enforcement mechanisms. If you rely solely upon merchant education strategies to change both merchant and youth behaviors regarding tobacco in your community, you are less likely to be successful in the long run. Below are several case studies documenting how other California communities have used merchant education as a beginning point to affect positive change in their store environments.

- [Citizen Citations](#), LA Link (1997)
- [The Good Guys Club](#), ALA Superior Branch (2000)
- [Health Promotores](#), San Francisco Tobacco Free Project (1993)
- [Effectiveness of an Intervention to Achieve Voluntary Reductions in POP Tobacco Advertising](#), Vista Community Clinic (June 2000)
- [Voluntary Approach to Ads in Stores](#), North Valley Region

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### *References*

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1. Feighery, et al. The effects of combining education and enforcement to reduce tobacco sales to minors. *JAMA*, 1991;266:3168-3171.

General references were made from *The Tobacco Free Youth: How to Reduce Sales to Minors in Your Community Guide* (1992) produced by the Health Promotion Resource Center at Stanford Center for Research in Disease Prevention and the North Bay Health Resources Center in Petaluma, CA.