The Role of Data Visualization in Generating Retail Campaign Media Coverage
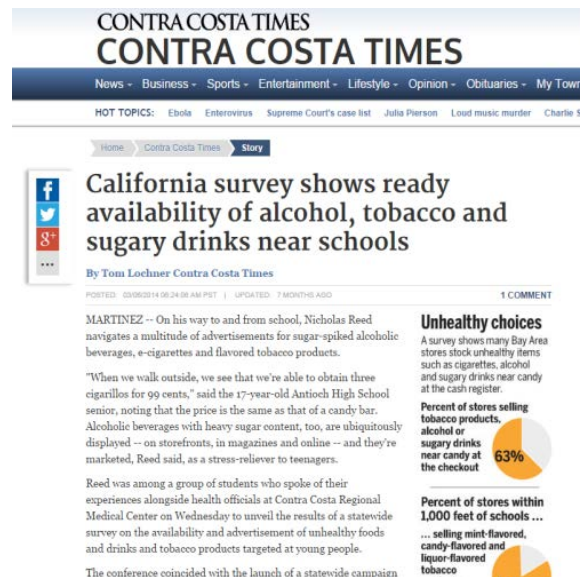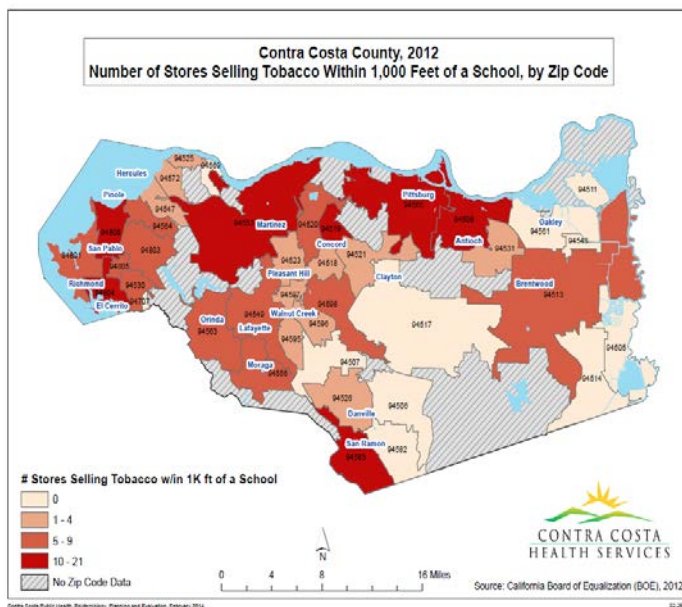
by Miriam Hartig

If you work for local lead agency, chances are someone on your staff received a call from us in the last month asking about data visualization. *What was all that about?*

Well... we were conducting a bit of research. We know that when engaging in advocacy work, generating media coverage about program findings is crucial for promoting community interest in the issue. To do this, it's necessary to translate evaluation findings into eye-catching representations that grab readers' interest and tell a compelling story. So we wanted to understand how data visualization may have played a role in generating media coverage for the retail campaign.

In advance of the coordinated Healthy Stores for a Healthy Community media events held in March, the media unit at the California Tobacco Control Program generated some excellent data viz pieces customized for each local project which were distributed in press packets and used in presentations around the state. In addition to that, a number of projects supplemented these materials with their own data visualizations. As a result, over 260 media stories were generated—stories like the one below that appeared in the Contra Costa Times. Here, you can see that the newspaper picked up the key message contained in a map which Contra Costa County created to show the number of stores selling tobacco near schools. A clear correlation between data viz and media coverage.

What did we learn?

Most of the time, though, the relationship was not that apparent. Of the 37 local lead agencies which participated in our survey or interviews, only 11 produced supplemental data viz material for the media release. In a way it's understandable that more projects didn't, since they already had professional, jurisdiction-specific materials provided by CTCP.

However, some reported that time was a factor and that they *did* develop visualizations with retail results *after* the media events. Examples range in sophistication from simple tables to highly interactive retail maps. To the right you'll see San Mateo County's data dashboard which allows users to zoom in on retail stores throughout the county and see their alcohol, tobacco and nutrition ratings.
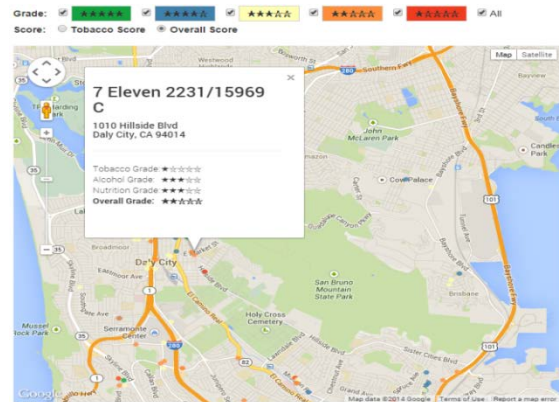
Did programs create data viz for other purposes?

With the exception of a few, most projects we spoke with produced some sort of data visualization in 2013-2014—both to communicate retail campaign results, but also for their work on other objectives. The use of these materials ran the gamut from flyers for community education to presentations for policy makers, but were most often used for internal purposes like reporting or sharing with coalition partners. Surprisingly, few said they posted the visualizations on their websites or social media.

How come?

While almost everyone we talked to agreed that data visualization is a powerful way to deliver a message, many informants said they just don't have the resources to develop the caliber of data viz they would like. Projects are often short on staff, time, tech access, or knowledge of graphics programs. **It became clear to us that there was big gap in what programs would *like* to do with data viz and what they felt *capable* of doing.**

So, even though we hoped to find a nice correlation between the use of data viz and media attention in the retail campaign, what we found instead seems to be much more instructive. There is a clearly a wide range of skills, knowledge, and utilization of data visualization at the project level and as a capacity building center, we see this as a great opportunity to help develop or enhance an important skill set for California's tobacco control programs. Thanks to the feedback we got from informants, the Tobacco Control Evaluation Center is planning to develop a bunch of resources on data visualization in the coming months.

Because you asked for it…

Here's what we've got in the works:

- **More webinars and tutorials on specific data viz topics.** Many informants expressed interest in learning how to create *infographics* and *maps* to highlight the outcomes of their objectives.

- **A gallery of data viz examples and templates.** Projects unanimously lauded the CTCP materials for their usefulness and simplicity. For time-strapped programs, having professional-quality materials that can easily be tweaked to reflect their county's data will be very useful.

- **Available individualized technical assistance.** Sometimes you are not sure if your visualization is really communicating a key message effectively. That's where a second eye can invaluable. If you want feedback on your data visualizations or need to brainstorm the best way to spotlight your data with visuals, call TCEC. We are here to help!

For those who generously gave their time to be surveyed and/or interviewed, thank you so much! Your input was extremely valuable both for our presentation at the American Evaluation Association about this topic and for improving the services offered by TCEC.

Here's Catherine sharing some of our findings at the presentation she and Robin gave at the conference. They featured **your** work to an interested audience of almost 50 people who attended despite the fact that it was 8 a.m. on a Saturday!
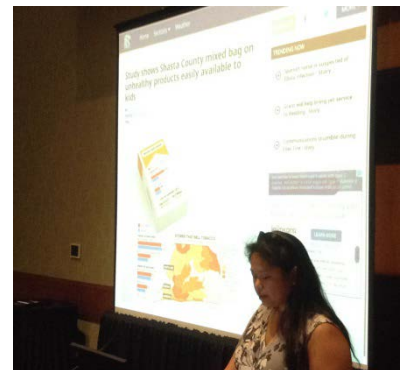
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