Seeing through a Camera's Lens:
 Using Photographs in Evaluation

We often use the phrase "a picture is worth a thousand words," indicating that images not only have the power to tell a whole story, but that they can also prove something. That's why pictures also work for evaluation purposes.

Many of us have used photographs to illustrate a tobacco-related issue or tobacco control success. Few of us, however, have thought of using photography as a data collection method. And while you have already laid out your evaluation plans for the rest of this funding cycle, it may be worth considering to enhance your evaluation through photography and to think of using this data collection activity in future plans.

Over the past two decades, telling stories with pictures has become a respected and well-documented method for research and evaluation. How exactly can photo documentation be used in tobacco control work? There are three main uses:

1. to record and reflect personal and community strengths and concerns, for example by showing photos that demonstrate youth involvement in an evaluation activity, or through images that show new tobacco-related signage
2. to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about issues through group discussions of photographs, for instance during the CX process when working with coalition members to set priorities
3. to demonstrate issues to policy makers, for instance when showing them photos of cigarette litter in parks to illustrate the severity of the problem and the need to address it.

Photos can also be used in conjunction with other data collection activities, such as focus groups. To get a conversation going among the tenants, the facilitator may show a number of pictures taken in the apartment complex of litter, signage, people smoking, or even simply tenants sitting on their balconies.

These pictures may be used as prompts to generate a discussion about whether and to what extent a secondhand smoke problem exists in the apartment complex. The activity becomes even more powerful if tenants are invited beforehand to take pictures about the issue for the meeting where each participant can tell the story of their picture to the group.

The most obvious way of using photographs is to

capture observation data. While frequencies (or counts of how many times something occurs) are important in observations, a photo can literally illustrate the issue at hand and carry as much weight with a policymaker as the number count.

Documenting issues with photos can also be a good way to engage youth in your project. Young people's creativity is often sparked by using any kind of technology, and some of them may already be avid photographers. Give a young person a camera, and s/he will be sure to hunt for images.

But a word of caution is warranted. While taking photos of people in public places is allowed, the activity becomes legally sticky if you then use those pictures to portray something in a negative light (like smoking). To avoid this issue, have anyone who is recognizable in the shot sign a consent form (see our website for one). Alternately, you can blur faces with photo software or use pictures where faces are not recognizable, for instance by photographing people's backs or when they are turning their heads. And do not take pictures inside stores; it is not legal unless the store clerk or manager has given consent. Be creative, but be mindful of the harm a photo may cause to an individual.

There are many ways of using photography in evaluation. For more ideas, do an internet search on "photovoice" and get great examples of research based entirely on photos.

Photos courtesy of istock photo