

Hot, Medium or Mild? Pursuing 'No Smoking' Polices with Taco Trucks

By Robin Kipke

When it comes to finding hot food on the go, the nomadic nature of taco trucks or catering vans can come in handy. However, the very fact that they are mobile makes it that much harder when you are trying to get them to adopt 'no smoking' outdoor dining policies.

There are A LOT of taco trucks in the Central Valley cities of Modesto, Patterson, Ceres and Salida—around 89 in fact. But knowing where and when to find them is the trick!

Lupe Parra, with the Fresh Outdoors Project in Stanislaus County, knows this firsthand. Traditional approaches to reaching taco truck owners did not work. Her project sent out letters to all owners explaining their objective and their desire to conduct patron and staff surveys, but no one responded. So Lupe went to the parts of town where taco trucks congregated and learned how the mobile food truck business worked.



Establishing Contact

"You need to go in with a plan," Lupe says. Taco truck personnel are always busy. Take your business card, introduce yourself and ask for the owner's name. She warns, "At first, [the staff] are hesitant to tell you anything. However, once you assure them that you are not from the health department and that you're not leaving until you get what you came for, they'll talk to you." It also helps if you speak the language.



Be friendly, keep messaging short and give them something they can see. "I take fact sheets on the dangers of secondhand smoke (in Spanish)—really basic information with pictures because you only get about a minute to get their attention," Lupe recommends. Make sure they know everything (including signage) is free. Use small incentives to get them to participate in surveys or key informant interviews. Explain, "I just want to get some feedback from you guys."

Once you find out the owners' schedules, try to catch them before they open for business. Explain your purpose. Say, "I know you are trying to conduct a clean, safe and successful establishment here," Lupe advises. [They appreciate that someone else is acknowledging what they are trying to do.] Make sure they know the policy is voluntary. Mention that going smoke-free is a new and popular thing that everyone is doing.

The Proof Is in the Pudding

Tell them they can be sure it's what customers want if you are allowed to survey their patrons. Lupe would survey at lunchtime, their busiest time. She'd bring a bag of giveaways (bandaids, pens, stickers and keychains). These would catch the attention of kids and parents. She'd first target the kids and ask their parents if she could give them a small prize if the parents would take a survey. "Once they agreed, then everyone around them would know what I was doing and wanted to participate," Lupe explained.



The results confirmed that families who go and dine don't like the smell of smoke. She went back to the owners with the data and said, "I think this feedback will help you." They wanted to see the evidence for themselves, so Lupe showed them the survey responses one by one and this was very convincing. "They were really glad to see the information." And when she suggested we could post customer comments from the surveys on Yelp and mention that the truck was going smoke-free, "they were like 'Oh yeah! Wow!'"

Work the System

One thing that can speed the process of policy adoption is WHO you get on board. Lupe was able to convince one owner whose family has eight different trucks to go smoke-free. "Once I got him to sign, I made sure everyone knew. Then others said, 'Oh, if he signed, then I don't have a problem with it. I'll sign.'" She got three additional contracts signed because of that.

Lupe's project objective was to get 10 trucks to sign the policy. They have already gotten 18 different owners to sign, with more pending. Each truck will receive English/Spanish 'no smoking' signs with their name and logo on it. Once the signs are ready, the project plans to generate media coverage to highlight the businesses that are going smoke-free. Lupe

anticipates, “Once we do that, the word will spread. Nobody should have a problem with it after that, because they will read about it and see that others are doing it (and getting free press).”

Epilogue

Lupe’s prediction is already coming true. Since TCEC’s initial interview with her, Lupe has been featured in an article in the Modesto Bee newspaper and on Univision’s morning and evening news shows. From this publicity, her project received a number of calls from more truck owners wanting to go smoke-free. “The Hispanic community is hearing about our work,” Lupe shared modestly.

Photos by: [Lupe Parra](#), [cfarivar](#), [The Hungry Dudes](#)