

CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS WITH RETAILERS

Introduction

To evaluate California's Healthy Stores for a Healthy Community Campaign, many Prop 99 funded tobacco control projects are conducting interviews with retailers in order to learn their opinion on proposed retail policy changes, the impact of policies on their business, their vision for their retail stores in the future, and similar topics related to tobacco control and healthy stores. However, health department officials and local organizations may not feel comfortable conducting these interviews for fear of not being able to get access to retail store owners and managers or not finding the right tone to have a conversation about policy suggestions, or simply because they are inexperienced in conducting interviews. This tool is designed to help interviewers in the retail setting.

The Tobacco Control Evaluation Center (TCEC) did not create a key informant interview for retailers because Prop 99 funded projects are working on a wide variety of tobacco retailer projects. The questions in this tool are suggestions and will need to be tailored to your own situation. You may also be looking for very specific information, and it is fine to be very precise about what you are trying to find out. **Approaching a retailer**

Unlike in a survey, where data quality depends to a large degree on the consistency in asking every respondent the exact same question, the interview is intended to solicit individual nuances in responses to questions, and the goal is to get "rich" information. Making retailers comfortable to talk freely is therefore very important. Keep in mind that retailers may be defensive when approached by someone with a public health agenda who may not approve of the products they sell. Here are some do's and don'ts regarding approaching tobacco retailers:

Approach retailers in good faith. The retailer provides a service to the community by offering products people need or want. Your organization also provides a service to the community by advocating on behalf of people's health. Do not approach the retailer with an attitude of superiority, assuming that your service is superior to the service the retailer provides. Start with an attitude of common interest – you both serve the community.

Introduce your request for an interview by acknowledging the retailer's value to the community, thus showing that you respect them, for instance by saying,

"You have been serving this community with your business, and we would like to hear about your experience with the products you sell."

Be conscious of the retailer's time. Tell him or her upfront how long you wish to speak with them. Make the interview concise and ask specific questions, all the while giving the respondents the opportunity to elaborate as they wish.

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Approaching

Getting to know the retailer

Part of the good-faith approach is a sincere interest in understanding what the retailer's goals and challenges are. One goal is certain - the retailer conducts a business and therefore needs and wants to make a profit. The business may be struggling to stay afloat, but don't assume that this is the only motivation and concern he or she has. The retailer's values may very well include a concern for the community's well-being, especially children. Find out how the retailer understand the business' role, for instance by asking questions about the business history, the person's relationship to that business, and how it fits within the community. Questions may include, for example:



Getting to know

"How long have you been the owner (manager) of this business and how did you come to be in this role?"

"What do you like or dislike about being the owner/manager of this store?"

"Who are your customers?"

"What service do you think the store provides to the community or neighborhood?"

Making the connection between product and health

Even though retailers' first concern may be to make a profit, chances are they also care about the health of the people they serve. Introduce health issues with this thought in mind, for example by providing some information on the health in the community and the products sold in stores. Here are some examples:



Introducing "Health"

"As you may know, research shows that there is a connection between people's health and the products they consume, for example sugary drinks, fatty foods, cigarettes, and alcohol. Are you concerned about the connection between health and products on the shelves of grocery and convenience stores?"

"Have you ever considered reducing unhealthy products in the store and selling more healthy products like fresh fruits and vegetables, non-sugary drinks, etc.?"

"You may have heard that some stores have decided to no longer sell tobacco products because of their bad effect on people's health. Have you ever considered doing the same?" (Probe for the reasons why)

"If there were incentives, for instance through government assistance or tax breaks, would you consider getting more healthy products into your store and unhealthy products out of the store?"

Proposed legislation

When introducing proposed legislation into the conversation, make sure that you are not presenting it as a threat. Be sympathetic to the retailer's point of view and work from common ground. For instance, rather than simply asking "Are you in favor of or in opposition to a proposed ban on electronic cigarette sales in

this county?” ask how such a proposal may affect the retailer so that he or she is not put on the defensive. Examples of how to phrase questions on legislation are:

“Approximately what percentage of your sales are from tobacco products and what percentage are from alcohol product?”



*Suggested
laws*

“The city (county) of ... is considering a law (ordinance) that would limit the number of retail stores that can sell tobacco products /that can sell tobacco within 2 blocks from schools / that limits the sale of certain tobacco flavors so that children don’t want to buy them. Etc/. What is your opinion on this suggested law?”

“How would this law (ordinance) affect your business?”

“How would your business adjust if this law/ordinance went into effect?”

“Would you be interested in receiving technical assistance and information on ways to transition to selling other kinds of products if this law/ordinance went into effect?” (Only ask this question if such services exist or will be available in case the law or ordinance passes.)

Talking about alternatives

Some retailers may think that tobacco and alcohol are the only or main products that will bring in sufficient revenue. Offer assistance in re-thinking this notion. Do not promise that other products will be just as profitable, since there is no guarantee. However, retailers may not know that customers would buy alternative products. You could talk about it this way:



*Introducing
“Health”*

“Do you think that selling other products would bring in the same number of customers than you have now?”

“Would you be interested in getting information on alternative products you could sell that may attract new customers in your neighborhood?”

“Do you know that people in this area have a hard time finding stores that sell fresh fruits, vegetables, and other healthy food?” Follow-up: “Would you be interested in offering these sorts of products?”

Involving retailers

Some retailers may welcome the opportunity to change their products if they see an alternative. They may also like to be involved in the Healthy Stores campaign. The interview can be an opportunity to offer involvement. Here are some ways the conversation could go:



Involving retailers

“Have you heard of the Healthy Stores for a Healthy Community Campaign in California? It is a state-sponsored movement to bring more healthy foods into stores. It includes various interested partners in the community, including retailers. Would you like to become a part of the movement? You could do so by becoming a healthy retailer, or by joining workgroups, by giving advice, or in another capacity. Apart from being an active member you could also just join an e-mail or mailing list where we send information on the campaign.”

“How do you feel about becoming a “healthy retailer” yourself? What would be an incentive to make changes towards becoming a healthy retailer?”

“Do you have any suggestions on improving the retail environment for the betterment of the community?”

Thanking

Don't forget to thank the retailer for his or her effort and time to respond to your request for an interview. Give an opportunity to retailers to add any thoughts on the subject they may have.

The questions in this tool are suggestions and will need to be tailored to your own situation. You may also be looking for very specific information, and it is fine to be very precise about what you are trying to find out. However, keep a collegial tone and make retailers comfortable speaking with you.

Other resources you may find useful in preparing your interviews

- Patricia A McDaniel and Ruth E. Melone. (2011.) Why California retailers stop selling tobacco products, and what their customers and employees think about it when they do: case studies. *Journal of Negative Results in Biomedicine*. 11:848
- TCEC website resource “Conducting Interviews”
http://tobaccoeval.ucdavis.edu/files/Tips_Tools_03_2009.pdf
- TCEC website resource “Online presentation on conducting Key Informant Interviews”
<https://breeze.ucdavis.edu/keyinterviews/>