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Research Update

November 2005

Tobacco Marketing at Point-of-Sale in Ontario

BACKGROUND

The retail point-of-sale environment provides important opportunities for tobacco industry communication with current, former, and potential smokers. Point-of-sale marketing is one of the few remaining communication vehicles available to the tobacco industry in Canada. A growing number of studies have found an association between cigarette promotional activities and adolescent smoking initiation.¹⁻⁴ Indeed, provincial governments are recognizing the importance of the retail environment as a marketing venue that contributes to the tobacco epidemic in this country. Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Nunavut do not allow cigarettes to be displayed at point-of-sale. Cigarette displays will cease in Quebec in 2008. The *Smoke-Free Ontario Act* will eliminate countertop displays and power wall “enhancements” on May 31, 2006, with a complete elimination of tobacco retail displays by May 31, 2008. The definition of “enhancements” is currently being determined.

The Tobacco Marketing at Point-of-Sale Study was undertaken to improve understanding of current tobacco industry marketing strategies and activities at point-of-sale in Ontario.

METHOD

Twenty Ontario cities with a population size of at least 43,000 were chosen for observation, representing all seven health planning regions in the province. Within each city, 24 stores were randomly selected from Yellow Pages lists of convenience stores, variety stores, gas stations and grocery stores. Trained observers used checklists to capture the range, type, and intensity of different tobacco marketing and promotional strategies used in a variety of stores. Fieldwork occurred from April to July 2005. As youth are most likely to buy their cigarettes from independent and chain convenience stores, combined results for these two types of stores are reported below, weighted to reflect all such stores in the 20 selected cities.

RESULTS

Tobacco marketing at point-of-sale is extensive. All stores have power walls (rows of cigarette packages visible as a backdrop to the cash register) and a majority have countertop displays of cigarettes.

Common features of power walls

- *Large size:* 72% of power walls are at least 6 feet long while almost one-third (31%) are 12 feet or longer. In over half (56%) of stores, the power walls are longer than three-quarters of the cash counter length. 64% of power walls are at least 5 feet high, and 84% are at least half as high as the ceiling height. Almost three-quarters (73%) of the power walls extend below the cash counter.
- *Price signs:* 73% of power walls include a price sign.
- *Danglers:* 50% have danglers (a small sign that hangs or “dangles” off the power wall).
- *Coloured shelf gliders and shelf liners:* 81% of the stores have coloured shelf liners behind cigarette packs to visually highlight the product, and 84% have coloured shelf gliders (a coloured strip that sits flat against the shelf rail to visually highlight the product).
- *Augmentation features:* 85% of power walls have extra horizontal or vertical display pieces that go beyond the rows of cigarettes and attract customer attention.

Cigarette displays are on the cash counter too

- *Cigarette countertop displays:* Over half (58%) of the stores have at least one cigarette display on the counter. The number of displays range from one to four.
- *Tobacco in a prime location:* In 80% of stores tobacco products or accessories (e.g., matches, lighters, ashtrays) are within one foot of the cash register. In 85% of stores these products are located within a foot of candy, snack foods or toys.
- *Other tobacco displays:* Smokeless tobacco and roll-your-own product displays are most frequently found behind the checkout counter, in 47% and 10% of stores, respectively.

Signs advertising cigarettes in stores

- *Signage:* Over one-third (36%) of stores have signs advertising cigarettes in locations other than the power wall; 25% of stores have cigarette packages attached to signs.
- *Tobacco accessories with cigarette brand names:* The presence of tobacco accessories with links to cigarette brands is evident in 22% of stores.
- *Covering up cigarette pack health warnings:* In over one-fifth (21%) of stores at least some cigarette packs are displayed so that health warnings are not visible.

Signs advertising cigarettes outside stores:

- *Cigarette advertising at point-of-sale can be seen by non-customers:* 26% of stores have signs advertising cigarettes facing the outside of their premises (e.g., in the window).
- *Advertising in children's line of sight:* Of stores with outdoor tobacco signage, almost one-fifth (18%) have low height (3 feet and under) tobacco advertising.

DISCUSSION

A high proportion of convenience stores in the 20 Ontario cities sampled market cigarettes and other tobacco products extensively. Marketing devices include large power walls with a range of enhancing features, countertop displays close to the cash register and other items that children buy, and signs advertising cigarettes. Elimination of these marketing tools will reduce youth exposure to tobacco promotion and impulse buying from existing smokers,⁵ thus serving important public health objectives.

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Acknowledgements: This project was funded by the Canadian Tobacco Control Research Initiative (Grant #15741).

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