



Episode Details:

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Title: Episode 28: Store Assessments

Description: Store assessments are visits to retail tobacco stores to document and collect data on what tobacco products are being sold and how they are being marketed and promoted in your community. In this episode, learn both why and how to conduct them, as well as how the data you collect can be used.

Transcription:

You're listening to the Counter Tobacco Podcast. I'm your host for today, CounterTobacco.org Managing Editor Mollie Mayfield. On this podcast, we aim to highlight the role the tobacco industry's influence at the point of sale plays in tobacco use and tobacco-related harm and what's being done to reduce that influence and to improve community health and health equity. Today, we're talking about store assessments.

So, first of all - what are store assessments?

Also called store observations or store audits or sometimes environmental scans, store assessments are visits to retail tobacco stores to document and collect data on what tobacco products are being sold and how they are being marketed and promoted in your community.

Common items on store assessment forms examine the availability of different types of tobacco products, like cigarettes, cigars, smokeless tobacco, and e-cigarettes; the presence of tobacco advertisements on the exterior and interior of the store, the placement of ads and/or products at children's eye level, the availability of price promotions like discounts and coupons, and product prices.

So why do store assessments?

Lots of reasons! To hear from some others on the topic:

"Many of our policymakers think that the tobacco problem's been solved. They're really ready to move on to other issues. So demonstrating how tobacco companies market to our kids at the point of sale is really, really important.

The industry is changing things. The environment changes all the time. It's important to know what's out there.

Unlike secondhand smoke where you see the smoke drifting through the air, it's hard to see the problem with point of sale unless you clearly document it.

Looking at the stores and collecting some data, some store observation data, it starts to give us an idea of what the landscape is for health in our communities...”

Those were the voices of:

- Danny McGoldrick, Vice President of Research at the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids
- Patricia Henley of the Office of Community Health and Tobacco Use Prevention, Massachusetts Department of Public Health
- Jeff Willett, then Vice President of Programs and Advocacy, Kansas Health Foundation
- Derek Smith, then of the San Francisco Department of Public Health and the Tobacco Free Project

And that was the beginning of a video created by the Advancing Science and Policy in the Retail Environment study of the national Cancer Institute’s State and Community Tobacco Control Research Initiative in 2016. See the full video as well as a video on using Store Observations for Policy Change highlighting three case studies on our website. I’ll link to the page in the show notes.

To expand on what those folks said, the information collected through store assessments can be used to educate the public and policymakers.

It can also be used to document and identify disparities in advertising and product availability at retail stores. For example, what stores in what neighborhoods have cheaper prices, steeper discounts, or more menthol or other flavored products for sale? Where are there more advertisements covering store windows? Are there large displays of tobacco advertisements right by the local school or soccer field?

We know from national studies and studies in various communities across the country that tobacco products are often cheaper and more steeply discounted in low-income neighborhoods, [8] that neighborhoods with more African American residents have more tobacco ads on store exteriors, more ads and lower prices specifically for menthol cigarettes and more flavored cigars for sale. [12, 13, 24] We also know that stores in rural areas are both more likely to advertise smokeless tobacco products and studies have found tobacco products to be cheaper in rural stores than in urban stores. [30] [31]

Store assessments can show how these trends are mirrored in your own community AND can identify which specific neighborhoods across your area are being targeted by the tobacco industry. This documentation can help practitioners and advocates illustrate the problem clearly and make the case for policies that minimize the tobacco industry’s ability to use neighborhood population demographics to target their deadly products.

Rather than relying on national data – store assessments can tell you exactly what’s going on in the stores where you live – it’s data at the most granular level possible.

And they can help identify issues that need to be addressed in the retail environment and identify what local disparities exist.

Store assessments are also a way to track change in the retail environment over time. The data collected can be used to track trends in product availability, prices, and promotion. It can also help document how new types of products are being marketed. And it can help show the impact of policies – documenting changes from before to after implementation.

As noted in a report by Counter Tools and Truth Initiative on the results of piloting a flavor-specific store assessment form in several midwestern cities, “The value of conducting store assessments goes beyond the use of the data collected. They can also serve as a tool for raising awareness of problems at the point of sale amongst data collectors, who can in turn become advocates for change and raise awareness throughout their communities.

For these reasons it can be important to involve data collectors strategically. We’ll talk more about this in just a bit.

In a 2015 study of national representative sample of counties across the country, counties that had performed retail tobacco assessments were more than six times as likely to have adopted point-of-sale policies than those that had not.^[4]

While store assessment data can serve as critical evidence for the need for policy change, documenting the problem is often only the first step. Plugging the data in to an organized campaign for change; raising awareness of the problem and solution amongst stakeholders, the community at large, and the communities most burdened by tobacco; and persuading decision makers to act are all important next steps in the policy change process.

Store assessment data provides a catalyst to this process and a foundation of evidence for change to improve the health of the retail environment and reduce the burden of tobacco related death and disease in our communities.”

So how do you do store assessments?

Depending on your goals and how you want to use the data collected and the experience, they can look a lot of different ways, so the first step is to determine your goals.

Once you’re clear on what you want to accomplish and how you hope to be able to use the results, the next step is to design or choose a survey form. And there’s no need to create something totally from scratch here. There are a number of well-tested assessment forms that are user friendly that you can use as is or modify to meet your needs. For example, there’s:

- **STARS:** The Standardized Tobacco Assessment for Retail Settings tool was designed in 2014 for practitioners to inform state and local tobacco control policies for the point of sale. The STARS form and training materials resulted from a collaboration of [researchers](#) with stakeholders from five state health departments, the CDC, and the Public Health Law Center. The assessment items were selected exclusively for their policy relevance, and it was designed to be a user-friendly tool that can be filled out by professionally trained data collectors, as well as self-trained youth and adults
- **vSTARS:** There was also a version of the STARS form developed specifically for Vape Shops in 2016, called vSTARS, as in v for Vape Shops. While the e-cigarette landscape has changed a lot since then and continues to evolve, it provides a starting point to think about to assess vape shops in particular vs. convenience stores. vSTARS was used to complete a statewide census of vape shops in the state of New Hampshire. They were able to assess product availability, price promotions, product messaging, as well as see how vape shops distinguish themselves from conventional tobacco retailers. [I’ll link to a study summarizing their process and results in the show notes.](#)

- **fSTARS:** There's also fSTARS – the f standing for flavors. Counter Tools and Truth Initiative partnered in 2018 to develop this set of retail tobacco store assessment questions specifically focused on menthol and other flavored commercial tobacco products as a modified version of the STARS form. This set of questions was initially used in five midwestern cities, 4 of which were within [Tobacco Nation](#).
- If you're looking for a more informal way to do these types of visits, we also have a [Point of Sale Scavenger Hunt](#) on CounterTobacco.org that makes it into a game for youth (who can find the cheapest pack of cigarettes? Who can find a flavored cigarillos advertised for less than \$1?) and trains them to identify the tactics that the tobacco industry uses to target them.

In addition to determining your form and what questions you want to answer during the assessments, you'll also need to determine your geographic focus – are you looking across a county, a city, a specific neighborhood? Either way, you'll need a list of stores you want to visit, meaning a list of stores that sell tobacco in your geographic area. This can come from a variety of sources, including local or state licensing lists, lists used for enforcement purposes, or from Synar reports. Some researchers also purchase business lists from companies like Reference USA or Dun and Bradstreet, though you'll have to do some cleaning to sort through which stores likely sell tobacco.

You'll also need to determine your capacity for how many retailers to visit. You could visit a random sample to get a representative picture of what the tobacco retail environment looks like in your community, or you could visit a group of stores that is convenient for you and your team (like all the stores within a mile of a school). The retailers that you choose to assess will also of course relate to your goals.

Sometime groups conducting store assessments also pair store assessments with efforts to provide education to retailers on how to follow existing tobacco control regulations, or even efforts to encourage retailers to take additional voluntary steps to protect youth – like removing tobacco from self-service displays and removing tobacco advertisements and products from kids' eye levels.

Next, determine who your data collectors will be. It can be helpful to think strategically about this. Speaking from experience, and this is something I've heard from many others – after conducting tobacco store assessments you'll never be able to look at a convenience store the same way again. And that means whoever is involved in the data collection and has their eyes opened by the experience may be someone who then wants to DO something what they've seen at stores and work to make change. So that could mean asking students, community members, elected officials, the local newspaper editor, the school principal, or others to participate.

Once you have your data collectors selected, the next step is training them, which is key to ensuring that the data you're collecting is reliable. For the STARS form, there is a Training PowerPoint available on [countertobacco.org](#). It's important to become familiar with the questions and products that you'll be looking for in stores, and practice helps! It may make sense to do a store assessment as group to practice before heading out to stores individually or in pairs.

When you're ready to go out to stores, you can collect the data either on paper or by programming the form into a system that allows you to conduct the survey on a mobile device. Counter Tools can help with that if you're interested in mobile data collection.

While you're in stores, it's important to be mindful of those around you – including both customers and store employees. Generally, it can be helpful to avoid trying to survey the store during “rush” times like commute hours or around lunchtime, but if the store happens to be busy while you're there, just wait a bit until the rush passes on so that you can be sure to not get in the way of customers. Especially in smaller stores, it's a good idea to introduce yourself to the clerk and let them know what you're doing – looking at how different products are sold in stores. Sometimes it can be helpful to reassure them that you're not an inspector and that you won't identify their store specifically in the results. Some groups also find it helpful to carry a letter from your organization explaining the assessment project that data collectors can hand to the clerk if they have questions. It also never hurts to buy something small while at the store – gum or mints, water - if you have funds for that to support your local businesses.

Once you're done collecting data, take a look at your results and share your findings with stakeholders and with all the data collectors!

How have folks used store assessment results? For lots of important purposes, including:

- To educate and engage stakeholders,
- To advocate for policy change – in testimony for example,
- In media campaigns,
- To inform goals and policy priorities, and
- To share with the media.
- The information can also be displayed on a map and paired with other data, such as public opinion polling data, youth and adult tobacco use data, information about how many and where tobacco retailers are located in a community to paint a broader picture about what the tobacco retail environment looks like in a community and what impact that may be having on residents' health.

Many places across the country have also combined tobacco retail assessments with assessments of the alcohol and food environments as well, examining the availability, pricing, placement, and promotion of other consumer products. We'll link to some case studies involving multiple different types of products in the show notes.

No matter your focus, store assessments are important work, documenting the tobacco industry's tactics at the location where they spend the vast majority of all of their marketing dollars: the retail environment. And they're spending it there because they know their marketing works – it leads youth to start smoking, keeping people who currently smoke hooked, and making it harder for people to quit. Documenting the tobacco industry's efforts is the first step to countering them.

When you're out and about conducting store assessments, don't forget to take photos! Photographic evidence is a really powerful tool and allows us to show others exactly what we mean when talk about the problem at the point of sale – and don't forget to upload any great examples of tobacco industry marketing tactics at the point of sale to our image gallery on CounterTobacco.org – we'll share them for all to use in their education and advocacy efforts.

That's all for today - tune in next time when we cover a specific type of store assessments: assessing compliance with tobacco-related Assurances of Voluntary Compliance.

Thanks for listening, and I look forward to you joining us again next time!