How Coalitions Can Restrict Alcohol and Tobacco Billboard Advertising
INTRODUCTION:

COMMUNITIES CAN PREVENT ALCOHOL AND TOBACCO advertisers from targeting given neighborhoods and ethnic groups. “Target” marketing has been increasing for decades and is defined as advertisers promoting use by specific ethnic, racial or age groups through the development of advertisements with messages which appeal to those targeted groups.

Billboard statistics show that more than 50 percent of the billboards in some low-income ethnic/racial communities feature alcoholic beverages and tobacco.1 In San Francisco, a city Department of Planning survey found that more than 62 percent of the billboards in African-American and Latino neighborhoods advertised tobacco and alcohol as compared to 36 percent citywide.2 The New Orleans Planning Commission released data showing that 58 percent of all billboards in the city advertised cigarettes and alcohol. In a predominately African-American part of the city, there were 515 billboards selling tobacco and alcohol products compared to only 138 in a neighboring Caucasian district.3

More and more community anti-drug coalitions are working to restrict or eliminate tobacco and alcohol advertisements on billboards. Others are working with the press to create a public awareness of the over-saturation of alcohol and tobacco billboard advertisements in low-income areas or neighborhoods predominately comprised of people of color. The outcome of such efforts has been the creation of a lower level of public tolerance toward such advertising.

FOOTNOTES:


2 Ibid. page 107.

3 Ibid. page 107.
SUGGESTED STRATEGIES:

PHASE 1 - KNOW THE CITY/COUNTY REGULATIONS REGARDING BILLBOARDS

Find out where billboards are allowed in the community. What governmental body monitors advertising on buses, bus shelters, subways, and other public transportation facilities? You should start by approaching the city and county planning department(s). Ask to speak to someone who deals with zoning and subdivision regulations.

1. **STEP One:**
Check the zoning regulations to see if they coincide with the coalition’s interests regarding outdoor advertising.

   *Look for answers to the following questions:*

   1) **Do the zoning regulations contain a conditional use agreement?** Such an agreement requires that citizens be informed prior to the placement of a billboard in any given neighborhood. If such notification(s) takes place, be sure that the coalition is on the Planning Department’s mailing list. Hold town meetings or distribute informational flyers in the neighborhoods to be affected. Organize the citizens to appear at the public hearing.

   2) **Does the city and/or county take an annual inventory of signs and charge any fees per sign?** Such fees usually pay for the enforcement of sign regulations and for inspection costs.

   3) **Check the regulations for restrictions regarding possible billboard locations.** Zoning restrictions should forbid billboards within 500 feet of any residence or within 1,000 feet of any park, school, house of worship, hospital, cemetery, convention center, or governmental building.

2. **STEP Two:**
Discern compliance with the existing regulations.

   1) **Conduct a billboard survey.** Such a survey could be a function of coalition staff and volunteers but also makes a good civic project for high school or college students. Collect the following information:
   
   a) Define neighborhoods by primary ethnicity or socio-economic group.
   b) Count the number of billboards in each.
   c) Count the number of billboards in each which advertise tobacco or alcoholic beverages.
   d) Compare these findings to the number in predominately white or suburban neighborhoods.
   e) How many are in violation of the zoning regulations regarding outdoor advertising?

   2) **Publish the results of the survey.** If the targeted advertising is alarming and exaggerated, consider holding a press conference to announce the findings and the coalition’s plan of action.

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4Ibid. page 111.
3) Develop a plan of action.

a) Form alliances with organizations within the community who hold the same views regarding the preponderance of tobacco and alcohol advertising. Such groups could include the Cancer Society, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, etc.

b) Inform the regulating body (city or county) of the violations found. Allow a reasonable timeframe for the city or county to enforce the existing regulations.

3. STEP Three: Develop proposals for adoption by the city/county.

Proposals can address the following issues:

BILLBOARD MORATORIUM
Consider approaching the regulatory body for a temporary moratorium on new billboard advertisements. Such a moratorium can give community groups time to plan anti-billboard strategies. However, such a moratorium also disallows the construction of new billboards while the community debates proposed zoning changes.

BAN NEW BILLBOARDS
Such a proposal will only affect new billboards, not existing ones.

REMOVAL OF EXISTING BILLBOARDS
"Offensive" billboards can be removed by ordinance. Arriving at an agreed upon definition of "offensive," however, can take many years. The coalition may want to promote an exchange provision. Such provisions require billboard companies to remove one or more existing billboards prior to construction of a new billboard at a different location.

HEALTH WARNINGS
Require tobacco and alcohol warnings that appear on billboards to be large enough to be visible from some distance. Usually, the requisite warnings can barely be read even when extremely close to the advertisement.

Require the removal of all tobacco and alcohol advertising from sports complexes, concert sites, mass-transit systems and grocery store shopping carts.

PHASE 2 - MEET WITH THE OUTDOOR ADVERTISERS TO DISCUSS YOUR CONCERNS

Many coalitions receive considerable in-kind support from outdoor advertisers. Realize that such people are in business to make a living. Do not threaten them without first trying to negotiate compromises from the outdoor advertisers which address or alleviate the coalition's concerns. You may be surprised at the lengths to which advertisers are willing to go.

However, if the outdoor advertisers are unwilling to make reasonable changes, and the coalition decides to "take them on," BE PREPARED FOR INTENSE OPPOSITION.

Industry officials cite the First Amendment. However, courts have ruled that advertising can be regulated and even banned.
PHASE 3 – TAKE ACTION

1. **STEP One:**
   Meet one-on-one with city/county commissioners and Planning Commission members

   Are there members of the regulatory body who are closely aligned with the outdoor advertisers or known for always voting on behalf of business interests no matter what the public good? Are there influential members of the regulatory body who are sympathetic to the coalition’s positions regarding alcohol and tobacco advertising? If the political climate is not favorable, the coalition may want to reconsider the timing of the proposals. It can take many months to build an issue campaign among the electorate. The coalition may best spend its time educating and mobilizing the citizenry to initiate the proposals before the regulatory body rather than the coalition initiating the changes. Significant numbers of people can be identified to appear before the commission(s) in support of the coalition’s stand regarding advertising.

   Do not hesitate to approach all sectors of the community in order to request them to support coalition proposals. Do not overlook churches, block clubs, citizen associations, homeowner associations, schools, unions, and civic groups.

2. **STEP Two:**
   Seek desired changes in the regulations

   Formally petition the city or county government to make the desired changes in the regulations regarding alcohol and tobacco outdoor advertising.

3. **STEP Three:**
   Collect local data

   Be sure the coalition is well-armed with local data regarding the harmful effects of tobacco and alcohol consumption. Reveal rates of use—particularly of those age and/or ethnic or racial groups which may be over-saturated by tobacco and alcohol advertising according to the results of the coalition’s survey.

   The coalition may want to sponsor a survey in the local newspapers to ascertain the number and percentage of residents who agree with the coalition position(s) regarding outdoor advertising.

4. **STEP Four:**
   Have the results of the survey ready

   Mobilize the affected neighborhoods and age groups to appear at all public hearings and discussions of the issue.
SUMMARY:

Cities such as Seattle, Denver, Portland and Boston now prohibit alcohol and tobacco advertising on public transit systems.5

Some coalitions have chosen to counter-advertise at sporting events by soliciting sponsorship from corporations and individuals who are anti-tobacco and alcohol advertising. These sporting events bear names which mock the traditional sponsorship by tobacco or alcohol companies.

Should the restriction or banning of outdoor alcohol and tobacco advertising fail, a coalition will have succeeded in increasing public awareness of the proliferation and targeting techniques of alcohol and tobacco companies. Good Luck!

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Among those coalitions doing outstanding work in limiting/banning and/or educating the public regarding tobacco and alcohol advertising are:

- The Regional Drug Initiative (RDI) in Portland, Oregon
- ALERT — Partnership for a Drug-Free Valley in Allentown, Pennsylvania

To be linked with these and other outstanding coalitions, or to receive a list of resources regarding tobacco/alcohol advertising, call CADCA at (703) 706-0560 or 1-800-54-CADCA.

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Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America is a membership driven organization put in place to give anti-drug coalitions technical assistance and support.

The purpose of the Strategizer Technical Assistance Manuals is to provide step-by-step assistance to you on various topics relevant to the work you do in your community each day. We know you are busy, so the Strategizers are designed to be easy-to-use guides to streamline the thinking process.

Strategizers cover such topics as Long-Range Planning, Board and Staff Development, Development of Media, Marketing Plans, Fundraising for Coalition Operations and Programs, How to Engage Hard-to-Reach Populations, and more.

For more information on the Strategizer Technical Assistance Manuals available or for additional technical assistance on the topic covered in this Strategizer, phone the CADCA staff at (703) 706-0560 or write:

701 North Fairfax Street
Alexandria, Virginia 22314-2045
or call toll-free: 1-800-54-CADCA

Please notify CADCA regarding the technical assistance needs you may have. Your coalition is the front line against the ravages of drugs, alcohol and violence.

Keep up the good work!

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5Ibid. page 113.