

Office on Smoking and Health, Health Communications Branch

Guidance on Smoking Images in Counter-Marketing Ads

September 2, 2014

Avoid including smoking images or cues in ads (Kang, Lee 2013). Scenes including smoking-related objects and behaviors can activate strong cravings – they may seem unattractive to nonsmokers but can be quite tempting to smokers or former smokers, especially if the anti-smoking arguments in the ad are weak.

Cues include portrayals of holding and handling cigarettes, smoking of cigarettes, and even simply showing smoking-related materials (e.g., cigarettes, ashtrays, matches, lighters) (Kang). Research shows that smoking cues stimuli capture a smoker’s attention and reduce the ability to process competing stimuli – those cues receive prioritized attention over other elements in your ad (Versace, 2011 & 2010; Lee & Cappella, 2013).

Smoking cues in anti-tobacco ads undermine a significant part of what makes counter-marketing ads effective — their arguments against smoking (Lee 2011). When designing antismoking ads, the inclusion of smoking cues should be weighed carefully as they will erode the persuasiveness of the ad.

If you have a strong reason why depicting a smoking cue is integral to an ad, the ad should be accompanied by a strong anti-smoking argument (Lee). It is vital to test the argument strength to be sure it is adequate to overcome the potential damage done by the smoking cue.

Measures of argument strength apply to the core argument in the ad (Zhao). The core argument is a single statement that distills the line of reasoning in your ad – the explicit and implicit reasons given for not using tobacco. For example “every cigarette you smoke causes damage to your lungs” or “secondhand smoke is a serious health hazard” or “when you die from smoking you leave behind many sad family members who miss you”.

Below is a nine-item scale developed by researchers to measure argument strength. This scale is designed for a research setting, but you could include some of the measures from the scale in your formative testing of an ad – including them in surveys or in moderated discussion guides.

First, you’ll need to determine the core argument of your ad and distill it into a single statement. The authors provided the following instructions to develop a single statement that captures the core argument of an ad: Research assistants familiar with anti-drug ads viewed ads and crafted a verbal description of the argument made by each ad. This description included relevant information from both the visual and verbal components of the ad. Faculty members on the research team did the same thing and produced another set of verbal descriptions. These two sets of descriptions were compared and a final version of the central argument made by each ad was developed by the authors to (a) be comprehensive, (b) be clear and coherent, and (c) be as consistent as possible with the ad’s intent.

You can then test that statement drawing from the sample measures below.

Sample nine-item scale to measure argument strength

1. *The statement is a reason for [target behavior] that is believable.*
 2. *The statement is a reason for [target behavior] that is convincing.*
 3. *The statement gives a reason for [target behavior] that is important to me.*
 4. *The statement helped me feel confident about how best to [target behavior].*
 5. *The statement would help my friends [target behavior].*
 6. *The statement put thoughts in my mind about wanting to [target behavior].*
 7. *The statement put thoughts in my mind about not wanting to [target behavior].*
 8. *Overall, how much do you agree or disagree with the statement?*
 9. *Is the reason the statement gave for [target behavior] a strong or weak reason?*
- (Zhao)

Sources:

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