Reviewer's report

Title: Why California retailers stop selling tobacco products, and what their customers and employees think about it when they do: case studies

Version: 1 Date: 23 September 2011

Reviewer: Janet Hoek

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The authors have identified an interesting and novel behaviour among some retailers and have investigated this further. I think the results are likely to be of interest to tobacco control researchers generally as well as researchers interested in public policy. I thought the paper was very well written and I enjoyed reading it, as I am sure others will also. I have only minor questions and suggestions for clarification.

1. On p.5 the authors could explain why they interviewed both a store owner and an employee? What additional data did they expect the employee to be able to provide (or what grounds were there for expecting a divergence in views)?

2. Were there any differences between the telephone and f-t-f interviews? Did the data quality vary by interview mode?

3. In a couple of places, I thought ideas in the quotes could have been explored further. As an example, on p.7, the authors list three quotes for abandoning tobacco sales – two of these cite general (public) health reasons (didn’t want to retail cancer causing products) while one noted a personal reason (family members having died from cancers attributable to smoking). The same difference between general and personal motivations is evidence on p.8 and I wondered if it might be worth differentiating between these different reasons?

4. On p.9 the authors discuss how retailers publicised their decision and I was interested to see that one didn’t, largely because he seemed to fear negative consequences (people might shop elsewhere). It would be interesting to know whether this happened to any extent as I suspect this fear may inhibit other retailers, thus evidence that it is misplaced could be very helpful.

5. The fear of inconveniencing customers also emerges on p.11 in a comment from an employee opposed to the measure. Although the authors didn’t explore this point, I wonder if there is an opportunity for retailers to sell NRT products and for the transition away from tobacco to coincide with a movement towards NRT retailing? I’m not sure of the US regulations around sale of NRT products, but such a move would be consistent with the ‘care for consumers’ philosophy some participants expressed and may also help counter negative employee perceptions (i.e., stores would offer an alternative, rather than nothing at all). (This point also relates to comments made on p.15, about customers who had attempted to quit following the store’s decision.)

6. I was slightly surprised to read the comment from a retailer who, while
committed to the new policy, nevertheless saw it as somewhat ‘nanny statist’ and wondered whether policy moves might need to stress the fact that tobacco is not a normal grocery item (as this store owner stated), but a toxic and lethal product?

7. I was also interested to read that retailers thought tobacco did not fit with their ‘healthy’ products and wondered if they also retailed sweets, carbonated soft drinks and high other high fat, salt and sugar items? Is there an opportunity to promote other public health measures (that might help people live to 100, as a manager suggested)?

8. Could the authors comment on how local community approval for retail outlets (p.14) would be obtained? Is this part of a planning submission process? I was not sure how local residents’ views would be considered in licensing decisions?

9. In New Zealand, retailers who have taken tobacco products off open display have received awards from the Asthma Foundation and many display these proudly in their stores. They are also listed on the AF website and the AF prepares media releases each time they make a presentation. It might also be worth considering how third party endorsement could be used to promote these retailers.

10. California has more progressive tobacco control than New Zealand at present, but I did wonder about whether it was worth considering a progression from removing tobacco from open display to removing it altogether? It may be that such a suggestion would not be useful in California, but it might be in other jurisdictions, where a move to remove tobacco from sale altogether would generate resistance.

11. Overall, very interesting, nicely written and thoughtfully conceived MS.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

'I declare that I have no competing interests'