

Using a “priorities questionnaire” to evaluate what is important to local stakeholders

Competing priorities are a common obstacle to successful work in tobacco control at the community level. No matter whom you are trying to reach—elected officials, youth, school boards, or the media—few individuals or organizations have enough time or resources to make tobacco control their highest priority. However, knowing more about competing priorities can help local advocates get tobacco issues on the “agenda.” Tracking the ways that priorities change over time can produce compelling information for funders interested in outcomes.

What is a priorities questionnaire?

A priorities questionnaire is a short list of questions designed to identify where people stand on an issue. How important is the issue to them, and what are their competing priorities? The questions can be administered one-on-one or in groups, through interviews over the phone or in person. If the same questions are asked over time to the same respondents, the priorities questionnaire can help document whether tobacco control issues have become more important over time.

Why use a priorities questionnaire? Used over time, this method of collecting information can highlight whether tobacco control issues have gained precedence over other issues or, more importantly, have been integrated into existing priorities.

Who would use this method? A priorities questionnaire can help tobacco control advocates gain a better sense of what is important to local “audiences” or target groups. Two examples, below, illustrate how such a questionnaire might be useful to track whether priorities among important groups have changed over time.

To elicit priorities, try asking questions that address the following:

- 1) Importance of the issue (e.g., What are the most important health issues to you?)
- 2) “Stand” on the issue (e.g., Where does tobacco fit with respect to those issues?)
- 3) Current situation or action on the issue of interest (e.g., How are you currently addressing tobacco issues in the community?)

Tips for generating your own priorities questionnaire:

Information is only as good as the questions used to collect it. Choose questions that make sense to the people who will answer them. Also choose questions that will generate useful information to assist the coalition’s work in tobacco control. Avoid using the word “priority” in your questions, and don’t call the process a “priorities questionnaire.” People won’t understand what you are talking about. Simply tell them that you would like to know what health issues are most important to them so that the coalition can recognize opportunities to work most efficiently with community members.

Ask people to write down brief answers, and if possible discuss with them how they answered each question. This process will help clarify the reasons why individuals have the priorities that they do. It can also illuminate opportunities to work with them to integrate tobacco control into their priorities. The results of the questionnaire can show local advocates how to make tobacco control less of a *competing* priority and more of a vehicle for a healthier community.

For example, a priorities questionnaire process reveals that school officials are reluctant to support a youth advocacy initiative because it does not seem to help reach the goal of inquiry-based education or service learning. If the coalition can show administrators how the youth group is integrated into local service-learning projects, such as Community Ad Watch, the youth advocacy group and the coalition’s activities become a win-win scenario for the school.

Example 1: Interview with local mental health agency director

1. Please list the five most important health issues facing your clients.
2. Where does smoking fit within these health issues?
3. What, if anything, does your agency do to address the issue of smoking among your clients?

Results

The following table illustrates how priorities among key social services providers have changed in our county between 2001 and 2003, listing the steps the tobacco-free coalition took to help facilitate that change.

Agency	2001	Coalition action	2003
United Social Services	Smoking not listed as one of top five priorities. Director says smoking is difficult to address when poverty and domestic violence are so common among their clients.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7 mental health counselors attended a CTRI training on cessation. • Coalition provided staff with information and posters on Medicaid coverage of cessation services. 	Smoking not listed as one of top five priorities for clients. However, director says staff are providing information on Quitline and other cessation resources to clients that they did not previously provide.
Lathrop Services, Inc. Services include case management of > 300 families of children with chronic health conditions.	Smoking not listed as one of top five priorities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 13 social workers attended CTRI training. • One social worker now sits on coalition. • 	Smoking listed by director of counseling services as one of top five priorities, particularly for case management among families with chronically ill children.
Generation EAP, Inc.	Smoking listed as one of top five health priorities.	Coalition member who is an HR consultant reviewed benefits plans of EAP's three major clients who employ more than 3,000 employees. Helped create a chart explaining how smokers can access services to quit.	Smoking cessation information made available as part of every Generation EAP counseling session.

Example 2: Priorities for tobacco-free youth group

1. Please list the three most important things you think the tobacco-free youth group should accomplish during the next six months.
2. What do you think are the most important health issues facing your peers today? Why?

Results

At the beginning of the tobacco-free youth group, we asked members to tell us the three most important things the group should accomplish during the next six months. Their responses included the following:

- Recruit more members (6 responses)
- Have a “stay tobacco-free” dance for middle school students (5)
- Put signs up about the dangers of smoking (5)
- Talk with parents’ groups about dangers of smoking (4)
- Teach a couple of middle school classes about the dangers of smoking (4)
- Elect a president for the group (2)
- Build a float for the homecoming parade (2)

Members said that smoking was one of the most important health issues facing peers today. However, most said “stress” or “depression” and alcohol use were also important “because they can kill people right away, but tobacco takes a long time to kill.”

After members had attended five meetings facilitated by a coalition member and a semester had passed, we asked students to respond to the questions again. Eight of the same original members responded to the questions. Fourteen new members responded to the questions.

For the eight original members, we saw a dramatic change in the focus of the tobacco-free youth group. Instead of educating youth about the dangers of smoking, the members uniformly saw their role as advocates for awareness that, as one student put it “youth are pawns of the tobacco industry”. The coalition member working with this group facilitated a process for the youth to develop their own action plan. As a result of their meetings, their answers to the question, “Please list the three most important things you think the group should do in the next six months” included the following:

- Recruit more members, including smokers (8)
- Map the advertising and sales of tobacco in our town (6)
- Develop a marketing campaign to educate youth, parents and school board members about how the tobacco industry is taking us for a ride (4)
- Do a skit about quitting and the quitline for high schools in our county (2)
- Develop a handout on how much it costs to smoke a pack a day and where the money goes (1)
- Find out and make a list of who profits from tobacco in our town and write an article for the local newspaper about it (1)