

## COUNTERING THE GLAMOROUS PORTRAYAL OF TOBACCO IN THE MOVIES May-November 1999

Natasha Kowalski, MPH; Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency, Santa Cruz, CA; Cornelia Pechmann, Ph.D.; Graduate School of Management, University of California, Irvine, CA

**Introduction/Objective:** The Santa Cruz County Tobacco Education Program aimed to counter the glamorous portrayal of smoking in the movies by showing a 30-second, anti-tobacco ad in local theaters. The preponderance of tobacco use in the movies makes smoking seem more common and more glamorous than it really is. Almost 90% of the top 50 U.S. movie box office hits for 1997/1998 contained tobacco use, and major movie characters are three times more likely to smoke than the general population.

According to research conducted by Dr. Pechmann at U.C. Irvine, on-screen smoking causes teens to have positive impressions of smoking; however, showing an anti-tobacco ad before the film nullifies the positive effect. Santa Cruz County decided to test these results in a "real world" setting.

The objectives of the project were to determine: 1) if the glamorous portrayal of smoking in the movies has an effect on peoples' perceptions of smoking; 2) if showing a 30-second, anti-tobacco ad in movie theaters can nullify the effect.

**Methods:** A total of 210 people were surveyed at a youth-oriented movie, "Down To You", which contained numerous smoking scenes. The respondents were divided into three groups: those who saw only the movie, those who saw the movie and the anti-tobacco ad, and those who saw neither. The self-administered survey asked about the movie-goers' attitudes towards the movie, the anti-smoking ad, the actors who smoked, and smoking in general. To determine attitudes towards smoking in general, respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 5 how cool, attractive, healthy and fit, successful, and popular smokers appear. The majority of the people surveyed were between the ages of 12 and 24.

**Results:** People that saw on-screening smoking left the theater with positive impressions of smoking. However, people that saw the anti-tobacco ad before the film were much less likely to think smoking is cool. *All results are statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ).*

The movie and the ad also influenced the respondents' attitudes towards the stars that smoked on screen. The group that saw the ad was more likely to have negative feelings towards the actors who smoked than the group who only saw the movie (73% vs. 34%).

The ad's effect on susceptibility was very dramatic. If respondents saw the ad before the movie, they were 3 times less likely to want to smoke in the next year than those who only saw the movie.

**Conclusion:** Anti-tobacco programs can take action locally - with a proven tool - to counter the glamorous portrayal of smoking in Hollywood. This strategy is powerful enough to even reduce susceptibility to smoke in the next year.

**PRESENTING AUTHOR:** Natasha Kowalski, MPH, Santa Cruz County Local Lead Agency, P.O. Box 962, Santa Cruz, CA 95061 Voice: (831) 454-4297 Fax: (831) 454-5048  
E-mail: natasha.kowalski@health.co.santa-cruz.ca.us