

Impact of a Newspaper Mediated Quit Smoking Program

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Abstract: We present the results of a survey conducted to evaluate the impact of a newspaper mediated smoking cessation program conducted in Buffalo, New York in January 1987. Over half of all smokers surveyed reported exposure to the newspaper series: 13 per cent reported that the series prompted them to try to quit smoking, and 4 per cent stopped smoking for at least one week. We estimate that over 9,600 smokers in Erie County, New York stopped smoking for at least one week as a result of the newspaper's smoking cessation program. (*Am J Public Health* 1987; 77:1452-1453.)

Introduction

Several studies have reported on the effectiveness of television mediated stop smoking clinics.¹⁻⁴ While the long-term cessation rates associated with televised stop smoking programs are low (usually <15 per cent), the potential for reaching large numbers of smokers makes this type of intervention attractive.⁴

A newspaper mediated cessation program offers a number of potential advantages over similar broadcast programs. It allows readers more flexibility in gaining access to the information which then can be easily saved and shared. Moreover, since most cities have only one or two newspapers, the percentage of the population exposed may be greater than with broadcast media, where the audience is divided among several competing stations.

We report here on the impact of a newspaper mediated cessation program conducted in Buffalo, New York in January 1987.

Methods

The Series

In the spring of 1986, we approached the managing editor of the *Buffalo News* with the idea of producing a series of articles on quitting smoking. We pointed out that approximately one-third of the paper's adult readership smoke and that surveys show that most smokers express a desire to quit. In addition to enjoying wide readership, such a series would be seen as a public service and would allow the *News* to score a "first" by being the only major daily publication to have published such a series. The *Buffalo News* is the only paper in the Buffalo metropolitan area. Its afternoon edition is circulated to over 80 per cent of households in Erie County, New York.

The medical reporter for the paper, working in conjunction with the Roswell Park Memorial Institute's Smoking Control Program, produced a six-day quit smoking program. The series, called "Time to Quit", was published in the lifestyles section of the paper between January 4-9, 1987.

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Each installment of the series included a feature story, a profile of a person who had quit smoking, and tips on quitting.

The first article of the series highlighted statistics on the changing prevalence of cigarette smoking; the second provided information on the risks of smoking and benefits of quitting; the third included stories of local people who experienced illness as a result of smoking; the fourth presented stories of people who had successfully quit smoking; the fifth was quit day, and the main article discussed reasons why people have problems quitting. The final article provided suggestions on how to stay off cigarettes and what to do in case of a relapse.

On the fifth and sixth days of the series, readers were informed they could obtain an "Ex-smoker's Survival Kit" by calling Roswell Park. The free survival kit included pamphlets on the hazards of smoking, a brochure containing 20 daily messages on how to avoid relapsing, a quit smoking button, stickers, and "no smoking" signs. Over 2,000 requests for the survival kit were received within one month following the series; 70 per cent of requests occurred in the first week.

The Survey

We conducted a random telephone survey of working telephone numbers listed in the Buffalo area telephone directory one week after the series was completed. Any individual age 18 or older within a selected household was eligible, but only one person per household was surveyed. The majority of the calls were made over a weekend, with callbacks staggered over the course of the day to ensure a representative sample. Sampling continued until 1,000 completed interviews were obtained; 119 persons (10.6 per cent) refused participation in the survey.

The five-minute interview questioned respondents about their current and past smoking practices, newspaper readership, exposure to the "Time to Quit" series, and personal characteristics. Respondents who reported reading the series were asked about the number of days they had read the series, whether they liked it, what they liked best, and whether they saved any of the articles. Smokers who had read at least one installment of the series were asked if it influenced them to try to quit smoking. Persons who reported having quit during the time of the series were asked if they stopped smoking as a result of the series.

Survey participants ranged in age from 18 to 91 years, with a mean age of 47 years; 51 per cent were male, 84 per cent White, 14 per cent had not completed high school, 42 per cent were high school graduates, 19 per cent had some college training, and 25 per cent were college graduates. Thirty-two per cent of respondents were current smokers (including recent quitters, i.e., quit smoking after January 4, 1987); 28 per cent were ex-smokers, and 40 per cent were never smokers. Among current smokers, average daily cigarette consumption was 23 cigarettes (range of <1 to 60 cigarettes per day). Four per cent of respondents smoked a pipe; 2.4 per cent smoked cigars, and less than 1 per cent used dipping or chewing tobacco. The demographic characteristics of respondents in the sample closely resemble the characteristics of the population residing in Erie County, New York.⁵ However, persons under age 24 and Whites were slightly underrepresented in the sample.

Results

Nearly 90 per cent (n = 896) of respondents reported reading the *Buffalo News*. Of these, 701 (78.2 per cent) reported awareness of the "Time to Quit" series, and 421 (46.9 per cent) reported reading one or more of the articles in the series. Over half of the 321 current smokers (51.4 per cent) reported reading the series. Fifty-three of the 421 who read the series reported saving the articles, with current smokers more likely to do so. Overall, 87 per cent (365/421) liked the series, with ex-smokers (94 per cent) and never smokers (91 per cent) being more likely to do so than current smokers (78 per cent). The most highly rated features included the profiles of ex-smokers and tips on quitting.

Of the 321 current smokers in our survey, 42 (13.1 per cent) reported trying to quit in conjunction with the series (25.4 per cent of those who read the series). Fifteen of the 321 smokers reported quitting during the time when the series appeared in the newspaper, 13 as a result of reading the series. The quit rate among smokers who reported reading the series was six times greater than those who did not read the series (odds ratio = 6.5; 95% confidence interval = 1.5, 28.3). Overall, an estimated 4.1 per cent of smokers quit smoking as a result of the newspaper cessation program (13/321).

It is estimated that there are 239,252 current adult smokers in Erie County, New York based on the smoking prevalence from this survey (32.1 per cent). Among these smokers, an estimated 122,980 (51.4 per cent) were exposed to the series, 34,342 (13.1 per cent) tried to quit smoking, and 9,687 (4.1 per cent) quit smoking for at least one week as a result of the series.

Discussion

The findings from this study demonstrate that a newspaper mediated cessation program can be an effective vehicle for reaching smokers. Although only a small percentage of smokers surveyed reported quitting as a result of the series, because of the large number of smokers reached, we estimate that over 9,600 smokers in Erie County, New York quit smoking for at least a week. To have the same impact, we

would have to conduct over 380 stop smoking clinics with 25 quitters in each clinic.

Public reaction to the series was very favorable. The *Buffalo News* received numerous letters thanking them for publishing the series. Due to the demand for reprints, the *News* reproduced the series in a booklet form and has made it available to the public free of charge. The newspaper's advertising department reported that there was no change in the advertising space purchased by cigarette companies associated with publishing the series.

The generalizability of the findings from this study are limited by the short follow-up period and by the fact that the program was implemented in only one area. It is likely that many of those who reported quitting will return to smoking again in the next year. However, it is also likely that many smokers who did not quit will be encouraged to do so as a result of exposure to the series. Publishing the series shortly after the first of the year may have enhanced the impact of the program, since many smokers attempt to quit at that time. It is unclear whether the series would have the same impact if published at a different time of the year, nor is it clear whether a newspaper mediated program would be as effective in a region served by competing newspapers. However, the findings from this study are sufficiently positive to suggest that newspapers should be considered along with broadcast media as a potentially effective means of reaching smokers with cessation information.

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