

### Developing Materials for Low SES Populations

One fourth of California's population is defined as Low Socio-Economic Status (Low SES) including those with limited income (less than \$25K per household), limited education, and limited economic opportunities.<sup>1</sup> These underserved populations are made up of multi-ethnic, multi-cultural communities. The majority of adults living in these communities are employed but still living below the poverty level.<sup>2</sup>

Smoking prevalence for this population is much higher than that of the general population; 22% compared to 13%.<sup>3,4</sup> Because of this, people in low income communities often assume that smoking is far more prevalent than it really is. They also have limited access to health care, and health information about the risks of smoking and secondhand smoke, and limited resources and social support for quitting.



#### TOPICS IN THIS GUIDE INCLUDE

- Developing your message
- Choosing a format
- Writing text that's easy to read
- Creating an effective design
- Testing
- Reaching your audience

#### Developing Your Message

By spending time to learn about the concerns, motivations, and attitudes of your target audience you will be able to develop a more effective message to reach them. Include them in the early planning stages, if possible, especially when creating cross-cultural communications. Tools such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups are great ways to learn about the needs and concerns of the target group. If this type of direct research is not possible due to time or budget issues, information can also be gathered through the TECC Resource Library and by speaking with other organizations working with similar target audiences.

In general, the following guidelines are helpful in creating effective messages for low SES communities:

- Focus on family, especially children
- Emphasize benefits of adopting the desired behavior
- Use clear and friendly language, free of blame
- Keep your message short and easily understood

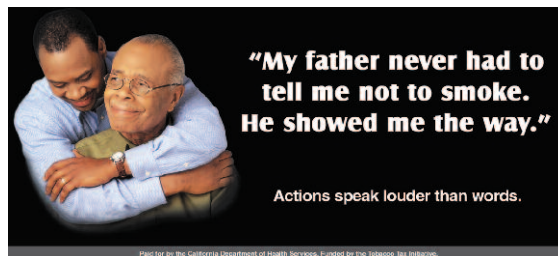
- Focus on realistic actions and achievable goals such as “Ask family members to step outside to smoke.” Or “Call the Smokers’ Helpline for free information about quitting”
- Acknowledge barriers (social and financial) and provide stress reduction alternatives
- Include free or low cost resources for help such as a local cessation clinic or the Smokers’ Helpline number

## Choosing a Format

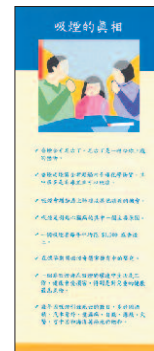
The right format is also critical so think beyond the brochure. Short fact cards, posters, and photo-novellas convey information without a lot of text.



Photo novella



Poster



Fact Card

Many low SES populations also use oral tradition to pass on ideas and stories between generations. Consider non-print activities or visuals like videos and presentations using visual aides, which work great for families and groups, or creating media pieces like radio ads and television ads featuring members of the community.



Videos



Presentations

## Writing Text That's Easy to Read

### Choosing the Content

- Keep the message short and simple. Don't share everything you know.
- Include examples and stories from from the community to engage your reader.
- Speak directly to your audience and use “you” and “your” where possible. Personalization helps the reader understand what he or she is supposed to do.

- Accentuate the positive. E.g., "When you make a no-smoking rule in your house, your whole family will breathe easier."
- Maintain an adult perspective. Do not make assumptions about people who read at a low level.

### Choosing the Organization

- Start and end with the most important information.
- Structure the material logically. Step-by-step, chronological, question/answer and problem/solution formats are all easy to follow.
- Use shorter sentences in general but vary the length for interest.
- Break up longer content with headlines, short paragraphs and bulleted lists.
- Use headlines with a short, complete message rather than an abstract phrase.

**TIP: Headlines that ask the reader a question help draw them in.**  
E.g. "Is tobacco smoke making your child sick?"

### Choosing the Words

- Avoid "health educator language." E.g. use "help to quit smoking" instead of "cessation help"
- Write in an active voice using vivid verbs. E.g. "You can quit smoking" instead of "Quitting smoking is possible."
- Replace statistics, where possible, with words like "most," "many," and "half." E.g. "Most people in California don't smoke."
- Use numbers and symbols when possible rather than words. E.g. "\$10" rather than "ten dollars."
- Write in a conversational style using common words. E.g. "Cigarette smoke can make you get sick more often." instead of "Exposure to tobacco smoke increases illness."
- Try to keep your text within a 4th to 6th grade reading level.

### Calculating Reading Level

There are many ways to calculate the reading level of your text. One quick way is with an online SMOG calculator available at <http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/campaign/SMOG.html>

### Creating an Effective Design

The right design will also increase the readability of your material.

A few things to **avoid**:

- Busy or distracting backgrounds
- Graphs and tables
- *Cursive, italics*, and ALL CAPS
- Single spaced text
- Small font size – use at least size 12 point size for general text
- Graphics or photos that are poor quality or juvenile

A few things to **include**:

- Lots of clear or “white” space
- Simple, consistent fonts for headlines, subheads and text
- Highlighting key ideas by using **bold**, underline, or a simple box around the text
- Colors that are favored within the community
- Familiar visual cues and simple graphics that illustrate an idea



- Visuals that your audience can identify with - simple sketches and photos that represent the reader are best



### Test Your Message Within the Community

Holding focus groups or one-on-one interviews with low SES community members will help identify the best message and provide feedback on your draft materials. Adult

education classes, trade and vocational schools, head start families, and job program training facilities are all good sources for focus group participants and reviewers.

Create an open dialogue and let participants share stories. For focus groups, invite the whole family, offer free child care, snacks and incentive gifts when possible. Keep your language simple and avoid public health jargon. Find an advocate/interpreter from the community to help with your testing.

**For sample pretest questions see <http://www.tecc.org> and choose “Development Resources.”**

### Reaching Low SES Audiences

Have information available in places where low SES residents receive services such as:

- Community clinics including prenatal, family planning and maternal/child health programs
- Education and training centers including trade/vocational schools, ESL classes, and GED classes
- Government agencies providing social services, low income housing, and job programs
- Faith based feeding and housing programs
- Substance abuse and prevention programs
- Programs serving children such as Head Start and First 5 projects

Also consider placing information or performing outreach activities in places where residents congregate such as:

- Public parks and recreation areas
- County fairs and community events
- Religious and spiritual facilities
- Swap meets, flea markets and farmers' markets
- Ethnic and neighborhood markets
- Check cashing facilities and laundromats
- Beauty salons and barbershops

A little research will help you determine the best organizations and businesses to work with in the community you want to reach. Being visible is the best way to learn about your audience, share information, offer assistance and gather feedback. Partnering with respected community leaders and organizations will further help you to develop credibility and the trust of community members.

### Additional Resources

#### Simply Put

An excellent guide created by the CDC for writing and designing easy to understand materials. Includes detailed information on developing message content, choosing words, choosing graphics, designing for readability, and testing the literacy level of your material.  
<http://www.cdc.gov/od/oc/simpput.pdf>

#### MedlinePlus Easy-to-Read Site for Health Information

A how-to guide for writing health information in plain language.  
<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/etr.html>

#### Clear & Simple: Developing Effective Print Materials for Low-Literate Readers

This guide, created by the National Cancer Institute, walks you through the five key steps for creating effective materials: conduct target audience research, develop a concept for the product, develop content and visuals, pretest and revise draft materials.  
<http://www.nci.nih.gov/cancerinformation/clearandsimple>

#### RESPECT

A statewide program of the American Lung Association of the East Bay, they provide public health agencies and community-based organizations with reliable information, respectful and relevant educational materials and strategic technical assistance. To request help call 800-622-2829 or visit them online at <http://www.respect-ala.org./index.htm>

#### Tobacco Education Clearinghouse of California (TECC)

Free services and resources are available for CTCP-funded agencies. These include library services (research, reference, and circulation), customer service (product information, ordering, and customized material) and our online and print catalog. Additionally, you will find great resources on our three websites: [www.tecc.org](http://www.tecc.org), [www.tcsrover.org](http://www.tcsrover.org), and [www.TobaccoFreeCatalog.org](http://www.TobaccoFreeCatalog.org).

### References

1. California Department of Health Services/Tobacco Control Section, *Communities of Excellence in Tobacco Control, Module 3: Priority Populations Speak about Tobacco Control*. Sacramento, CA: CDHS/TCS, 2006.
2. Baran, B., Ross, J., Graves, S. "California's Working Families Fail to Make Ends Meet" California Budget Project Annual Report, Dec. 2004.
3. California Department of Health Services/Tobacco Control Section, *Communities of Excellence in Tobacco Control, Module 3: Priority Populations Speak about Tobacco Control*. Sacramento, CA: CDHS/TCS, 2006.
4. California Department of Health Services/Tobacco Control Section, *Smoking prevalence among California adults, 1984-2006*, 2007.