

# COUNTER BALANCE

## CounterBalance: A Rural Tobacco Point of Sale Intervention Using a Statewide Census of Vermont Tobacco Retailers

Author: **Rebecca Brookes**, B.A., Division of Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, Vermont Department of Health, Burlington, VT

**The Problem:** The more young people are exposed to tobacco advertising, the more likely they are to start using tobacco.

Launched in 2014, **Counter Balance** was developed by the Vermont Department of Health (VDH) and its contractor **Rescue Social Change Group** (Rescue SCG) to minimize the tobacco industry's influence on Vermont's youth by educating parents and raising awareness about how the tobacco industry targets youth with advertising in the retail environment.



### Step 1: Document the Need for Policy Change

The Vermont Department of Health Tobacco Control program worked with community partners statewide and the nonprofit organization Counter Tools to audit Vermont's tobacco retail outlets. From October through December 2014, store audit teams visited 885 tobacco licensees and completed 767 audits.



### Major findings from the store audit:

Statewide, neighborhoods with lower household income have more tobacco retailers per 1,000 residents than higher-income areas.

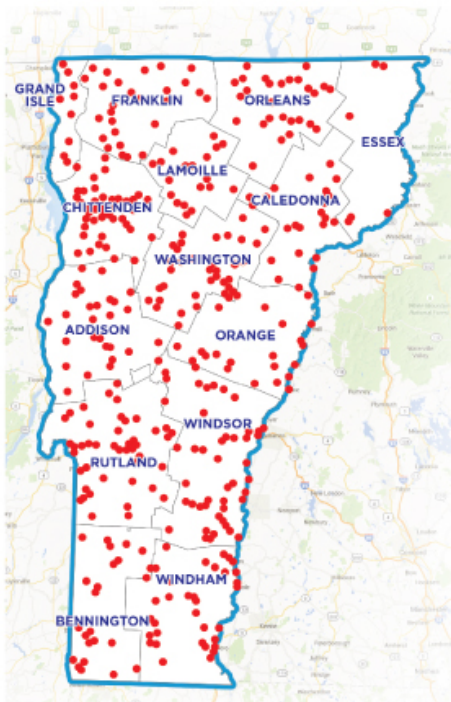
In Vermont's lowest-income neighborhoods, tobacco retailers are twice as likely to be located within 1,000 feet of a school or park than in the highest-income neighborhoods.

Stores within 1,000 feet of a school are more likely to have tobacco marketing visible from outside the store, more likely to offer discounts on tobacco products, and more likely to sell cigarillos. 51% of retailers within 1,000 feet of schools have exterior advertising, compared to 39% of retailers outside a 1,000 radius.

Pharmacies that sell tobacco have high rates of tobacco marketing and product placement visible to youth. 35% of pharmacies have interior tobacco advertisements within 3 feet of the floor.

Cigarillos - small cigars - are widely available, frequently advertised, often discounted, and more likely to be sold in stores near schools in Vermont.

39% of retail stores that sell single cigarillos advertise them for less than \$1.00, making them more appealing and accessible to youth.



## Step 2: Assess Public Support

VDH developed a public opinion survey on the issue of POS and tobacco use among VT youth. Nearly 600 online surveys were completed via an online survey tool.

### Main Survey Findings:

**“Youth are exposed to tobacco advertisements in my community.”**

**35% Disagree**

**“It is acceptable for tobacco advertisements to be placed within 1,000 feet of schools and playgrounds.”**

**73.4% Disagree**

**“Are you aware that it is illegal for cigarettes to be sold in candy and fruit flavors?”**

**51.7% say No**

**“It is acceptable for tobacco products to be sold in pharmacies.”**

**54.7% Disagree**

**COUNTER BALANCE TOBACCO SURVEY**

HOW MUCH DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS (CIRCLE ONE)

Youth are exposed to tobacco advertisements in my community.

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree/Disagree Disagree Strongly Disagree

It is acceptable for tobacco advertisements to be placed within 1000 feet of schools and playgrounds.

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree/Disagree Disagree Strongly Disagree

It is acceptable for tobacco products to be sold in pharmacies.

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree/Disagree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Are you aware that it is illegal for regular cigarettes to be sold as singles? (e.g. Not in a pack)

Yes No

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? It is acceptable for cigarettes (800+ mg) to be sold as singles.

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree/Disagree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Are you aware that it is illegal for regular cigarettes to be sold in candy/fruit flavors?

Yes No

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? It is acceptable for cigarettes (800+ mg) to be sold in candy/fruit flavors.

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree/Disagree Disagree Strongly Disagree

**TOBACCO USE (CIRCLE ONE)**

Do you currently use any tobacco products? Yes No

If yes, circle all the tobacco products you currently use.

Cigarettes Smoked Tobacco (Chew, Snus, Dissolvable Tobacco, Etc.)  
Opium Cigars Cigarettes E-Cigarettes Hookah

**INFO/DEMOGRAPHICS**

Gender: Male Female

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Are you a parent of a child under 10? Yes No

**Thank you for your time**

**COUNTERBALANCEVT.COM**

Note: Additional survey responses were collected in person, and are not yet analyzed.

## Step 3: Increase Awareness

VDH worked with Rescue SCG and its community partners to use traditional media, social media, paid digital media, community outreach, earned media, and events in order to expose and educate Vermonters on the issue and establish a foundation of knowledge on which to build future efforts.

### Traditional Media

Counter Balance included statewide TV media buys including cable, broadcast, and digital streaming services like HULU.



### DIGITAL MEDIA

#### Paid Digital Ads

A Google display ad campaign used high-profile animated ads (linked to CounterBalanceVT.com) to deliver key messages during a seven-week period which resulted in more than 2.5 million impressions.



#### Organic Social Media

A library of custom posts were created and posted to the Counter Balance Facebook page during the campaign period. Posts were meant to be highly visual, easy to understand, and easy to share.

### Community Outreach & Earned Media

VDH led community outreach efforts with local coalitions to train community organizations in spreading Counter Balance's message and equipped them with a Counter Balance toolkit to help them raise awareness in their communities.



## KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

**82,000+**  
YOUTUBE VIEWS

**12,000+**  
WEBSITE VISITS

**5+ EARNED MEDIA STORIES**  
(STATEWIDE AND COMMUNITY MEDIA)

**5.7 MILLION+ PAID MEDIA IMPRESSIONS**  
(TRADITIONAL & DIGITAL)