GIVE ME A SIGN!

Recommendations for smoke-free signage

MAKE SMOKING HISTORY®

Introduction

Thinking about signage differently

Context for change

The traditional no-smoking sign is easily one of the most recognised symbols in the Australia. The classic design is common place in nearly all public places; from hospitals and restaurants, to sports grounds and universities. Unfortunately, however, there is little evidence that these common place signs are as effective as they are intended to be.

Across Australia, smoking rates have reduced significantly amongst the general population, though in some priority groups – such as Aboriginal Australian's, people experiencing mental health issues, or people living in remote Australia – smoking rates have remained stagnant and well above what is acceptable for a healthy Australia.

In recent years, there has been an increased focus on reducing the stigma directed at, or perceived by people who smoke. This has included thinking deliberately about how public health messages shape any actual or perceived stigma towards people who smoke.

With relatively poor smoking reductions in some sub-populations, and a general consensus that negative anti-smoker messages are unhelpful, it has become apparent that the traditional approach to warding off would be smokers with a no-smoking sign may not be the best or most effective intervention to choose.

Contents

This short guide aims to showcase ideas for smoke-free signage that are positive and effective.

- Part One of this guide provides some simple, evidenced-based reasoning for developing signage
- Part Two showcases ideas for signage and messaging that could be adapted.
- Further examples of smoke-free signage are included in the appendices.

Evidence and reasoning behind good smoke-free signage

In plain words

Some types of punitive or restrictive type signage are partially effective at reducing smoking in the immediate vicinity; however better outcomes could be achieved through signage that reflects broader health and wellbeing messages and avoids using negative or stigmatising messaging. People who smoke prefer language that is positive and provides a good reason for not smoking.

Does smoke-free signage work at all?

There are numerous examples of where signage is displayed in parks, urban areas, hospitals and other places. Smoke-free or no-smoking signage does work and does reduce smoking behaviour.

Consistently, evaluations show a clear reduction in the number of smokers, and a reduction in smoking activity where smoke-free or no-smoking signage has been displayed.[1–5] There is also evidence that increasing smoke-free areas where people cannot smoke is likely to make many people who smoke more willing to quit or cut down their consumption of tobacco.[2,3]

Is there any evidence for the content of smoke-free signage?

Historically, much of the research regarding to smoke-free signage has related to whether it works at all, but not necessarily what kind of content is effective.[6] As it stands, there is still room for more research into effective signage and improving how it is used.[7] There are, however, enough studies to pave the way for good, high quality and effective signs. In addition, Make Smoking History is continually evaluating and focus-testing their smoke-free signs to make sure they're effective.

What content works best in a smoke-free sign?

While most signage appears to work, there are some things that are better than others. Below is a list of evidence based recommendations for developing a good smoke-free sign, followed by an example of what a good sign might look like. In the appendix there are further examples of recommended and not recommended signage options.

Part One

☐ Recommendation 1 – use positive language

Several studies show that signs which display positive language are preferred by people who smoke.[5,6,8] Simple phrases like "please" seem to resonate palpably more than messages that are blunt or overly direct in their approach.[5,8]

☐ Recommendation 2 – use motivational language to change behaviour

In other public health issues such as physical activity, examples of motivational messages have been shown to be effective in positively influencing behaviour.[1] Language in smoking signage might be improved therefore if it encourages or suggests a positive response to the sign using motivational wording.

☐ Recommendation 3 – use messages that provide reasons for not smoking, especially reasons that are health related

Instead of traditional smoke-free signs with messages like "no smoking", people who smoke actually respond better to signage that provides a reason not to smoke.[8] In particular, reasons and messaging that focus on health or health related ideas are well received.[8] Examples of this included the dangers of second hand smoke, or the risks of smoke exposure to personal health or women and children.[5,8]

☐ Recommendation 4 – use large signs and clear wording to increase visibility

One way to increase smoke-free signage visibility is quite simply – increase its size! Many smoke-free signs are inconspicuous and hidden.[6] By designing attractive and positive signs, increasing signage size may not cause visual pollution, nor will signs need to be discrete. Clear, short non-wordy simple messages will also increase the readership.

☐ Recommendation 5 – use recognisable symbols to increase visibility

Whist the traditional smoke-free symbol could be considered negative or blunt on its own, when coupled with a positive message it can be used as a very recognisable symbol which may increases its environmental presence.[6] It probably doesn't need to be the main feature of the sign for it to be recognisable.

Part Two

An example of good smoke-free signage

There are lots of ways to promote smoke-free awareness through signage, and there is no one template that is suitable for every location, setting or context. Still, based on the recommendations from part one there are some elements in a smoke-free sign that may improve outcomes and effectiveness.

Good smoke-free signage avoids negative imagery or language and instead has a positive and recognisable message focusing on the health and benefits of being smoke free. It is clear, legible and has a significant presence in the environment. An example may look like the sign pictured below from Rockingham General Hospital.

Image 2: A good smoke-free sign

This sign was developed by Rockingham General Hospital and the South Metropolitan Health Service

Direction to quit support

Positive imagery

Easily recognisable symbol

A positive tone and message

Clear and simple wording

QUITLINE
13 78 48

Thank you for **not** smoking

We care about **your health** and the health of **others**

A clear reason and motivation not to smoke

Significant size / environmental presence

30 cm (+)

Conclusion

Where to from here?

Testing out your signage

Developing smoke-free signage is never perfect, but a good path to improvement is to focus test ideas and messages with people who will see them. This can be as simple as a few people in a room sharing their thoughts or a short survey to be completed online.

It's the experience of Cancer Council WA that all stakeholders; from staff and clients or patients, to visitors and contractors have great ideas and provide invaluable and honest feedback when needed. The end user may often have the best ideas.

The final recommendation of this document is that signage gets road tested before it's used. This ensures those who see the signs have had opportunity to design and approve the final product.

All the best!

Appendix 1

Other signage examples

Image 3: Threatening smoke-free sign[4]

Note the negative, stigmatising language / imagery. Whilst somewhat effective this type of signage has the effect of reducing on the spot smoking only. It is unlikely to encourage smokers to consider their health, seek help from the professionals at this facility or feel cared for by the community.

Image 4: Environmentally insignificant sign[6]

Whilst some of the features of this sign are useful, its small size and print, as well poor placement in an environmentally crowded location make it unsuitable.

Image 5: Sign containing positive health messaging[1]

The health message in this sign says, "For the health and safety of our kids please help us keep this park smoke-free." Whilst this is a good message it is perhaps hard to read and is not the most obvious component in this sign.

Image 6: A novel smoke-free message

This sign from Alfred Health in Victoria uses a novel and humorous message to reduce smoking. When evaluated this sign (and the others like it) received very positive reviews from smokers.

Appendix 2

Make Smoking History signage

Image 7: Community services smoke-free signs

Image 8: Public spaces smoke-free signs

WE CARE FOR YOUR HEALTH

HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT QUITTING SMOKING?

If you'd like to reduce and quit smoking, speak to a member of our staff or call the trained counsellors at the Quitline support service on 13 78 48. They'd love to help.

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ENJOY FRESH AIR HERE

THANK YOU FOR NOT SMOKING

If you'd like to reduce and quit smoking, speak to your GP or call the trained counsellors at the Quitline support service on 13 78 48. They'd love to help.

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