

No Strings Attached: Addressing tobacco company sponsorship of women's and girls' organizations

ABSTRACT

Background

Tobacco companies use philanthropy as a marketing tool to appear to be good corporate citizens and influence legislators, stockholders and the public. The goals of tobacco companies conflict with the goals of most non-profit organizations. When organizations refuse donations from tobacco companies it may help to de-normalize tobacco.

Objective

To assess the effectiveness of face-to-face meetings in motivating decision makers of women's and girls' organizations to adopt a written policy prohibiting acceptance of tobacco company sponsorships or donations.

Design

Baseline and one year post intervention surveys were conducted by telephone with leaders of organizations to determine their attitudes, policies and practices related to donations from tobacco companies. All organizations that did not have a policy in place at baseline received educational materials and were invited to sign a written commitment to refuse tobacco company donations. In-person meetings were requested with the intervention group of randomly selected organizations.

Main Outcome Measures

Number of organizations that changed attitudes or policies associated with sponsorships or donations from tobacco companies.

Results

Leaders of 188 organizations participated in both the baseline and follow-up surveys. A shift in attitude occurred among both the control and intervention groups. Of the organizations that did not see anything wrong with accepting donations from tobacco companies in the baseline survey, more than half now feel that there is a problem with accepting them. Of all the organizations that would accept donations initially, now only 41% would. Compared to the control group, a higher percentage of the intervention group had discussions within their organizations about developing a written policy forbidding the acceptance of donations from tobacco companies and a higher percentage did sign a policy.

Conclusions

There is a secular trend toward greater public awareness that tobacco and the tobacco industry are harmful for people, and the intervention moved more organizations to discuss and implement written policies that prohibit them from accepting tobacco industry funding. These findings suggest that greater educational efforts targeted to philanthropic organizations is a viable strategy to help denormalize the acceptance of tobacco industry funding.

BACKGROUND

The delegates to the 14th World Conference on Tobacco or Health in March 2009 adopted eleven recommendations for global tobacco control. The eighth recommendation addresses the problem of tobacco companies' influence through philanthropy:

"Governments, academia, and civil society must not accept funding or participate in the tobacco industry's youth, social responsibility, voluntary marketing, or other programmes."¹

One of the most insidious promotion tactics employed by tobacco companies is the offer of sponsorships and other donations to non-profit organizations such as shelters, youth programs, community groups, professional organizations and the arts.² Donations have included sponsorship funds, incentive items, smoking cessation programs and smoking prevention curricula. Through this philanthropy, tobacco companies co-opt the valuable reputations of organizations, hoping to paint themselves as “socially responsible,” and thereby to influence legislators,^{3,4} stockholders and future jurors,⁵ whose decisions will affect the way the companies can do business. Tobacco companies often spend more to advertise about the donations they have made than they spend on their donations, revealing that philanthropy is just a tool they are using with the hope of improving their public image.⁶

The Task Force for Tobacco-Free Women and Girls is a statewide network of organizations and individuals working to help girls choose to stay tobacco-free and to help women who smoke to quit. For this project, the Task Force worked in collaboration with the local tobacco control partnerships across the state to reach out to the leaders of women’s and girls’ organizations and motivate them to make a written commitment that they will refuse tobacco company donations of any kind.

THE STUDY POPULATION

The study population was comprised of women’s and girls’ organizations throughout New York State. The contact list was developed from many sources, beginning with a comprehensive list found on the Internet at <http://www.distel.ca/womlist/countries/usa/newyork.html>. The addresses of the organizations on the preliminary list were tested in 2004 by a mailing that announced a Task Force for Tobacco-Free Women and Girls program. Contact information for organizations whose envelopes were not delivered were updated if possible or removed from the list if no further information could be obtained. In preparation for this study, an exhaustive search of the Internet was conducted for organizations in New York State that are primarily comprised of women or girls or that serve women or girls. The original list was enriched with contacts for domestic violence shelters, youth organizations that focus on girls, college sororities, women’s studies programs at universities, women’s service clubs, professional organizations in fields dominated by women, organizations that focus on women’s issues, and organizations that focus on lesbian, bisexual and transgender issues. Local tobacco control partnerships were asked to add organizations in their areas that were not yet on the list. Except for LGBT organizations, organizations that did not serve or were not comprised of more than 50% females were not included on the survey list.

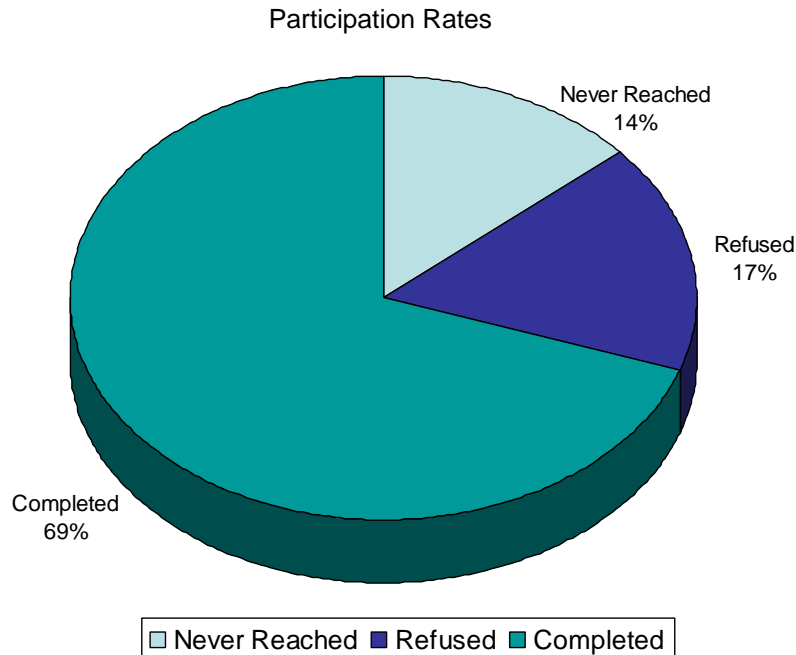
Among the 994 organizations identified at baseline, 311 (31%) completed the baseline survey. Incorrect phone number (21%) was the most common reason for not reaching organizations at baseline. There were 17 organizations that reported having policies in place. These were removed from the study and the 15 that agreed to further communication were invited to help with interventions. An additional 15 organizations that did not have a policy in place did not give consent for further contact on this issue and were removed from the study.

During the intervention period, eight more organizations were removed from the study. One organization was really just one individual, one dissolved, two listings were found to be the same organization, and the others asked to be removed from the contact list.

The follow-up survey list consisted of 271 organizations. Of those, 188 completed the follow-up survey (69%). The most common reason for not reaching organizations at on follow-up was refusal to participate (10%) followed closely by those that either did not answer the phone or did

not return calls (9%).

Figure 1
Follow-up Survey Participation Rates



THE INTERVENTION

The organizations that reported during the baseline survey that they did not have a tobacco-free funding policy in place and that agreed to further communication on the issue were randomly divided into an intervention group and a control group. All organizations were sent several educational pieces, including:

- a hand-addressed and signed thank you note for participating in the survey with an invitation to contact the Task Force for more information or with any concerns or suggestions.
- a large postcard that illustrated the dilemma of a woman trying to hold onto her organization's mission, reputation, integrity, and other values by resisting the temptation of easy money from a tobacco company. The postcard also included facts about tobacco philanthropy, announced the August 2006 verdict in the U.S. Department of Justice's lawsuit against the major tobacco companies,⁷ and invited recipients to visit the Task Force website for more information.
- a fact sheet about women, girls and tobacco, including information about tobacco companies' motives for making donations.
- a sample commitment resolution for tobacco-free funding.

A video featuring testimonials by leaders of organizations that have made a written commitment to tobacco-free funding was created. It was mailed with a package of popcorn to the control group and was delivered in person, with the popcorn, to the intervention group.

No further contact was initiated with the control group until the follow-up survey. All educational materials invited them contact the Task Force director or to log on to

www.tobaccofreewomenandgirls.org for additional information or for help in adopting a policy. Some may have visited the website, but none contacted the Task Force.

Organizations in the intervention group were contacted with a request for a face-to-face meeting to discuss issues related to tobacco company funding. A team of Task Force members volunteered to send letters, call, and meet with these organizations. The volunteers first participated in Cicatelli Associates' "Engaging Decision Makers" training and were provided with baseline responses from the organizations with which they would meet. For this project, volunteers were asking organizations to make a written commitment that they would not accept donations of any kind from companies that profit from the sale of tobacco. Presentations were tailored to the type of organization, the level of acceptance that was expected, and the layers of approval that were anticipated for each organization. Volunteers adapted their presentations as they learned more about the interests and concerns of the leaders. Organizations that had accepted tobacco company donations were offered an online grant research subscription at no cost to help them find replacement funds if they made the commitment. The number of direct contacts with each organization varied from zero, with organizations that would not return repeated voice mail and email messages, up to nine, with organizations that were interested, had meeting schedule complications, and had issues to resolve before signing the commitment.

Local tobacco control partnership coordinators were kept apprised of the organizations that were being contacted. Many collaborated by providing additional information and some participated in the intervention meetings and follow through. Public acknowledgement of organizations that made this commitment was promised during the intervention and is being delivered at partnerships' annual recognition events and in congratulatory advertisements in publications across the state.

THE SURVEYS

The baseline survey questionnaire was designed to collect the following information:

- Contact information
- Organization mission statement
- Current policy toward accepting donations from tobacco companies and reasoning for having or not having a policy
- History of sponsorship behavior, value of donations and reasoning for accepting or not accepting donations
- Additional information such as alternative sources of funding and amount of alternate funding
- Orientation toward sponsorship policy including vulnerability toward future tobacco donations
- Willingness to adopt a policy against accepting donations from tobacco companies in the future

The baseline and follow-up surveys included approximately 35 questions each and were nearly identical to each other. Respondents were called and most completed the survey over the telephone. Some respondents requested and completed a self-administered survey and returned it via the postal service or e-mail.

OUTCOME VARIABLES

The primary outcome of interest in this study was the adoption of a written policy to refuse donations of any kind from tobacco companies by organizations who reported at baseline that they did not have that policy in place. During the intervention, Task Force volunteers asked leaders of organizations to sign a written commitment that their organization would not accept

donations of any kind from tobacco companies. The document they were asked to sign stated: “[Name of organization] shall not accept any charitable funding, donations or underwriting in the form of cash, gifts, in-kind or planned giving from any company specified below as a member or part of the tobacco industry.” The tobacco industry is defined in the document as “these and any other companies that produce or market branded tobacco products: Altria Group, Philip Morris USA, Philip Morris International, Reynolds America, R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co., Sante Fe Natural Tobacco Co., Lane Limited, Loews Corporation, Lorillard Inc., Smokin’ Joe’s, Vector Group Ltd., Liggett Group Inc., Vector Tobacco Inc., U.S. Smokeless Tobacco Co. Inc. (UST), Houchens Industries, Inc., Commonwealth Brands, Inc.”

Organizations were asked in the survey:

Which of the following best describes your organization’s current stance on accepting donations from tobacco companies? (Please choose only one.)

- 1. The organization has a written policy forbidding acceptance of tobacco company donations.*
- 2. The organization has a written policy allowing acceptance of tobacco company donations.*
- 3. The organization does not have a written policy about tobacco company donations.*

Organizations were considered to have adopted a written policy if they signed the commitment provided by the Task Force volunteer or if they answered on the survey that they have a written policy forbidding acceptance of tobacco company donations (response #1).

Any movement toward adopting a policy, including discussions within the organization, was also of interest. Survey respondents were asked:

- In the past year, has there been any discussion in your organization about developing a written policy that would forbid acceptance of donations from tobacco companies? (Yes/No)*
- Would your organization be willing to consider adopting a written policy that specifically prohibits accepting donations from tobacco companies? (Yes/No)*

Additional areas of interest were changes in the organizations’ practices regarding donations from tobacco companies. Did those who had accepted in the past stop? Were some accepting now who had refused in the past?

- Has your organization accepted a donation from a tobacco company in the past year? (by that we mean the donation of funds or other resources.)*
 - 1. Yes --- What donations did the tobacco company give you most recently?*

Money: \$ _____
Other: _____ Estimated value: \$ _____
 - 2. No*
- In general, would you say that your organization would accept or refuse tobacco industry donations, if offered? (Yes/No)*

Questions were also asked to determine whether change occurred in the organizations’ attitudes regarding donations from tobacco companies:

- Does the leadership of your organization think it is okay for organizations to take donations from tobacco companies? (Yes/No)*
- Does the leadership of your organization think there is anything wrong with tobacco companies using an organization’s name for public relations purposes? (Yes/No)*

DATA COLLECTION

The baseline survey was conducted between December 2006 and December 2007 and the

follow-up survey was conducted between November 2008 and February 2009. The telephone surveys were conducted by the Survey Research and Data Acquisition Resource (SRDAR) at Roswell Park Cancer Institute. SRDAR uses WinCati version 4.2, a specialized computer assisted telephone interviewing software package.

SRDAR routinely makes up to 15 callback attempts in order to reach participants, and calls are placed seven days a week during allowable calling hours (generally 9am to 9pm). Roswell Park Cancer Institute's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the New York State Department of Health's IRB approved data collection procedures used in the surveys.

RESULTS

ATTITUDES

Compared to the baseline survey, the follow-up survey found a higher percentage of organizations reporting that it is not acceptable to take donations from tobacco companies (Figure 2) and that it is wrong for tobacco companies to use an organization's name for public relations purposes (Figure 3). However, no difference was found between the intervention group and the control group on these measures.

Among all those who responded that it is acceptable for organizations to take donations from tobacco companies at baseline:

- 29% still think it is acceptable
- 43% now think it is not acceptable
- 29% now are unsure

A total of 72% have changed their views in the desired direction; however, the intervention group did not change more than the control group on these measures. The

Figure 2

Does the leadership of your organization think it is okay for organizations to take donations from tobacco companies?

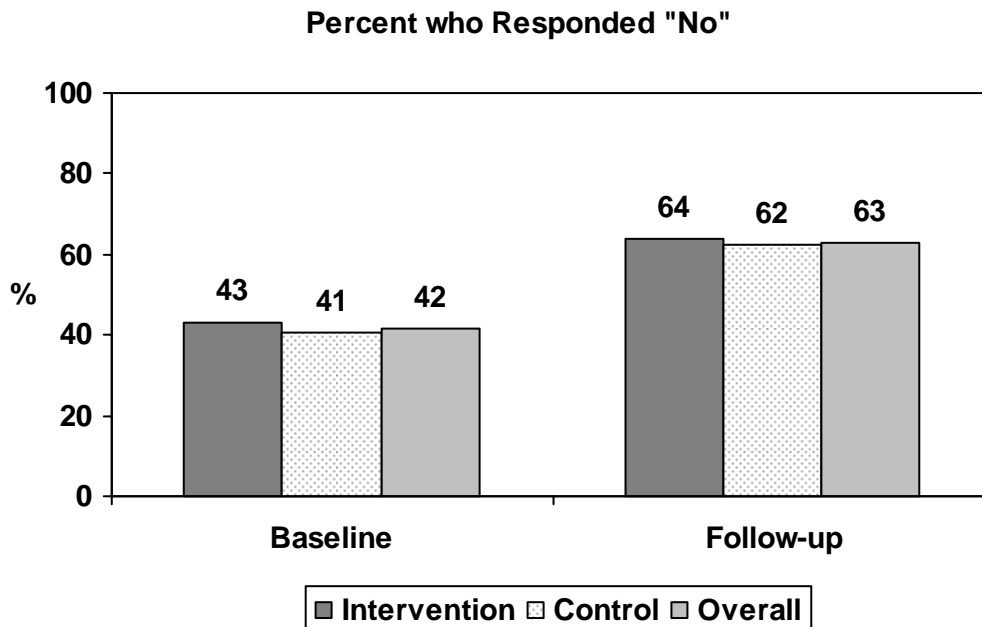
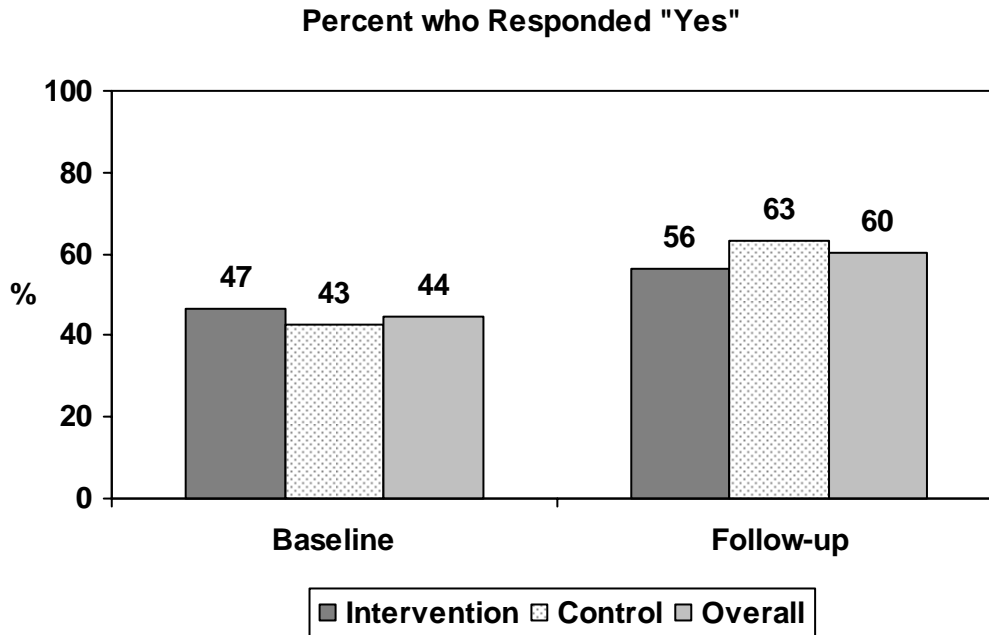


Figure 3

Does the leadership of your organization think there is anything wrong with tobacco companies using an organization's name for public relations purposes?



Among those who responded at baseline that the leadership of their organization thinks there is nothing wrong with tobacco companies using an organization's name for public relations purposes :

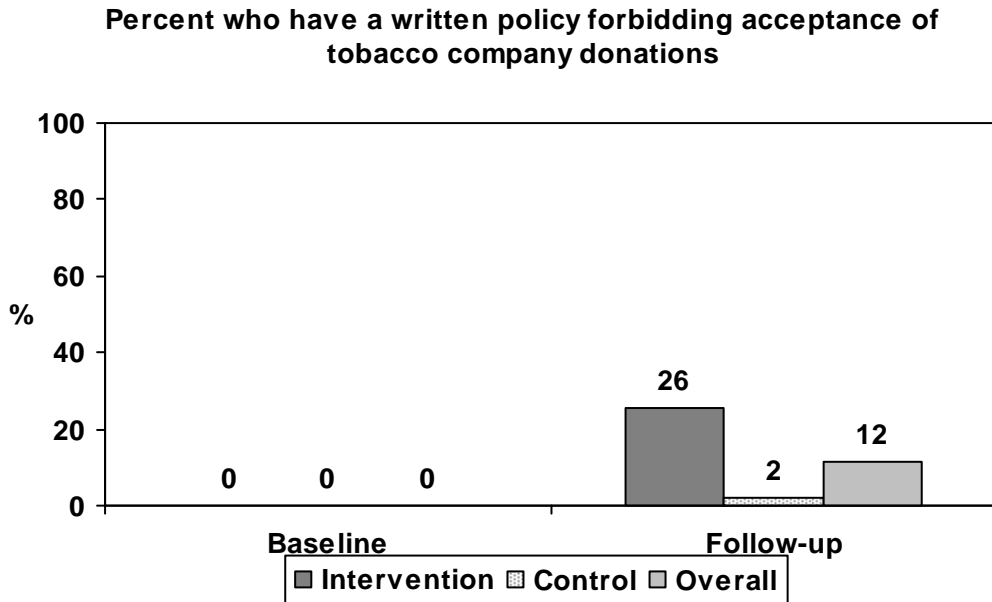
- 22% still think there is nothing wrong
- 52% now think there is something wrong
- 26% now are not sure

A total of 78% have changed their views in the desired direction. The difference between baseline and follow up on this measure was significant ($p=0.03$).

POLICY

Compared to the control group, a higher percentage of organizations in the intervention group reported that they had adopted a written policy forbidding the acceptance of donations from tobacco companies, either by signing the commitment provided during the intervention or by their response in the follow-up survey.

Figure 4

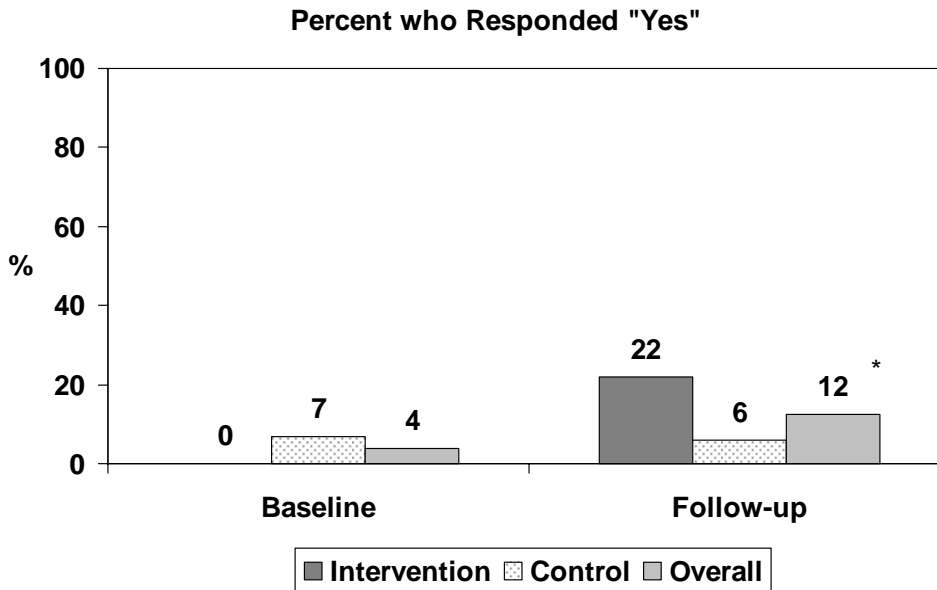


Note: *P < 0.05 (chi-square test, intervention group versus control group), n=188 organizations who completed both the baseline and follow-up surveys.

At the follow-up survey, the percentage of organizations reporting that there has been discussion in the past year about adopting a written policy that would forbid acceptance of donations from tobacco companies was significantly higher in the intervention group, compared to the control group. This reflects the degree to which the intervention was remembered by the leaders of the organizations.

Figure 5

In the past year, has there been any discussion in your organization about developing a written policy that would forbid acceptance of donations from tobacco companies?

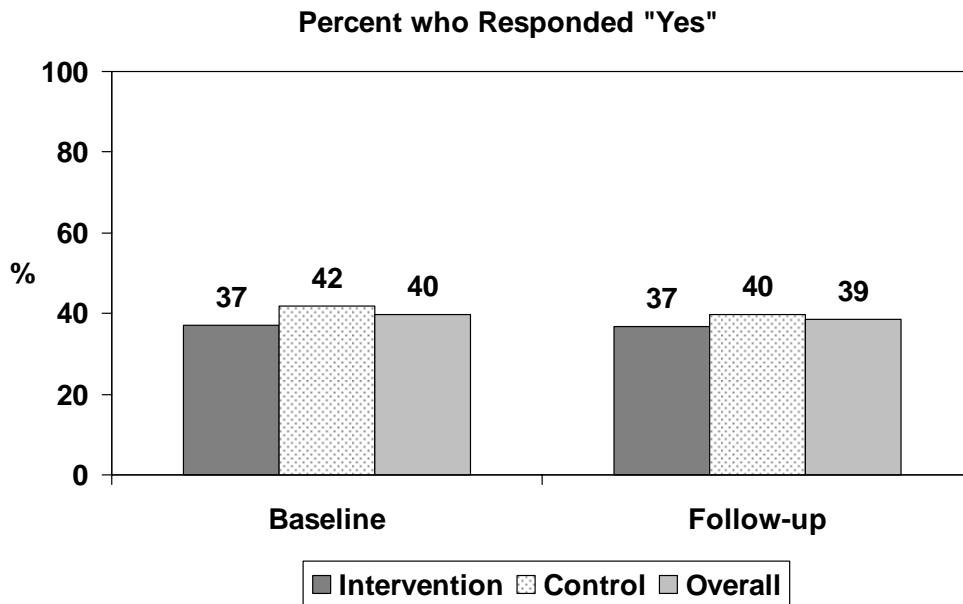


Note: * P < 0.05 (χ^2 test, intervention group versus control group), n=188 organizations who completed both the baseline and follow-up surveys.

The percentage of organizations who reported that they would be willing to adopt such a policy remained comparable between the intervention and control groups.

Figure 6

Would your organization be willing to consider adopting a written policy to forbid the acceptance of donations from tobacco companies?



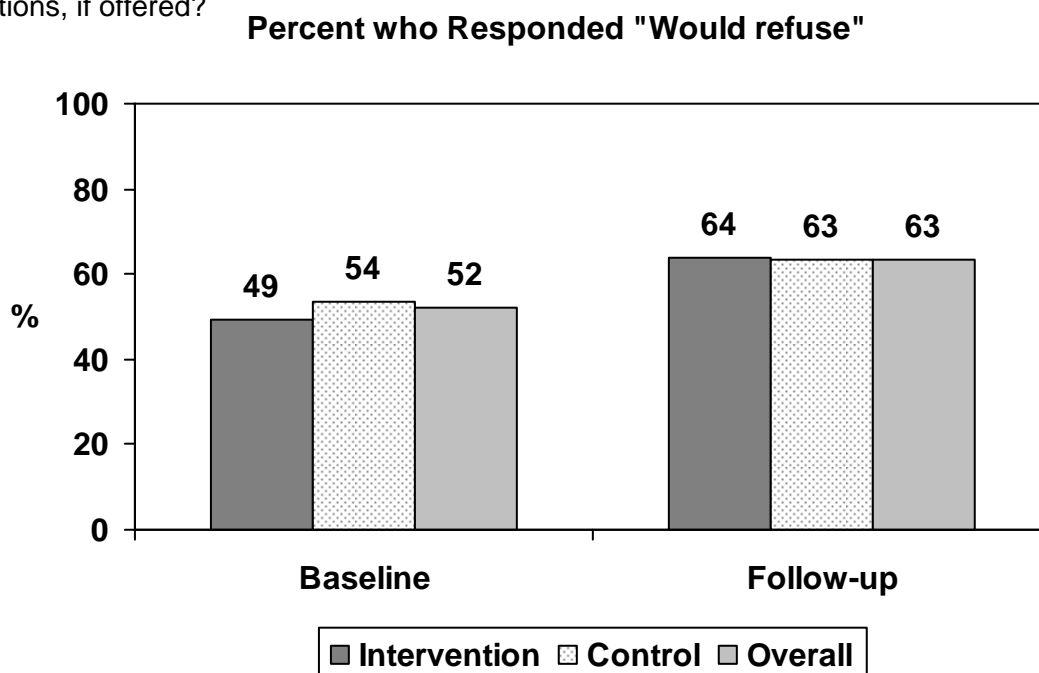
Note: Baseline, n=188 organizations who completed both surveys. Follow-up, n=159 organizations that do not have a written policy.

PRACTICE

Compared to the baseline survey, the follow-up survey found a higher percentage of organizations reporting that they would refuse donations from tobacco companies, although no difference was found between the intervention group and the control group on this measure.

Figure 7

In general, would you say that your organization would accept or refuse tobacco industry donations, if offered?



Note: n=188 organizations who completed both the baseline and follow-up surveys.

Among all those who responded at baseline that their organization would accept tobacco industry donations, if offered:

- 41% still think they would accept them
- 28% now think they would refuse them
- 31% now are not sure

A total of 59% have changed their views in the desired direction. Although a difference between the intervention and control groups was not detected, the overall difference between baseline and follow up on this measure was significant ($p < 0.001$).

Among those who reported that their organization would accept donations from tobacco companies, the reason most often given was "The organization can use the donations to work toward serving clients or working toward the general mission." Among those who reported that their organization would refuse donations from tobacco companies, the reasons most often given were "Accepting tobacco company donations would be contrary to the organization's overall belief of health promotion," and "The organization does not want its name tied to a tobacco company."

Table 1

What reasons do you think are behind your organization's decision to accept tobacco industry donations?

(among those who reported that their organization would accept)

| Reason | Baseline % (n=30) | Follow-up % (n=26) |
|---|-------------------|--------------------|
| The organization's specific aims come before health promotion or tobacco control. | 13% | 50% |
| The organization can use the donations to work toward serving clients or working toward the general mission. | 77% | 89% |
| Declining donations will not hurt the tobacco companies. | 13% | 42% |
| Tobacco is legal and the public is aware of the health consequences of smoking. | 17% | 50% |
| Good rapport with tobacco company representatives. | 3% | 4% |
| Other organizations do not award as large donations as tobacco companies. | 3% | 15% |
| Would not have enough money to carry out the organizations mission if it weren't for tobacco company donations. | 0% | 19% |

Note: Participants were able to select more than one reason.

Table 2

What reasons do you think are behind your organization's decision to refuse tobacco industry donations?

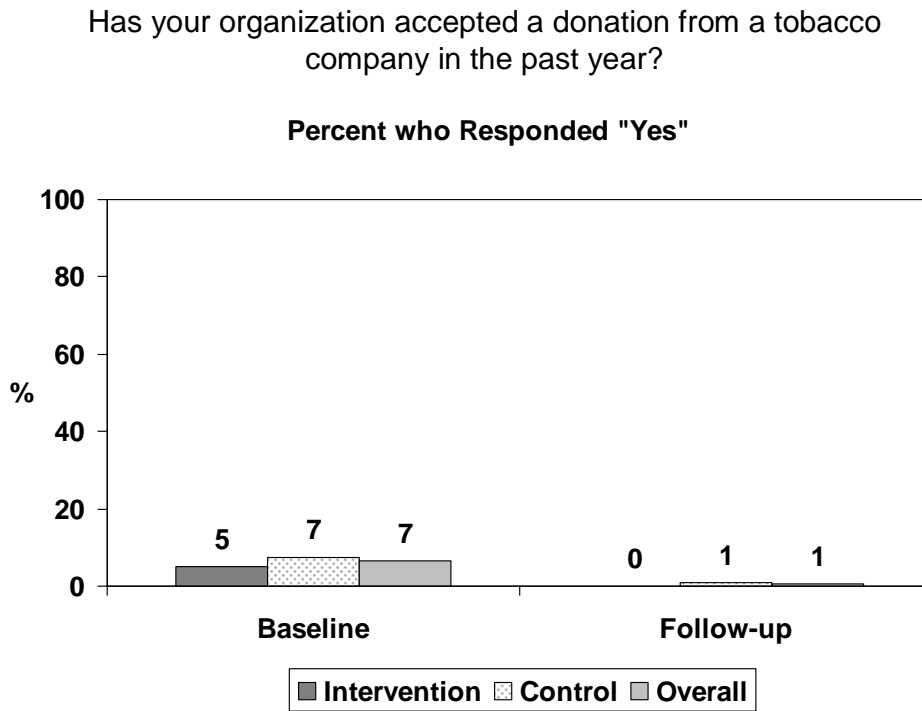
(among those who reported that their organization would refuse)

| Reason | Baseline % (n=97) | Follow-up % (n=118) |
|---|-------------------|---------------------|
| Accepting tobacco company donations would be contrary to the organization's overall belief of health promotion. | 77% | 92% |
| The organization does not want its name tied to a tobacco company. | 55% | 93% |
| The organization would not be eligible for other grants or funds if they accepted donations from a tobacco company. | 8% | 8% |
| Clients may disapprove of a decision to accept tobacco company donations. | 31% | 63% |
| Private donors may disapprove of a decision to accept tobacco company donations. | 32% | 71% |

Note: Participants were able to select more than one reason.

Fewer organizations reported having accepted a tobacco company donation in the past year at follow-up, compared to baseline, although there was no significant difference between the intervention and control groups on this measure.

Figure 8



Note: n=188 organizations who completed both the baseline and follow-up surveys.

KEY FINDINGS

A shift in attitude occurred among organizations in both the intervention group and the control group. Of the organizations that did not see anything wrong with accepting donations from tobacco companies in the preliminary survey, more than half now feel that there is a problem with that. Of all the organizations that would accept donations initially, now only 41% would.

Additionally, fewer organizations in both the intervention and control groups have accepted donations from a tobacco company during the last year, compared to baseline (1% overall, compared to 7% at baseline). Of those who said at baseline that they would accept donations, 59% have changed their views and either would refuse or are not sure.

Very few of the organization contacts reported remembering the educational materials that were given to them, so the shifts in attitude and practice may represent the general climate of greater public knowledge about tobacco and tobacco industry tactics. It is possible that even if they do not remember the educational materials, the materials may have had an influence, along with the work of many health-related groups and a growing public awareness that tobacco companies have been defrauding the public for decades.

During the study period, a higher percentage of intervention group organizations (26%) did adopt a written commitment to refuse donations from the tobacco industry compared to the control group (2%). More intervention organizations also reported that they had discussions during the last year about adopting the policy (22% intervention, 6% control).

Of the organizations that participated in both surveys, 161 agreed to further contact on women/girls and tobacco issues. They have been added to the contact list for the Task Force for Tobacco-Free Women and Girls. Local tobacco control partnerships may also include them in their communications.

DISCUSSION

Given the secular shifts in attitude and practice that occurred among both the intervention and control groups, it is likely that the intervention resulted in some commitments because the timing was right for those organizations that signed. Many organizations still are not ready to close the door on any potential funding source. Even though most do not want to have any association with the tobacco industry, they are not yet ready to make a formal commitment forbidding the acceptance of funding. As the public becomes more aware, through comprehensive tobacco control programs across the country, that accepting donations from tobacco companies helps the companies sell their products, more individuals and organizations will commit to tobacco-free-only lifestyles and funding.

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