

How Governments Work and How to Convince Them to Control Tobacco*

**Practical tips to improve your political game*

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Is there a sure-fire way of winning a political struggle? If so, no one has patented it yet. The political process doesn't happen in the sterile conditions of a laboratory or within the logical framework of computer analysis. It belongs to the messy world of human nature – a chaotic world of irrational thought and complex motivation. No two political campaigns are remotely the same.

There are, however, certain reliable steps to political success. These are:

1. Getting tobacco on the public agenda

- Raising awareness of and building public support for our goals
- Winning the competition against other issues for public attention

2. Getting favourable decisions

- Getting governments to make pro-health decisions.

3. Protecting political gains and minimizing losses

- Re-positioning after decisions to ensure continued success

1. Getting on the public agenda

Smoking, lung cancer, heart disease, emphysema. These are life and death issues: but they are not the only life and death issues that concern governments. Our issue has to compete for attention against an almost infinite number of other concerns. Getting public, media and government – keeping it and renewing it – is an enormous challenge.



Be in the news – and drive the news

It's not enough to have a story in the newspaper – there are dozens of stories in the newspapers each day. Governments, like individuals, respond to the stories which command attention. That's why our stories must be presented in a way that triggers a response. Decision-makers may ignore the story "more teenagers smoking:" they won't ignore the headline "government tries to hide figures on teenage smoking rates."



Caution:

To avoid taking action, governments:

Deflect

They shift attention away from themselves, and try to get us turn our energies elsewhere. I.e. "We can't ban advertising until there is international agreement" or "These tax issues are decided by another department," or "There's nothing we can do to provide non-smoking work areas in private factories."

Delay

They pretend the issue is being addressed, when in fact nothing is happening. Meetings take a long time to happen. Letters aren't answered for weeks or months. Reports are mysteriously delayed.

Study groups are set up involving the health community. These groups have no real power to affect change, and can waste advocates' energies.

By postponing decisions they hope to discourage us, wear us down, stall the momentum we have built, or wait until public interest is lost.

Deny and Deceive

Governments (like the tobacco industry) will try to deny the validity of our concerns. Their denial comes in many forms:

- They may deny the importance of the issue (i.e. "we won't be able to meet with you for several weeks")
- They may deny resources (i.e. "I'd like to help, but there isn't enough money in the budget")
- They may deny the truth (i.e. "There's not enough proof that advertising causes people to smoke for us to ban tobacco advertising")

Deception is worse form of denial. Governments may try to leave the impression that something will happen, when they know in fact that nothing will be done. They may pretend to be sympathetic, when there is no real intention of considering our views. They may withhold information to which we have legal rights. They may lie or misrepresent their own research.

Discount and Discredit

They will try to dismiss both tobacco issues and those who are fighting for them. They will minimize the impact of smoking when they are not prepared to take action. They will question our legitimacy, our research, our intelligence, our motives.

Divide

Governments will try to 'divide and conquer'. They will ask for 'reasonableness' when their real intention is to distract us with a fight between moderates and more radical members. They may try to divide us by offering small gains (i.e. signs at retail stores), hoping to send some away before any meaningful changes are made.

Deal

When governments begin to negotiate, this may mean we are headed for victory. And then again, it may not. If they indicate no real intention to move towards your demands, or if they set up negotiations in a way that you are handicapped, then you should consider that the negotiators are intending to defeat our goals, not work with us towards meaningful controls on tobacco.



Be on every meeting agenda

The more often decision-makers hear about our concerns, the more likely they are to realize that they must do something to respond. The people who run government spend hours in meetings - the more times a day they hear about tobacco, the more likely we are to see action on it. Get smoking on the agenda of every meeting possible: this includes cabinet meetings, committee meetings, meetings between politicians and their friends, international meetings, neighbourhood meetings, party meetings, staff meetings, family gatherings – any meeting at all. Even a tiny agenda item (like asking for a no-smoking area at a small public event) helps build awareness of tobacco issues.



Be persistent

Public attention for most issues dies down very quickly, and politicians and governments learn that if they ignore a concern, or give a lame response, both the issue and its advocates may go away. Don't let them give the 'brush off.' Show them that we won't go away. Reply to their indifference with yet stronger and louder arguments and better information, and a fresh, news-worthy angle.



Be creative

Selling ideas is just another form of marketing. Many businesses and interests groups are competing for attention. To get noticed in this busy market place of ideas, our ideas have to be attention-grabbing.



Make Friends

We need every friend we can get. Seek out those individuals in high and low places who are personally and politically committed to tobacco control. Look especially for influential individuals in areas where the tobacco companies are active - the media, universities, business, the arts, etc. Keep our allies up-to-date, and involve them as appropriate.



Broaden our base

Develop real alliances with sympathetic individuals and groups. Most certainly these should be in the health community (professional and charitable organizations). But they should also include groups beyond the health community – including business, the arts, labour, churches, political parties. Remember that real alliances require mutual support – we can't expect other groups to support us unless we are also willing to support them as appropriate.



Force decisions

Smoking is a chronic social issue – this makes it easier for the public to ignore it, or to support government delay in responding to it. By developing a 'crisis' or decision point, we command public and media attention. Even small decisions, like a request to remove a tobacco ad from a municipal park, or make a sports arena smoke-free will advance awareness and action on tobacco.



Be mainstream

There are lots of crazy people in the world, and newspapers and politicians carefully avoid them. We can't afford to take the risks of appearing like extremists or religious zealots. We can control body language, tone of voice, style of dress, rhetoric and tv-backgrounds to ensure that we appear as 'normal' as we are.



Work together

The ideas which go furthest and fastest are those which are articulated in the community and which have the support of both political leaders and bureaucracies. Government departments set the administrative agenda – and they can and will slow down any agenda they oppose. And policies and programs from government departments have a better chance of succeeding if there are supporters in the broader community.

2. Win the Public Debate

Once tobacco-control is on the public agenda, the hard work begins.

Unlike some other public health issues, tobacco is not a one-sided debate. When governments decide to do something about tuberculosis, for example, they chose tuberculosis over issues for limited resources. Addressing tobacco-caused disease is quite different. Governments must be willing to stare-down a large and powerful commercial sector as well as its domestic and international allies. They must not only choose the public interest, they must choose against the corporate interest. These aren't easy decisions for government, and it's not easy for us to convince them to make the right decisions.

That's why we must be prepared to:



Play hardball

The industry plays to win, so we must too. That doesn't mean playing 'dirty' or doing anything dishonest or devious. We must still take the high ground. But we must also understand what it takes to defeat the tobacco industry when it fights hard against us. Political campaigns require flexible strategies, quick responses, and tireless workers.



Have a tough skin

In a campaign for tobacco control, we will put the tobacco industry and its friends (and maybe even politicians or government) on the defensive. Their counter-attack will be fierce. They will say nasty things about us and will do nasty things to us. Sadly, even some of our friends will believe them, or will side with them. The media and politicians will treat us with suspicion, and challenge everything we say and do. Understanding that this unpleasantness is a natural part of achieving success makes it easier to accept.



Confirm and exploit relationships and allies

Once we've built alliances and found friends in high and low places, we need to use them. Confirm and cement the allegiance of these individuals and groups by asking them to do something on the issue, even if it is something quite small (like writing a letter).



Be on best behaviour

Policy makers will have surprising difficulty in choosing between 'us' and 'them.' That's why it's important not to give them any excuse to make the wrong choice. Be careful not to do anything or say anything which gives them this excuse. Be polite, be honest, be generous, be kind, be trust-worthy, open-minded, act in good faith. Remember – they'll be watching.



Think like a politician

In the final crunch, the big decisions will be made by politicians (some of whom will be senior members of the bureaucracy). Understanding how they make their decisions makes it easier for us to present them with our decision in an attractive way.

3. Prepare for loss – and prepare for victory

Tobacco use is an enormous problem, and one without quick remedy or instant solutions. Reducing tobacco use involves both individual and social change, neither of which happen quickly or smoothly.

Every victory against tobacco use will be accompanied by another assault on public health by the tobacco industry. Ad bans will be circumvented. High taxes will be undermined through smuggling. Bans on smoking in public places will be flouted. So once we've finished celebrating our victories, we have to unroll strategies to protect our gains.

The converse is also true. Every apparent defeat before the industry teaches us something useful for the next engagement. And it's never too early to begin preparing for that next battle.

Because public interest is so fleeting, it's important to overlap the next campaign's strategy into current activities. If government, the media and the public think that a problem has been solved, it may be difficult to capture their attention quickly again. Similarly, if they think that the tobacco industry can't be defeated, they may not be interested in the next challenge to it. We can improve our readiness for the next steps by:

- Keeping our eye on the horizon.
- Developing a media message which signals the next campaign, and which leaves the media and the public interested in the next rounds
- Monitoring enforcement of legislative gains, and by documenting abuses by the industry of government concessions.

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Understanding Politicians (and learning to think like them).

Politicians are just like the rest of us –**NOT!** Their job makes them look at the world differently than we do, and make decisions in a very different way. Knowing how they think makes it easier to work with them and makes it easier to get them to do the things we want.

Politicians live in the “here and now.”

Do you know what you will be working on next week? Politicians don't. To stay flexible and free to respond to new events, they often don't plan more than a few days ahead. (other than appearances at official events, which must be scheduled in advance). They live in the present and think mostly about today's issues, today's news-stories, today's decisions. They will think about smoking on the days that it is in the news – and forget about it on other days.

Politicians want immediate rewards – and want to avoid immediate difficulties

Health workers plan for policy changes which will take effect over years or even generations. A politician plans for the next newspaper headline, or the next meeting (and, of course, the next election). To motivate politicians to take action means finding an immediate positive reward.

Politicians are competitive.

Everything is partisan to a politician. Don't expect them to want to 'build agreement,' or work with members of other parties, or to share the limelight with you or anyone else. They live – and die – by publicity.

Politicians want to be liked.

Politicians need as many people as possible to approve of them. They don't like to say “no;” to any request, in case it creates enemies. There are two important lessons from this.

- Always ask for something they can agree with.

In addition to asking for your big items (i.e. a ban on tobacco advertising), make sure you ask for something else that they may be able to support (i.e. programs in schools) or do (i.e. writing a letter in support of a program). That way you both walk away with a some good feeling, and the door is left open for future talks.

- Listen carefully for 'no'.

If a politician can't say 'yes,' she may say 'no' in a very quiet and subtle way. Even groups of politicians – like cabinets – will prefer to avoid saying no. Instead of directly rejecting our ideas, they'll fail to take any action on them. As a rule of thumb, if they don't look you in the eye and say 'yes' – then the answer is 'no.'

Politicians make 'deals.'

Politicians barter constantly with each other, and spend much of their time “making deals.” They are quite comfortable trading off policy gains in one area against those in another. Tobacco is a special issue for us, and we might not be willing to trade it against a totally unrelated issue – but a politician will. A Minister of Health may agree to abandon tobacco control, for example, in return for more money for hospitals, or for a new public building in her or his city.

Politicians think locally

Politicians feel a strong loyalty and responsibility for their communities. Don't expect them to care about the 'big picture.' They may willingly oppose controls on tobacco if they think it will hurt even a handful of local tobacco farmers or threaten only a few jobs in their community.

