

Case Example #1: “Secondhand Smoke” - Backburning the Fire

America spends billions upon billions of dollars to break bad habits or change beliefs one person at a time. This includes efforts focused on addictions, obesity, drinking, exercise and in this instance, smoking. What we commonly overlook is that an underlying definition like *Secondhand Smoke* impacted change much more readily than all the previous efforts centered on changing an individual’s addictive habit; and at an infinitely smaller fraction of the cost.

Beliefs, habits and definitions are rooted in our subconscious mind. Often we can better leverage improvement across a society by tackling definitions first. However, definitions rarely, if ever, ~~even~~ make it up on either our billboards or airwaves.

The power of defining “secondhand smoke” as harmful to those in the vicinity of a smoker simply fired everyone up. Yes, the Surgeon General had declared smoking as unhealthy, a warning label was prominently placed on each cigarette pack, the tobacco companies under duress agreed to bankroll major anti-smoking public ad campaigns, and health insurers agreed to pay for stop smoking counseling. We tried to change a filthy and unhealthy habit and the many internal beliefs surrounding it, but with only moderate success. So we next tried to change opinions at an early age in our schools and that had even less effect.

Then the definition, “secondhand smoke” got pushed by a fervent group of Californians. The stop smoking effort shifted from changing behaviors one person at a time to implementing a change in everyone’s behavior. This enabled us to ostracize smoking to outside or contained areas. This shifted beliefs to “your smoking can harm me” and punished those with the habit by setting them conspicuously apart, which ultimately led to banning smoking in many public places altogether.

A brief history from American’s for Nonsmokers’ Rights (ANR) follows. People around the United States began to talk about the annoyance and potential health hazards of secondhand smoke. The smoke gave some people headaches, made some cough and gag, and in the worst case scenario kept those with respiratory illnesses from entering smoke-filled establishments. These concerned citizens banded together to form local organizations called Group Against Smoking Pollution (GASP) that initially engaged in educational work and eventually began to seek legislation to limit smoking in public places.

As of October 2, 2008, there are 2,960 municipalities with laws in effect that restrict where smoking is allowed. There are 760 municipalities; 29 states and 1 commonwealth; and at least 16 countries that have a 100% smokefree provision in effect in workplaces, and/or restaurants, and/or bars.

One can argue that America’s effort to stamp out smoking has been evolutionary. However, if we would have started this effort by leveraging one key definition - “secondhand smoke” - where would society be today and how many lives and dollars could have been saved? Yet, we remain hesitant to consider the potential of definitions.



Little Bird
ANR's Mascot
1976

Little Bird Artwork
by Tim Mancusi