

WORKING WITH MEDIA

Because going smoke-free is a significant and very visible social change for restaurants and bars, the media normally follow this issue closely before it becomes law and will continue to follow-up to see how the new law is being accepted once it is enacted.

Historically, media stories in the first few days after a law has passed tend to dwell on the negative. They will quote a bar owner who says things such as, “My business has fallen off a cliff.....I’ll be living out of my car by next week.” But these initial reactions tend to be overstated and subsequent stories a year later will find the same owner still in business and doing fine.

So if a reporter calls, use it as an opportunity to educate your customers about the process and compliance with the reality of change. The sooner and smoother the transition, the better for everyone involved. Be honest with the media. Tell them truthfully what is happening in your establishment. Do not approach the interview with an axe to grind or feel compelled to support a story line the reporter has pre-determined.

Most reporters will understand what you’re going through. Just a few years ago the haze of secondhand smoke was synonymous with newsrooms, yet all of those workplaces are smoke free now too.

In this section you will find tips on how to take the high road and make your interactions with the media the most beneficial to your business.

(For more information on working with the media if you have gone smoke-free voluntarily, please see the Voluntarily Smoke-Free section in this handbook.)



The Spokespeople:

Since this is a sensitive topic, don't let just anyone from your establishment answer questions when the media calls. Assign a specific person or persons – normally an owner or manager – who is in touch with the situation and easily accessible. This person should be well briefed on the issue and any reporter inquiries should be referred to them.

The Message:

Do your best not to offend any of your customers or potential customers. More than three-quarters of Americans don't smoke, so you need to consider their preferences without pitting them against or making any mockery of the remainder who do smoke, and who you sincerely wish to retain as customers. Do not let the simple term “smoke-free” be misinterpreted to mean “smoker-free” or “anti-smoker.” This can be accomplished by:

- Letting your customers know, through the media, that nothing has changed at your restaurant or bar. You still provide the same excellent food and service and appreciate customer's efforts to comply with the new smoke-free policy. Where applicable, you may mention some appropriate area where customers can easily step outside the restaurant/bar and smoke.
- Avoid interjecting your own personal opinion on the new law or politics and in general. Overwhelming experience from smoke-free laws passed in other locations indicates the law will succeed and any reluctance to obey it will only hurt your ability to educate your customers, thereby making the transition slower and more difficult.
- Do your best to accentuate the positive. For example, tell reporters that now that this challenging issue is behind you, the business is looking forward to the healthful advantages of clean indoor air for employees and customers and the reduced maintenance costs the business will enjoy as a result.



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Tips on Talking to the News Media:

Your attitude with a reporter often can be as important as what you say. The more you know about his/her job, the more comfortable you will feel with what is happening. The more you understand your position in the interview, the more you will feel in control.

The following are some basic rules to remember about dealing with the media and how they operate:

- **The news media is not the enemy** – Reporters will ask tough questions, but that is their job. This can easily lead to you feeling defensive. Don't be.

- **This is your chance to be heard** – Thank the reporter for making the effort to get your viewpoint on the issue. Be friendly, helpful, and sensitive to the time constraints and deadlines some reporters will be under. Always return their calls immediately or you may miss your opportunity to be included in the story.

- **Write down important talking points before communicating with the media** – This way, you can easily refer to them during the interview. Always try to draw the conversation back to those important messages if a reporter starts to deviate from them.

- **Often, reporters have a preconceived agenda for their story.** Be sure to stick to the facts and do not be pushed into saying what the media wants to hear.
- **If there is a microphone or camera, consider it always on. There is no such thing as “off the record”** – Consider everything you say to be eligible inclusion in the story. Do not make wise cracks about your opponents or even self-deprecating remarks about your restaurant, employees or customers. A well-meaning reporter might misinterpret you. A mean-spirited reporter could make you look horrible and damage your customer or employee relations.
- **Nice people ask tough questions** – Don’t be surprised if a reporter’s demeanor changes drastically once the discussion turns to the subject at hand. Radio and television reporters may want to use the question as part of the story, so they often try to make it sound confrontational to evoke equally emotional responses. Just concentrate on the question and your answer, and maintain measured calm in your response.



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- **You are in control** – This is the most important point to remember. If you don't say something, it can not be used. If you are asked a question about something irrelevant to the smoke free law, politely answer that that was not what you understood the interview was about and indicate the subject matter you were told you would be discussing.
- **Never say “no comment.”** – If you truly don't know the answer to a question, say so. Promise the reporter you will get back to him or her. Then do it. You have agreed to an interview on the smoke-free law and if you refuse to answer questions on it you will appear less trustworthy and to be hiding something.
- **A reporter's responsibilities** – Conflict of opinion is one of the main ingredients of news. If you are criticized in a story, you should be given the chance to respond. Likewise, you must expect critics to respond to your points. Make sure a reporter knows how to get in touch with you following the interview, including after hours, in case they need more information or response to a new development.

Although talking to the media about a new and often controversial law may seem like an intense experience that you'd rather avoid, look at it as an opportunity– it might even help you attract new business!



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