

Messaging Guidance for an Effective Sugary Drink Tax Campaign

Effective messaging is paramount to a campaign's success. In Summer 2020, the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), with support from Bloomberg Philanthropies, hired a strategic communications firm (Seven Letter) to test the effectiveness of sugary drink tax messages with key audiences across the country. Through this exercise, Seven Letter identified which messages resonate most with voters as well as those that are less effective. The results of these findings are summarized below.

Key Messaging Takeaways for Sugary Drink Taxes

- **Keep your messaging positive!**
- **Focus on a community-specific set of health benefits.** Talk about the health benefits that come from a sugary drink tax rather than talking about trying to stop a product that some see as dangerous or unhealthy, but do include messages on the health risks—and costs—of sugary drinks.
- **Support with community benefits and equity messages.**
 - Support grows when sugary drink tax revenues are invested in community priorities like health and nutrition access programs and when there are efforts to enact more healthy policies.
 - **To counter decades of beverage industry predatory marketing actively targeting low-income people (people in need) and communities of color,** revenues must be invested in these communities to improve health.
- **Be specific about community benefits. Give examples.** We should tax sugary drinks to offset the costs of increased diseases and to pay for community initiatives like food access, community health, policy changes that support community priorities, and other key programs.
- **When making the comparison, link sugary drinks to tobacco and alcohol in the right way.** Just as we regulate and tax other unhealthy and dangerous substances like tobacco and alcohol, taxes on soda and sugary drinks can reduce consumption and help increase the health of everyone.

Key Findings

Solid support: 50% of voters already support a tax on beverages with high levels of sugar.

31% of likely voters under the age of 30 believe added sugars are completely harmless to consume; one third of the same group believes that soda has nutritional value.

Black, Latinx, younger, conservative and lower income Americans are more likely than Whites, older, liberal and higher income Americans to say that added sugars and soda are “harmless.”

Refer to low-income populations as “**Families in Need**” or “**People in Need.**” Personalized terms like “Families in Need” or “Households in Need,” are also more empathetic.

Using **personal and relatable stories**, continue to describe the struggles that families in need face when trying to access and afford quality, nutritious food. **The message is that unhealthy eating is the result of systemic factors, not personal choices.**

Health as a general topic, appears to be **APOLITICAL**. The topic becomes politicized only when it is related to the appropriate role of government.

Describe sugar as “**unhealthy,**” rather than dangerous, damaging or harmful.

Effectively Responding to Perceived Roadblocks In Enacting a Sugary Drink Tax

The following are arguments that the general public and policymakers often raise in opposition to the enactment of sugary drink taxes.

Roadblock	How to Respond
<p>Sugary drink taxes are regressive. “A tax on sugary drinks might be harder to pay for lower income people and disproportionately affect people of color.”</p>	<p>Don’t use the term “regressive” when countering this claim; the general public has no idea what a “regressive” tax is.</p> <p>Instead, answer criticisms of regressivity by calling into question what’s fair and unfair. The tax isn’t “unfair” to lower income people (people in need) or those who disproportionately consume more sugary beverages. What IS unfair are the higher rates of obesity, childhood poverty and unaffordable childcare that these communities experience every day. And the benefits of well-designed taxes are progressive, as they are directed towards critical community needs.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Overregulation</p> <p>“If people want to choose healthy options, they will. The government shouldn’t tell people what they should drink.”</p>	<p>Talk about the health of the whole community. Reducing sugary drink consumption is associated with lower rates of diseases like type 2 diabetes, heart disease and dental disease. A sugary drink tax means healthier people and healthier communities.</p> <p>When communicating directly to communities of color, address and specifically acknowledge that they have been disproportionately targeted by sugary drink marketing.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Ineffective</p> <p>“Sugary drink taxes might not reduce soda consumption as much as we’d like or expect.”</p>	<p>Cite statistics and credible sources. Sugary drink taxes are effective and reduce purchases. For example, in Seattle, sales volume of taxed beverages fell, on average, by 22% in the first year after implementation of the tax.¹</p> <p>Make use of trusted spokespeople. Doctors and public health experts believe that a sugary drink tax will improve health and save lives.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Timing</p> <p>“We shouldn’t impose new taxes during an economic downturn.”</p>	<p>Now is the perfect time to focus on health. The death rate from COVID-19 is higher among people with Type 2 diabetes, obesity and overweight, and other serious chronic medical conditions. Underlying health disparities have taken a deadly toll on families during the pandemic, and addressing them will help to build greater health resilience in communities that face other risks. Taxing sugary drinks could help to improve public health at a time when we need it most.</p> <p>With 9 in 10 cities and counties expecting a revenue shortfall from the COVID-19 economic downturn, a sugary drink tax can help keep critical health, nutrition, food access, and childcare programs functioning. For example, in Seattle, \$5 million in sugary drink tax revenue is being used to provide grocery vouchers for thousands experiencing food insecurity related to the economic impact of COVID-19.</p>

<p>Causes job losses. “Sugary beverage taxes hurt small businesses like convenience stores and local markets, causing job losses.”</p>	<p>Counter with facts. An analysis of Philadelphia’s monthly employment data before and after the tax was implemented, found no evidence that the sweetened beverage tax resulted in job losses in the overall economy, private sector, limited-service restaurants, or convenience stores in the two-and-a-half years following implementation of the tax.²</p>
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Focus on health and nutrition when describing how a sugary drink tax might benefit the community as these are most closely tied to the subject of the tax.

- Given that the tax focuses on health, our research found that it was most compelling to discuss community benefits related to health. Most believe that revenue from the tax should be dedicated to health programs and nutrition access, for example.

A Note on Best Practices in Tax Design

Any campaign on sugary drink taxes must and should address equity at its core, and incorporate a set of best practices related to ensuring representation of community voices in the allocation of tax monies, as well as many other critical steps identified by partners in the Tax Equity Workgroup.³

A key insight from the Berkeley tax campaign is also that revenues should support future beneficial changes in food and health policy that serve community needs. For example, a grant by the tax commission there was essential in securing the Berkeley Healthy Checkout ordinance—the first of its kind in the nation.

Tax revenues thus can drive community agency, spurring further benefits to the food environment and increasing organizing and community skills, as well as capacity, on the ground.

About the Methodology

Seven Letter conducted six focus groups (three Likely Voters and three Opinion Elite) in San Antonio, Texas (July 8th, 2020); Minneapolis, Minnesota (July 13th, 2020); and Connecticut and Washington state (July 17th, 2020). Opinion Elite met the following criteria: hold a four-year degree or higher, have an annual household income of at least \$75,000, engage in political activity, contact elected officials regularly, and consume news at least four times per week.

The 56 focus group participants represented a mix of age ranges, employment statuses, and location (urban/suburban/rural). The ethnicity and ideology of each group mirrored Q4 2019 Census projections and 2016 presidential voting records, respectively for each state. At least three participants in each Likely Voter group were current or former Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participants.

Tips for Discussing Negative Impacts of Industry Marketing

American voters generally have a favorable impression of the soda industry. They need to be informed of the industry’s actions to be persuaded.

To successfully discuss the negative impacts of the soda industry’s marketing, use these talking points:

The soda industry markets directly to kids *(works with all audiences).*

The soda industry markets heavily to lower-income communities *(works best with Black, Latinx, SNAP and lower-income audiences).*

The soda industry has contributed millions to political candidates *(works best with GOP and lower-income audiences).*

The soda industry markets heavily to communities of color *(works best with Black audiences).*

Additionally, Seven Letter recruited 1,200 likely voters for a quantitative survey between September 11-23, 2020. Likely Voters were over the age of 18, absolutely certain they are registered at their current address, have thought about the November 2020 election, have been following the 2020 candidates at least "somewhat closely," vote at least every four years, and voted in the last election.

For questions, please contact policy@cspinet.org.

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¹ Powell LM, Leider J. The impact of Seattle's Sweetened Beverage Tax on beverage prices and volume sold. *Economics & Human Biology*. Vol.37, 100856. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1570677X19302758>

² Marinello S, Leider J, Pugach O, Powell, LM. The impact of the Philadelphia beverage tax on employment: A synthetic control analysis. *Econ Hum Biol*. 2020 Oct 29;40:100939. doi: 10.1016/j.ehb.2020.100939.

³ Centering Equity in Sugary Drink Tax Policy Design: Elements of Equitable Tax Policy Design. The Innovation, Equity and Exploration Tax Equity Workgroup. 2021. [Centering Equity in Sugary Drink Tax Policy: Tax Design and Policy Research Recommendations - Healthy Food America](#)