

Tobacco Control Case Study

Mexico



The Power of Strategic Public Relations

Public places in Mexico—including restaurants, public transportation and schools—continue to be filled with smoke, and more than 60,000 people in Mexico die each year from smoking-related diseases, yet there had been no tobacco tax increase in the country since 2011, not even one indexed to inflation. Tobacco taxes have proven to be the most effective policy in reducing tobacco use around the world. A 10% increase in tobacco prices was found to lead to a 3-5% drop in overall cigarette consumption, most strongly reducing smoking among youth, young adults, and low-income people.

Since 2017, Vital Strategies has conducted an active public relations effort to engage government, journalists and advocacy organizations to bring attention to the urgent need for stronger tobacco control policy, especially the need to raise stagnant tobacco taxes.

As a part of this effort Vital Strategies contributed to more than 30 national news stories to create awareness about the damages and devastation of smoking and secondhand smoke and to call on decision-makers to implement the most effective tobacco control practices, including a tax increase.

Vital Strategies secured frequent media interviews for its communication manager in Mexico, as well as the director of Salud Justa, a local partner, and members of the Interinstitutional Committee for the Fight Against Tobacco. Vital Strategies arranged for the interviews in key timeslots, created a forum to discuss tobacco control and worked with journalists to develop feature stories about the state of tobacco control at the national level. Vital Strategies also introduced reporters to Alicia, 72, a woman who was married to a smoker for 40 years and is now fighting lung cancer due to her exposure to second-hand smoke. Each of these stories reached about half a million Mexicans.

In the 2018 legislative session, Congressman Jorge Álvarez Maynez proposed a tax increase of 70%, but the proposal didn't move forward. In 2019, the economic package for 2020 presented to Congress included a tobacco tax increase, proposed together with taxes on sugary beverages, sugary foods and alcoholic beverages. There were several prominent voices opposed to the bill including legislators, lobbyists and leadership from tobacco and beverage companies. Legislators claimed that the tax was punitive to consumers. Others said that they were opposed to tax increases of any kind and feared the precedent the bill would set. Philip Morris's chief executive in Mexico charged that the increase would lead to illegal trade of tobacco products.



Population

126.2 million

Smoking Prevalence

27% of men, 8.7% of women, 6.7% of boys, and 3% of girls use tobacco¹.

Tobacco Control Policies

Mexico increased taxes on tobacco in 2019. The tobacco industry is not allowed to advertise on television or radio. Mexico banned the import of e-cigarettes in February 2020.

Milestone

On World No Tobacco Day 2020, the government of Mexico received the World No Tobacco Day award for its advancement in tobacco control policies, particularly for the implementation of a tax increase and a ban on importing e-cigarettes.

¹ National Survey of Drugs, 2017



Alicia Membrillo, is fighting lung cancer due to secondhand smoke exposure from her husband for over 40 years. Alicia was part of a campaign to call attention to the need for tobacco taxes to reduce tobacco use.

Vital Strategies countered these voices and each of these points with evidence and strengthened its public relations efforts during the second semester of the legislative calendar, when the bill was being considered.

Vital Strategies regularly provided data on how increasing taxes would reduce tobacco consumption, increase tax collection, and reduce the health and economic burden to the government. We also conducted outreach to journalists, provided support to advocacy partners and held meetings with government, including the Ministry of Health and the National Tobacco Control Office, to emphasize the importance of a tobacco tax. Vital Strategies met with the attorney general of the Ministry of Health to reinforce the benefits of increasing the taxes and the encouraged her to lend her voice to this cause.

Two years of work came together when the Undersecretary of Prevention and Health Promotion in Mexico began to deliver public speeches supporting a tax increase. Finally, in late 2019, after nine years of inaction from the federal government and congress, a large tax increase of more than 40% was approved. The tax will also be indexed to the annual inflation rate.

This case study is part of a series highlighting our work with the Bloomberg Initiative to Reduce Tobacco Use in priority countries.

About Vital Strategies

Vital Strategies is a global health organization that believes every person should be protected by a strong public health system. We work with governments and civil society in more than 70 countries to design and implement evidence-based strategies that tackle their most pressing public health problems. Our goal is to see governments adopt promising interventions at scale as rapidly as possible. To find out more, please visit www.vitalstrategies.org or Twitter @VitalStrat.