Supporting tobacco control: stimulating local newspaper coverage with a technical assistance website for local coalitions.

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Abstract:
A large and growing literature confirms that well-designed web-based programs can be effective in preventing or treating several chronic diseases. This study examined how the Internet can deliver information and train community activists and specifically tested the effects of web-based technical assistance on local tobacco control coalitions' efforts to use media advocacy to advance their agendas. The authors compared a highly interactive, Enhanced website (intervention) to a noninteractive, Basic text-based website (comparison) in Colorado communities. A total of 24 tobacco control coalitions led by local county health departments and nursing services were enrolled in the project and randomly assigned to use either the intervention or comparison website. A total of 73 local daily and weekly newspapers were identified in the service areas of 23 of the 24 coalitions. A posttest assessment of newspaper coverage was conducted to locate all newspaper articles with tobacco control information published between January 1 and April 9, 2004, the last 3 months of the intervention. Although there was no evidence of a treatment effect on the frequency of newspaper articles on tobacco-related issues, there was, however, evidence that newspapers in counties where the coalition had access to the Enhanced website printed more stories focused on local/regional issues and more anti-tobacco local/regional stories than in the counties where coalitions had access to the Basic website. Coalitions can improve their influence on
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local media for community tobacco control when high-quality online technical assistance, training, and resources are available to them.

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