

## understanding impact

### the Operation I.D. case study

by Nikita James Nanos

Whether you are an advertiser, efficiency expert or team leader, understanding how your activities affect your outcomes is integral to informed decision-making.

The following is a case study of the research strategies used by Operation I.D. to measure the performance of its School Zone program. The outcome speaks to the role that performance measurement can play as part of an integrated approach to improving a program's results.

#### The Program

Operation I.D. is comprised of stakeholders such as the Canadian Coalition for Responsible Tobacco Retailing, the Retail Council of Canada and Canada's tobacco companies. Its aim is to keep tobacco out of the hands of minors. To do this, Operation I.D. has focused its efforts on front-line access, namely getting retail clerks across Canada to ask for identification and to refuse to sell tobacco to individuals who do not have valid identification.

Two levels of support are provided by Operation I.D. to retailers. The basic level includes signage, other point-of-purchase materials and a training kit. This is available to retailers across Canada. The enhanced level, known as Operation I.D. School Zone, involves the creation of a local steering committee of community and business leaders and provides additional services such as one-on-one regional consultant visits with retailers, local education and awareness initiatives, and a mystery shopping service.

#### The Big Picture – Defining the Key Objective

With a program objective of 100% retailer compliance with the *Tobacco Act* Operation I.D. asked a simple question three years ago, "how can we identify challenges and opportunities to micro-target program activities?" As a result, the program embarked on a process to longitudinally track the behaviour of retail clerks. Research conducted by SES Canada Research Inc. and Health Canada data clearly indicate a direct relationship between asking for identification and refusing to sell tobacco to minors. The act of asking for identification is a key determinant of behaviour. According to research conducted by SES, 19 of every 20 clerks who ask for identification are compliant with the *Tobacco Act*<sup>1</sup>, i.e., they do not sell tobacco to minors.

To understand the impact of the program, a series of research strategies were designed and implemented to get to the very heart of measuring performance and outcomes. The research cornerstones included a rigorous longitudinal mystery shopping program supplemented by quantitative telephone research.

#### Getting Started – First Decision Points

First, Operation I.D. decided to have the research designed and implemented by an independent firm. Testing compliance with the law is sensitive by its very nature. As well, the aggregate research findings would be shared with retailers and other concerned stakeholders. Therefore, impartiality and confidence were critical to the success of the initiative.

There were three start-up activities and decisions:

1. Build on the Experience of Others – A detailed methodological assessment and the identification of key strengths and weaknesses of other relevant research in the public domain was conducted.
2. Develop a Strong Research Plan – Since the objective of the initiative was to move beyond being a mere academic exercise, a detailed research plan was developed which articulated how the findings would support the activities of individual retailers, communities and the overall national program.
3. Use Multiple Approaches to Understand Impact – Since confidence in the process and the research data was paramount, a two-track validation strategy was initiated that used longitudinal mystery shopping and quantitative survey research to measure impact.

#### Core Tracking Through Mystery Shopping

In North America, using minors in mystery shopping research initiatives is the most common method of measuring compliance and teen access to tobacco. Generally, multiple profiles – such as males and females aged 15, 16, and 17 (in this example six profiles) – are used to test clerks. According to SES' research and the research conducted for Health Canada, there is conclusive evidence that the age and gender of teens affects retailer compliance rates.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, a 15-year-old male is more likely to be asked for identification than a 17-year-old male. Likewise, males are more likely to be asked for identification than females.

The use of multiple mystery shopping profiles is a challenge for researchers because it results in not having a common standard to measure behaviour against in a given community or among clerks over time. One clerk may randomly be visited by a 15-year-old boy and another clerk by a 17-year-old girl.

A key methodological decision was made to develop a universal standard to measure the behaviour of clerks across Canada. In this case, it was decided that a female mystery shopper two years below the legal age would be used to attempt to purchase tobacco. The implementation of a standard mystery shopper profile resulted in:

- the direct comparability of the behaviour of clerks at a retail location over time;
- the comparability between retailers within a given community; and,
- the comparability between communities across Canada.

The key lesson learned is that when using mystery shopping as a measure of performance, selecting the profile of the mystery shopper is critical in regards to the use and comparability of the data.

Communicating the results of the mystery shopping findings to individual retailers in a timely fashion puts the information into the hands of managers so they can quickly acknowledge a job well done or coach the clerk with more training on asking for identification. In this respect, the use of regular ongoing mystery shopping is an example of research as a component of program implementa-

tion as well as performance measurement.

Longitudinal tracking over the past three years indicates that the compliance of retailers in Operation I.D. School Zones has noticeably improved (see Exhibit A). The compliance results are based on over 2,000 mystery shops conducted each year.

Although this measure in itself should be considered quite positive, the use of third party data, in this case research conducted for Health Canada, further demonstrates that Operation I.D. School Zone retailers were more likely to be compliant compared to non-School Zone retailers and that the program has had an impact. Using the most recent data available from Health Canada, retailers in the seven Operation I.D. School Zones within which AC Nielsen does compliance research had a 10 percent higher likelihood to be compliant compared to non-School Zone communities.<sup>iii</sup>

Research findings of the longitudinal mystery shopping initiative clearly showed a positive trend in behaviour. The next step was to close the loop between program activities and outcomes through a supplementary quantitative study.

### Understanding Impact Through an External Measure

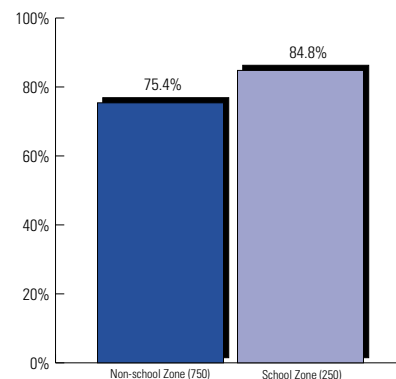
In order to better understand the program's impact at the retail level, a two-track quantitative study was conducted in the fall of 2002. The first track included a telephone survey of 750 non-School Zone tobacco retailers across Canada. The second track included a national survey of 250 Operation I.D. School Zone retailers.

Although retailers in the two groups surveyed had strikingly similar perceptions on most issues, the only noticeable difference had to do with training. While 75% of non-School Zone retailers said they regularly trained their clerks related to the sale of tobacco to minors, 85% of School Zone retailers said they did regular training (see Exhibit B).

Operation I.D. School Zone retailers are differentiated in three ways: they receive more training and education sup-

**Exhibit B**

Are the clerks at your location trained regularly, occasionally or never on issues related to the sale of tobacco to minors?  
Those Who Regularly Train  
(SES Research, 2002)



port than non-School Zone retailers; they do more training; and, they are more likely to comply with the *Tobacco Act* and refuse minors. These key observations point to the fact that training and the overall program approach – which integrates education, awareness and one-on-one support – have had a positive impact on compliance with the *Tobacco Act* in School Zone communities.

By communicating results in a timely manner, Operation I.D. School Zone retailers have the information to continually monitor and improve performance. The result, over time, is higher compliance and better-trained clerks.

### Conclusion

In understanding impact and measuring performance, there is indeed no such thing as knowing too much. It is not enough to point to the positive trend and take credit. Probing beyond the trend to understand what drives your success and communicating findings in a timely manner are critical.

*Nikita James Nanos is the President and CEO of SES Canada Research Inc. He can be reached at (613) 234-4666 or [nnanos@sesresearch.com](mailto:nnanos@sesresearch.com)*

<sup>i</sup> SES Canada Research Inc., *National Compliance Research, 2000-2002.*

<sup>ii</sup> SES Canada Research Inc., *Measurement of Retailer Compliance with Respect to the Tobacco Act, 2000 – 2002 and Health Canada, ACNielsen, 1999 Report on Compliance.*

<sup>iii</sup> ACNielsen, *Health Canada Tobacco Compliance Survey, 2000-2001.*

**Exhibit A**  
Annualized Compliance Results  
School Zone Retailers Refusing Cigarettes to Minors  
Operation I.D.  
(SES Research, 2000-2002)

