

## RRForum Research Briefs

*Insights and learnings from 25 years of research in responsible retailing*

### Research Brief #1: Why do underage sales occur?

- A study of ID-checking behaviors and attitudes of a national retailer provides insight into the root causes for underage sales and the challenges to achieve consistent compliance with underage sales laws.

Context. Twenty years ago, a work group of 43 state attorneys general engaged national retail chains found to have sold tobacco products to minors. It became apparent that all these retailers had explicit policies to check IDs and refuse underage sales – and equally apparent that a policy, even with penalties for violation, was insufficient. Accordingly, the AGs negotiated with these chains to implement comprehensive systems consisting of training, point-of-sales protocols, and supervisory practices. In 2002, ExxonMobil became the second national chain (following Walgreens) to execute an Assurance of Voluntary Compliance (AVC) committing ExxonMobil to sweeping changes to prevent underage sales of alcohol and tobacco in its 950+ Company-Operated Retail Stores (“CORS”) and approximately 12,000 franchise locations across the country.

The Research Project. Researchers at Brandeis University received an award from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to evaluate the ExxonMobil AVC as a public health strategy to prevent underage access to age-restricted products. The study examined three questions:

1. *How effectively did ExxonMobil implement the stipulations of the AVC?* To achieve this, the researchers conducted surveys with 1,225 clerks and 284 managers in 460 Exxon and Mobil CORS beginning one year after the AVC was executed.
2. *How effectively did the AVC improve ID-checking behavior?* To achieve this, the researchers analyzed the results of attempted purchases by young buyers conducted quarterly in all Exxon and Mobil CORS.
3. *What are the predictors of compliant, and non-compliant, staff ID-checking conduct?* To achieve this, the researchers compared the knowledge, attitudes, and behavior of staff

in CORS that consistently passed compliance checks, with staff in CORS with one or more recent violations.

### Results.

1. Implementation of the AVC. Survey responses revealed that staff training had been very effective. Clerks correctly identified, at rates well over 90%: the trigger age for an ID check; acceptable forms of IDs; and the consequences (termination!) for selling to a minor. Clerks expressed at similarly high rates that they personally took preventing underage sales seriously and that they consistently checked IDs. Clerks also expressed a belief that other clerks, store managers, and managers all the way up the corporate ladder shared the same commitment to prevent underage sales and acted conscientiously to achieve this.
2. Effectiveness of the AVC. Unfortunately, ExxonMobil's well implemented, comprehensive underage sales prevention program produced no improvement in age-verification rates. In the first inspection following the AVC, the ID-checking rate for all ExxonMobil CORS was 85.4% -- higher than national compliance rates but less than anticipated after the extensive trainings and point-of-sales protocol changes. But in each of the following three quarters, pass rates dropped even further (70.2%, 65.3%, 60.6%). Over the subsequent two years, pass rates fluctuated between 52% and 84.5%.
3. Predictors of compliant and non-compliant ID-checking behavior. The research team had hypothesized that clerks in stores that always passed compliance checks would display differences in their knowledge, attitudes and behaviors from clerks in non-compliant stores. However, the knowledge, attitudes, and behavior of clerks were the same in all stores, regardless of ID-checking performance. There were no predictors of clerk compliance or non-compliance.

### Implications.

The AG workgroup and the advocates who supported their engagement of national retailers had expected that the comprehensive training, point-of-sales protocols, and supervisory practices stipulated in the AVCs would significantly improve ID-checking for age-restricted products. The researcher team shared this expectation. But this improvement did not occur. And it raised the perplexing question: Why do well-trained staff and managers who professed strong support for preventing underage sales, and who knew that a lapse in ID-checking could lead to

termination, still fail to check IDs at an acceptable rate? The AVC successfully changed corporate culture, but not age-verification, which was the purpose of the AVC.

The research team had also expected that clerks in compliant stores would show discernible differences from clerks in stores with lax ID-checking, and this would serve as a blueprint for managers to follow. This, too, proved to be incorrect, raising an even more perplexing question: *if staff are already (a) well-trained, (b) highly motivated to prevent underage access to alcohol and tobacco, and (c) a powerful deterrent to selling to a minor (termination) is already in place, what additionally can managers do to improve ID-checking?*

### Changing our understanding of underage sales

The underlying problem of underage sales, the researchers came to recognize, was INATTENTION. Retail work is highly repetitive, and workers' minds wander. Underage sales occur for the same reason as many industrial accidents: momentary lapses in attention. William Chandler, the former director of alcohol law enforcement in North Carolina, thus aptly defined underage alcohol sales as "crimes of inattention."

If the underlying problem is inattention (not just daydreaming, or being on "auto-pilot," but multi-tasking as well), one potential remedy would be continual reinforcement of ID-checking policies and protocols. To that point, the only noticeable difference between staff in compliant and non-compliant CORS in the ExxonMobil study was that clerks in stores that passed all their inspections expressed that "my manager is always on my back to check IDs."

The take-away is that thorough training and explicit policies for age-verification are necessary – but not sufficient. Managers need to reinforce age-verification continually. This is as true today as when the ExxonMobil study was conducted. An upcoming Research Brief will discuss a strategy to overcome inattention that emerged from the ExxonMobil study.

Ironically, although the study provided enormously valuable insights, the underlying hypotheses of the research team were all wrong! Enhanced training, supervision, and point-of-sales protocols did not by themselves reduce non-compliance; and non-compliant staff were not "broken and fixable." A further irony is that by the time the study was completed, ExxonMobil was no longer in the retail business, converting all its CORS to franchises in order to focus



Brad S. Krevor, Ph.D., Director  
(617) 455-4676  
[krevor@rrforum.org](mailto:krevor@rrforum.org)

entirely upon production and distribution of petroleum products – a model adopted by other petroleum producers that also entered into AVCS with the AGs for their corporate-operated gas stations / convenience stores.

For a fuller discussion of the ExxonMobil study, [click here](#). To read the journal article on the application by Attorneys General of their Consumer Protection Authority to prevent underage sales, [click here](#).

If you would like to receive additional Research Briefs in this series, and other RRForum news, [register here](#).