

LESSONS FROM THE OVAL

The Fight to Stop Alcohol Advertising at the Halifax Oval



INJURYFREE
NOVA SCOTIA

INTRODUCTION

When the 2011 Canada Games ended in late February, most people figured the speed skating oval on Halifax's North Common would go back to being a baseball diamond. But Nova Scotians had grown attached to the outdoor ice surface. A group of volunteers lobbied local government to find some way to re-make the Oval into a permanent outdoor fixture. Support for this mission was strong. There was just one question: who would pay?

In early 2011, a major brewery pledged roughly \$200,000 in exchange for sponsorship rights. In response, a group of health advocates posed an important question about alcohol advertising in family-oriented venues: Are we OK with this?

That question would spark debate province-wide about where and how we promote alcohol. And for the people at the heart of that debate, the work would deepen their relationships, launch new career paths, teach them valuable lessons about advocacy work, and inspire in them a continued desire to talk about alcohol in Nova Scotia.

Here are their stories.



ASSEMBLING THE TEAM

Date: January 20, 2011
From: jheatley@acip.ca
To: jheatley@acip.ca
Subject: Alcohol and the oval

A major brewery wants to sponsor the oval...time to rally troops on all sides. Who will protest this? Jenn.

They already trusted each other and had worked together for years. That's why it only took a one-line email message from Jennifer Heatley to a group of health advocates to ignite one of the most intense public debates over alcohol industry advertising that Nova Scotia had seen in years.

At the time, Jennifer was the executive director of the Atlantic Collaborative on Injury Prevention (ACIP), and had been working closely with colleagues in public health, addictions and injury-prevention on a variety of fronts, including making helmets mandatory at the Oval.

So when she caught wind of the alcohol industry's funding and sponsorship offer, she had a built-in action group. Within days Jennifer's colleagues banded together on an ad-hoc basis. Some people played public roles, others worked behind the scenes, composing evidence-based letters and building quiet support. Through email conversations, teleconferences and bi-weekly meetings, the group launched a committed but loosely organized ten-month debate over alcohol sponsorship at the Oval.

Those pre-existing relationships had been built over many years. We'd established a lot of faith and good will. So when the time came that there was something to mobilize around, it happened in the snap of a finger.

Jennifer Heatley

KEY LEARNING

Strong networks and relationships underpin effective advocacy work. Look for opportunities to continuously collaborate and deepen your relationships with like-minded organizations and professionals.



Jennifer Heatley, Dan Steeves, Holly Gillis, and Shirley Ann Rogers were among a small ad hoc group who worked together over nine months to address alcohol industry advertising out of the Halifax Oval.

DEFINING THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

There's an expression we use sometimes in advocacy work to describe which issues we decide to debate and which we let pass. We call this process "choosing a hill to die on". You have to choose carefully – you don't want to waste your effort in areas where your impact will be limited.

We knew right away that opposing alcohol industry sponsorship of the Oval was a hill to die on. Why? First, it was a brand new sponsorship opportunity. It's easier to stop something from starting than it is to dislodge a long-standing sponsorship. Second, the advertising would be displayed in a venue that targeted families and young children. Third, the Oval was on public property that was controlled by HRM.

When it comes to effective advocacy, it's not just about choosing your hill; it's also about knowing that hill inside and out. Our "hill" was a public issue, so we knew it would be an out-in-the-open debate. To convince HRM Council to see our side, we'd need to harness the power of public opinion. That meant op-eds, media interviews, and letters.

Knowing our hill defined the rules of engagement, and the tactics we used. We were working with the media so we had to be quick on our feet and easy to reach. We needed to create some buzz and build awareness to spur water cooler discussions among ordinary citizens, so we had to get on social media and use our networks to ignite a letter writing campaign.

We didn't have a five-page strategy and implementation plan. Our work was built on trust, responsiveness and flexibility.

Dan Steeves

KEY LEARNING

When it's time to mobilize – especially around a hot button issue – be responsive, flexible and proactive. There's rarely time for fancy communication plans. Instead, monitor the discussion, respond accordingly, and always keep your teammates in the loop.

UNDERSTANDING WHAT WE WANTED

Shirley Ann Rogers

Like my colleagues, I was painfully aware of how alcohol advertising inundates our culture. I saw the Oval as a prime opportunity to not only halt that trend, but also to begin reversing it.

We knew from the outset that we had an uphill battle. But in the weeks after Jennifer Heatley's rallying email, people outside our feisty little group started to mobilize with us. We enlisted our colleagues and partners to write and send letters to media outlets, HRM councilors and other interested parties. We circulated internal memos in our workplaces about the potential alcohol industry sponsorship at the Oval. Recognized leaders like Dr. Robert Strang, Nova Scotia's Chief Public Health Officer, and Dr. Gaynor Watson-Creed, Medical Officer of Health at Capital Health, added their weight to the issue, going on record to say they opposed alcohol advertising at public, family-oriented venues. Media outlets ran stories. Concerned citizens wrote letters to the media, both supporting us and criticizing us for our views.

We did the thing you're never supposed to do in so-called "issues management" – we lost control of the issue. Ordinary citizens, politicians and professionals outside our ad hoc group started to talk about alcohol industry advertising with great passion.

The coup d'état happened when our colleague Todd Leader debated Dr. John Gillis (who supported the alcohol sponsorship bid) on Live at Five, Atlantic Canada's most watched dinnertime show. That's when I knew the "Oval issue" was no longer a side conversation, but the main event.

I didn't always agree with what I heard in the public conversation, but I loved the debate and the energy people brought to it. I started to see that the goal of stopping alcohol industry advertising completely at this one location was too narrow/too small. All around us a debate was raging about the impact of all alcohol advertising in our society. That discussion was proving to be much bigger than the issue at hand.

KEY LEARNING

Never shy away from the big wins. But don't let the pursuit of specific goals prevent you from connecting with the big picture – discussion and engagement. Public debate is the lifeblood of advocacy work.

EMBRACING OUR ROLES

Holly Gillis

One of the things I've learned about advocacy work is that it's not just what you say that's important. It's what you do.

In our small group alone, there were at least a dozen people who collaborated on the Oval work. To be effective, we each had to choose a role and embrace it fully. We never made name tags, we didn't announce it formally. While that's not a bad idea if you're working together for the first time, we didn't have to be so formal - we'd been working together for years.

First we needed someone to be the public face to express our points of view. Injury Free Nova Scotia stepped up. As a non-profit organization, IFNS could take a public position and be a catalyst for change. We had others on the team who were self-confessed news junkies and helped us monitor media coverage, gauge public mood and know when to respond.

I was a facilitator and connector. I set up weekly teleconference calls that were open to anyone who wanted to join. I took notes during the meetings and circulated them to our group so everyone would know what everyone else was up to. And I worked hard inside my own organization to ensure my colleagues were in the loop. I got buy-in from Public Health and that in turn paved the way for our District and Provincial public health leaders to step up and lend their voices to the debate. These formal leaders inspired members of the public and the media to pay closer attention to the debate. And in my mind, that was the most important win of all.



CHANGE OF HEART

Julie McEachern

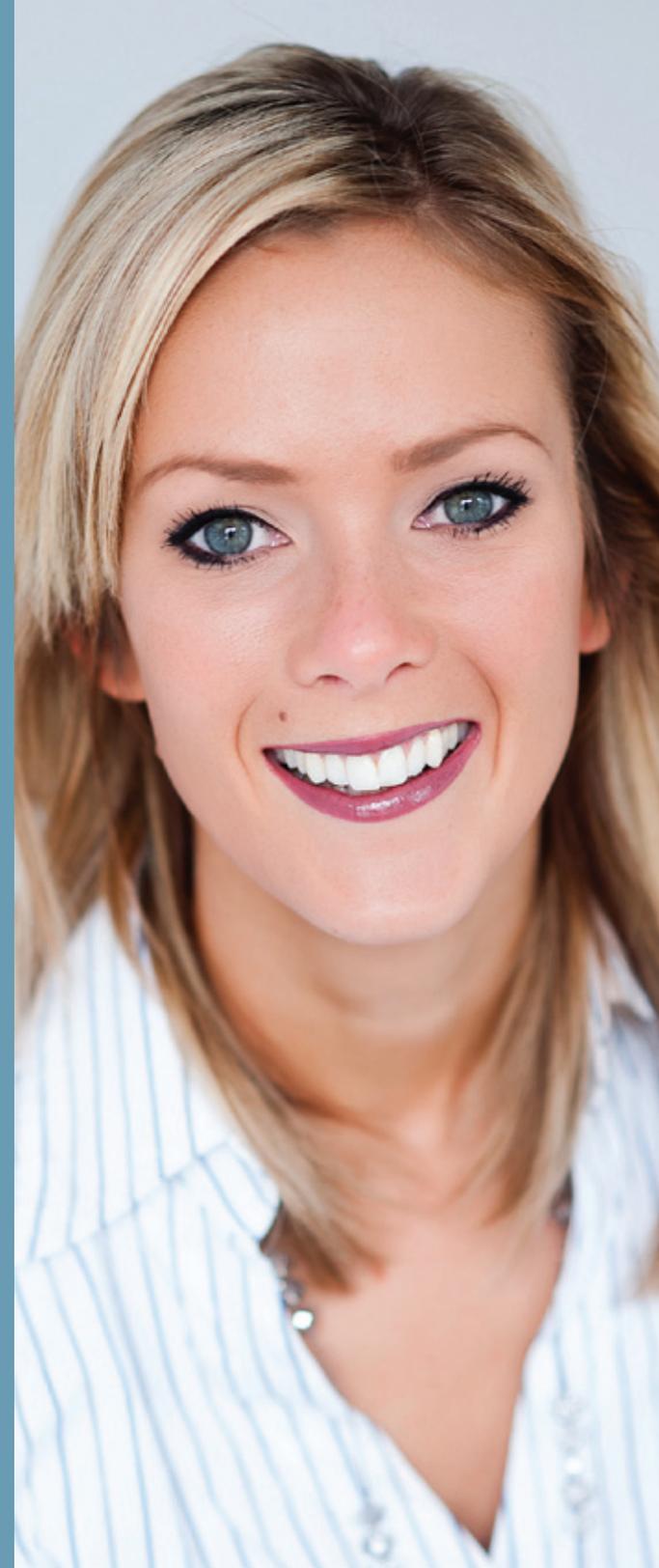
I was a second year psychology student at SMU when my community psychology professor and mentor Todd Leader, gave the class an assignment that would change my life. Our job was to write a one-page advocacy letter that would address a public health issue via a public health policy. I decided to write a letter that addressed my concerns over alcohol advertising at the Oval. I knew based on my studies that we can't educate our way out of an addiction. To change behaviour – the way we drink, for example, we have to change the environment. I saw the Oval issue as a great place to start trying to change the environment.

I guess I went a little crazy with the letters. I didn't just send one. Between September and November 2011 I sent hundreds of letters to municipal councilors, schools, community groups, churches, you name it. I became incredibly passionate about making people aware of the real implications of alcohol advertising at the Oval, especially on young children. I wanted to spur public demand for new policies that would limit this kind of advertising.

Two important things happened as a result of the work myself and others did. First, we had a huge, province-wide debate about alcohol advertising. For the first time in my lifetime, people were taking to the airwaves and media outlets to talk about why having a beer ad in a public venue was or wasn't OK. I found this thrilling. It meant our work was having an impact.

The second impact was way more personal. I realized that I had worked harder on the Oval issue than I had on anything else in my entire life. And the funny thing is that it didn't feel like work at all. I guess you could say I discovered my passion. I switched my focus in school and I'm now studying neuroscience and public health policies as they relate to alcohol.

I didn't achieve my goal of shutting alcohol advertising out of the Oval, but I did help move the needle forward, and uncover a new life path in the process.



WHAT POLITICIANS NEED

Gloria McCluskey

Rejecting alcohol advertising at the Oval was never a moral issue for me. It was a health issue. I had scientific evidence which clearly demonstrated the harmful effects that alcohol advertising has on the young people of our society. The average drinking age of boys today is just over 12 years of age and just over 13 for girls. With this evidence, I along with a couple of my colleagues, felt that we had a duty to protect our young people from the harmful influence of alcohol advertising. When Council voted against the major brewery's sponsorship of the Oval, I was surprised, but when the decision was reversed, I was very disappointed. However, it is important to focus on the debate that followed this. In March 2013, I had a motion passed that staff bring back a report, in consultation with individuals and organizations such as Capital Health, health officials Dr. Robert Strang and Dr. Gaynor Watson-Creed, educator Dan Steeves and the general public, which will result in a comprehensive alcohol policy for HRM.

Elected officials need to have the public on side to make controversial, effective decisions. If, as healthy public policy advocates, you can provide us with any peer evidence that supports a policy change, that's half the battle.



WHAT WE LEARNED

We all remember where we were when word came out that HRM Council had voted to reject the brewery's bid to sponsor the Oval. Our jubilation was short-lived – two weeks later HRM Council reversed its decision.

We were upset by the news, but not devastated. We had helped to trigger so much debate around alcohol industry advertising that we felt we'd accomplished an important goal. People who had never thought about the harms of alcohol industry advertising who were now engaged in healthy debate.

We knew going into this that we'd be up against apathy, and decades of cultural desensitization to alcohol advertising. But we didn't grasp one of the biggest obstacles of all – a deep-seated culture of fear and scarcity. So much of the debate was laced with the underlying sense that if we didn't take Big Alcohol money, there'd be no one else to step up. So the argument wasn't just whether it was OK to expose our kids to alcohol advertising, but whether we wanted the save Oval or not.

The lesson in that? Don't let the hard work of advocacy distract you from the larger debate. You need to identify and understand people's concerns in order to fully address them.

We learned that the results of advocacy work can take months to show up. As a result of this debate, a year later the then mayoral candidate Mike Savage ran on an election platform that included the development of a municipal alcohol policy around sponsorship.

Advocacy work on one public health issue builds capacity for other areas. We learned a tremendous amount about social media, community outreach and how to work with the media, and we're all applying those learnings to work in other arenas.

This work also drove home our existing strengths. Our success came about as a result of the skills and relationships we built during all our years of advocacy around tobacco. As a group of professionals and volunteers committed to reducing the harms of tobacco, alcohol and other public health problems, we're getting stronger and better all the time.



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