

# Why We Didn't Quit CVS When CVS Quit Tobacco

✘ *By Hope Nguyen, VP, Marketing, [NetBase](#)*

As [brands evolve](#) over time, there are lots of challenges to consider if they're to balance customer and shareholder happiness during periods of growth or decline. For most, how consumers *feel* about their brand is top of that 'challenge' list.


Take CVS, who announced in February 2014 that they planned to discontinue sales of all tobacco products in their stores nationwide by that October – a move that would cost an estimated \$2 billion in sales [Source: [CVS Stores Stop Selling All Tobacco Products](#), NY Times, Sept. 3, 2014], and the potential exodus of their smoking customers.

You have to admire a company willing to recognize and act on an inconsistency between the product line and their overall mission. In CVS' case that mission was wellness, and continuing to sell a product associated with a myriad of health problems seemed too big a conflict to ignore.

CVS was smart. In addition to sitting down with tobacco executives to discuss the new direction – [CVS chief executive Larry J. Merlo](#) looked to social media to understand how consumers would react to the news.

They knew the conflict of selling cigarettes in a store committed to wellness confused many of their nonsmoking customers. But they also knew their smoking customers might feel alienated or inconvenienced by the change. So CVS didn't just cease all sales of tobacco products and shrug their shoulders, sending customers who smoked down the block to the next shop stocked with cigarettes. They did something *genius*, initiating the "Let's Quit Together" campaign, offering

smokers interested in quitting, access to a nationwide retail-sponsored support group.

Plastering the store with campaign signage – most notably  behind the counter where cigarettes used to live – CVS offered “quit kits” and book-ended the in-store experience with an online [microsite](#) loaded with information, and a social media campaign complete with its own hashtag (#OneGoodReason) for sharing motivation across the Web.

Here’s why what they did was so powerful:

**It turned a negative into a positive** – Knowing people might focus on what was missing, CVS created an *offering*, letting their smoking customers know they weren’t just dropping them, but that they cared about their well-being and would help them quit. Which kept the social conversation focused positively.

**It harnessed emotion** – Most companies would steer clear of an issue so emotionally charged, but CVS smartly anticipated that some would be upset by their decision, and came up with a campaign to offset those negative emotions; at the same time they also embraced those elated at the decision – the medical community, anti-smoking groups, and even President Obama – celebrating the decision on social media.

**They understood their audience** – CVS was wise enough to recognize that their customers view them as a company with a focus on wellness, and they targeted each end of the spectrum – nonsmokers who couldn’t understand CVS why had been advocating smoking while promoting a healthy agenda, and smokers who might feel abandoned by the retail chain once the ban was complete.

Put simply, CVS used deep social listening to understand their customers and prospects at every level. Here are the three components all brands can use to do the same:

**Context of language** – Social conversations are useless without

advanced understanding of what consumers actually *mean*. Keywords like “love”, “hate” or “switch’ indicate positive and negative opinions..But if used sarcastically to mean the opposite of its typical meaning, you need to know that – otherwise your metrics and your response will be skewed. Our patented technology at NetBase can crack the context code.

**Net sentiment** – Emotions are part of life, and understanding them is a necessary part of engaging consumers at a truly human level on social. But it’s not just about emotion – it’s about intensity of emotion. CVS understood that people feel strongly about smoking/quitting and offered an outlet for those emotions by validating nonsmokers, and supporting smokers’ efforts by asking them to share their quit-spirations via the #OneGoodReason hashtag.

**Targeted Messaging** – With this kind of deep social data at your disposal, you can more accurately target your messaging to every part of your audience – just like CVS did in appealing to smokers and nonsmokers alike. The more personal and emotional your messaging, the more effective it will be.

As for the results? An initial decrease in front-of-store sales was offset by increased pharmacy sales, and in the first two months after the ban was complete CVS “revenue rose 9.7% from its third quarter earnings in 2013. Its operating profit increased by 4.3%.” [Source: [CVS Revenues Up After Cigarette Sales Ban](#), Time, Nov. 4, 2014]

It might sound like CVS got lucky there, but it was by design. When the announcement was made, [The Atlantic](#) reported, “CVS said it already has a plan to make up for the revenue lost from cigarette sales by ramping up a smoking cessation program—and marketing it to employers and insurers.”

It goes to show that when you tap into consumers’ language and emotions, even a big, potentially risky move can be managed to your favor.. That’s a reason for everyone from customers to

shareholders to breathe easier.

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