

# Conducting An Online Alcohol Environmental Scan for Your Community

*Introduction to the Concept of Conducting an Alcohol Environmental Scan to Address Alcohol-Related Issues in your Community.*



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## **Introduction**

A few years ago I attended the National EUDL Leadership Conference conducted by OJJDP's Underage Drinking Enforcement Training Center (UDETC). An emphasis of the conference was focusing on how communities can implement changes in environments to reduce retail and social availability of alcohol to youth, including supporting enforcements of underage drinking laws. It was my distinct pleasure to work with a great collection of youth attending the conference. We spent one evening with the youth conducting an Alcohol Environmental Scan. We loaded up on a bus, divided into small groups and then conducted the environmental scan at a local liquor store. The youth collected information on the alcohol advertising, promotions, atmosphere, actual placement of the product and any warning signs regarding violating alcohol laws.

The youth were quickly able to assess and provide some interesting feedback regarding the experience. For example, during our visit a customer attempted to buy alcohol without identification. The retailer, very cognizant of our presence, refused to sell. The customer stared at the retailer quizzically and awkwardly left the store. A young girl in our group commented when we left the store, "That boy is going to come back after we leave and the store clerk is going to sell to him. I could tell!" I agreed with her assessment. It was fascinating conducting the study and seeing the youth perspective.

Understanding the environments where youth exist, helps formulate and implement effective changes in the community. One of the most active environments for youth is online technology. This is a moving target as the Internet continues to evolve and change. A few years ago, the best source of information for young people was MySpace. Then in January of 2009, Facebook became the number one social networking site. A few years later it was reported that 41% of the population of the United States has a Facebook page. Youth are especially engaged in this medium and much can be learned from them and about them by environmentally scanning their online environment.

The same methods used to conduct an Environmental Alcohol Scan can be applied with our online community. I realized at the National Leadership Conference I had been conducting online environmental scans in every community where I have provided training on underage drinking issues. I would quickly like to introduce you to how such a scan can be conducted, demonstrating examples of what can be found and offer some suggested guidelines to consider in conducting such an environmental scan. Let's get started!

## **DEFINITION OF AN ALCOHOL ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN**

An environmental alcohol scan is a form of community assessment that investigates the physical elements within a community contributing to alcohol or other drug use. In order to fully understand what is creating a problem in a community, an environmental scan will go beyond looking at data such as the number of impaired driving arrests, underage drinking citations, enforcement actions taken against retailers and so forth. The goal is to assess what environmental factors are present contributing to alcohol or drug use.

An environmental scan for alcohol tends to look at surrounding cultural or geographic characteristics that may be adding to the problem. The scan would include going into a specific area and analyzing how many bars or liquor outlets are currently operating, and what is the latest time they are open for business? How available is alcohol? How easy is it to purchase? An environmental scan for alcohol would consist of noting the prevalence of signs promoting alcohol use, such as commercial signs, or the prevalence (or lack thereof) of signs against alcohol use. Environmental scans would also note other locations or events where alcohol is consumed, such as parks or festivals.

According to Dr. Eduardo Hernandez-Alarcon, coalitions should consider environmental scans to provide data on *context* or *place* of alcohol use in their community. He emphasizes the purpose of the environmental scan is to focus on “**where**” specifically the problems occur.<sup>1</sup> Coalitions can then focus on the areas of concern and develop strategies to reduce the prevalence of underage drinking.

The environmental scanning process includes three basic steps: (1) developing an approach to the scanning process; (2) scanning the environment; and (3) analyzing the data collected. A thoughtful and comprehensive planning process is key in developing a project that will have a chance in impacting the environment youth live in. Once you have your team you must develop a methodology to document the information. Identify the questions you want answered and determine how you are going to collect and analyze the data. For more information on environmental scanning you can check out the [CADCA Institute’s Environmental Strategies](#) publication. In addition, be sure to contact the Underage Drinking Enforcement Training Center at [www.udetc.org](http://www.udetc.org).

## **LET’S PRACTICE AN ONLINE ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN...**

The same principles and methods discussed above can be used to conduct an online environmental scan. I have been conducting these types of assessments for years when training law enforcement and prosecutors in how to use social media to investigate and prosecute alcohol-related crimes. It has also been a great tool when working with youth on the topic of underage drinking. I believe one of the most important factors for reduction of alcohol use among youth is to impact the environment they live in.

The best way to explain how to conduct an online environmental scan is to demonstrate it. I will do my best to demonstrate how I have scanned various community environments before conducting trainings alcohol-related trainings. Along with the demonstration, I have included some cliff notes I hope you will find useful. The key to remember is you are not going to break your computer by testing it out. Do not be shy about touching the buttons to see what happens. It will never become a useful tool unless you first practice.

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<sup>1</sup> *Why Should You Consider an Environmental Scan?* Dr. Eduardo Hernandez-Alarcon, CADCA National Coalition Institute’s blog, [www.cadca.org](http://www.cadca.org), April 6, 2009.

## **Social Networking Sites**

There are a vast number of social networking sites, ranging from Facebook to Fubar.com. It would be unrealistic for me to explain and demonstrate every social networking site. Instead, I will focus on the current king of social media, which is Facebook. The best fishing hole is Facebook because it has saturated the market and has the largest number of followers. So we begin by going where the fishing is good. But I repeat --- Facebook is not the only social media network. It is a good idea to keep the pulse on your local community to see what social media sites are being used. You may want to involve youth from the target community in your environmental scan. They are certainly adept with today's technologies and will know which social media platforms their peers are using. Make sure you implement good safety procedures and guidelines in your environmental scan, because the Internet is certainly not without its perils. We will discuss this in more detail later.

An online environmental alcohol scan widens the opportunities to collect data on a specific community. For example, we will walk through how to conduct a scan of youth attending a specific high school. The data collected may then lead to social media sites maintained by bars, liquor stores or other alcohol retailers. Therefore, many of the same questions in a traditional environmental scan will be useful in the online scan.

- How many liquor stores, bars, markets, convenience stores, drug stores, gas stations in the community have a social media page?
- Where is alcohol consumed? Bars? Parks? Festivals? Sporting events? Campgrounds? Abandoned buildings? Homes? Elsewhere?
- Who is providing the alcohol to the youth? Parents? Siblings? Retailers?
- How is alcohol promoted in your online community? What kinds of advertisements are found on the social media pages of alcohol retailers? Do they post lots of "Happy Hour" or other types of promotions (i.e. drinking games)? What type of photos do they post on their pages?
- Is there any posts on the social media sites indicating the person must be 21 to purchase their product? Any other similar warnings?
- Are there conversations about law enforcement involvement in enforcing the underage drinking laws? What is the tone and content of these posts?

These are just a few of the items you can scan. I think you get my point. Sit down with your team/coalition and determine what type of information you want to collect. Remember, the purpose of an environmental scan is to determine WHERE the problems occur. I think you will find the opportunities to impact the environment youth live in to be significant.

## **Scanning Youth Social Media Sites**

To demonstrate the online environmental scan, I decided to begin with scanning the social media pages of youth under the age of 21. The challenge of the online environmental scan is the wide expanse of the online community. It is not uncommon for

youth to communicate with peers across the globe. To help narrow the search to a specific geographical community, I have found it best to begin my scan with a specific school.

There are numerous ways to accomplish this. I will demonstrate how I can go into a community as a stranger and begin an online scan, identify a specific community and begin to collect data that is alcohol-related. First, I will use a search engine like Google or Yahoo to get a list of all the schools in the area. I will then visit these school websites. More often than not, the websites will contain names and photos of the students. For example, when it nears graduation time, I will find a complete list of names of every graduating senior. I usually locate the Facebook page of the first student on the list. Even if the school does not list the names of their students, I can use the name of the school and conduct a search directly on Facebook. A number of students will post this information on their Facebook page, making it easily searchable. Including youth from the relevant neighborhood to conduct the scan can also shortcut the time of your search.

A significant number of youth will have their social media sites available for public consumption. There is no need to send them “friend” requests to access their privately protected information. In fact, I would not recommend attempting this as it may thwart the positive impact you hope to make with your environmental scan. There will be plenty of information to collect from youth who have not set any privacy restrictions. Once you identify the relevant community, the next step is to implement the methodology you have developed to collect helpful information. I have included some sample templates attached as an appendix.

### **Scanning Alcohol Retailers Social Media Sites**

The same method discussed in locating youth in the online community applies to locating retailers selling alcohol. Use a search engine like Google to find the bars, liquor stores and other retailers in the community you are scanning. Then take this list of names and begin to search for their social media pages and/or websites. They often have both. An advantage to the online environmental scan is the advertising becomes a two-way street between the retailer and the customer. Due to this dynamic, it has been my experience that it does not take long to identify retailers who are more likely to engage in over-service, serve to minors or engage in other harmful practices. Often it is the online posts by the customers on the retailer’s social media page that exposes the illegal and/or harmful practices.

### **Scanning Law Enforcement “Fan Pages” and Alcohol-Related Groups**

Another interesting phenomenon with social media is you will uncover intertwined connections leading to more valuable information regarding the targeted environment. For example, a youth may bemoan an underage drinking citation they received. This may lead to discovering a “fan page” created so a collective group of like-minded similar situated individuals can vent. It is not uncommon to find what I refer to as “Law Enforcement Fan Pages.” They will rant about how much they hate the local

police. These rants give you valuable information on how active your local law enforcement, prosecutors and judges are in enforcing underage drinking laws.

In addition, this often leads to other alcohol-related group discussion on social media sites. For example, it may be a group of youth in your community that have developed a brand preference for a certain type of alcohol. It may be a particular brand of beer or liquor. A fan page is created and then multiple conversations and posts will revolve around this brand loyalty. Again, I often find information regarding where underage youth are purchasing the alcohol and/or who is the provider. All of this information paints an overall picture of what is occurring in the targeted environment.

## **A Word of Caution**

Searching the Internet is like navigating a big city you have never visited before. Most of the streets are clearly marked with signs that indicate where danger may be lurking. Keep to the main roads and heed the warning signs and most of the time you are safe. But when navigating unfamiliar online streets it is also easy to get lost or make a quick turn into a dark alley. It is imperative you plan for this to make sure you protect yourself, your team and the good name of your coalition. Have a very frank discussion in the planning phase and come up with a solid safety plan.

This is a very short presentation and there is no way for me to even consider all of the possibilities and needed guidelines. But it is imperative you put together a written plan including safety procedures. So let me help you begin your safety plan by offering three important guidelines.

### **1. Document and record all of your scanning activities.**

- a. Technology is available to easily record and store everything you do online. There are free or inexpensive applications that will record your online activities. It is likely the computer you are using already has the software. For example, the laptop I use came “QuickTime” already installed. This application has a feature where you can record and save your computer screen as a video file. Another product popular among my colleagues is called SnagIt. Again, it allows you to record and save your online activities. This will help protect you from any claims you engaged in inappropriate behaviors or methods. It may also be a method where one person can physically search the social media sites and record it, and others can then use the video files to document the sought information.

### **2. Implement a Method of Oversight – What I refer to as “Two Sets of Eyes.”**

- a. As a police detective, I was assigned the tough task of investigating child pornography cases. This required me to review and search the most despicable online sites. At the end of every online session I had a supervisor who would be my second set of eyes. He would review my

online activities and then sign a document as a testament I was within the scope of my investigative duties.

- b. In preparing trainings like this one, I have unfortunately stumbled upon youth who have posted nude photos of themselves or others. Not only do I not have the same protections as I did as a sworn officer assigned to these cases, but I don't want anyone thinking I am engaged in inappropriate or illegal behavior. Therefore, I have a plan in place that if I inadvertently find myself in a dark alley I can report this to my "second set of eyes." They review my actions and then can vouch I have not engaged in inappropriate behaviors. This is a strong protection both personally and professionally.

### **3. Report Illegal Behaviors to the Appropriate Authorities**

- a. Please put a plan in place where everyone involved in the scanning process knows when to report illegal behavior to the appropriate authorities. I strongly suggest you include a local law enforcement officer and a local prosecutor at least during the planning process. They will be able to help you implement a good reporting plan.
- b. Let me share some quick examples. First, you are going to run across too many pictures of underage drinkers consuming alcohol. It is certainly illegal but may not be something your coalition will report each and every time you come across an image. This is where you need to involve a police officer and prosecutor on your team. They can direct you to what situations to report to law enforcement. As a prosecutor, I may not be able to prove the necessary elements of the criminal statute on a photo alone. However, in my presentation, I have shown you an example of youth posting that their parents purchased alcohol for the party. In my jurisdiction, officers could investigate these claims and it may be possible to charge the parents with a crime. Finally, even if you determine to not report it to law enforcement, there may be someone else who is an "appropriate authority." For example, it might be appropriate to report certain findings with school administrators. There might be school policies the student is violating. Again, these are all decisions you should consider when formulating your plan. The goal is to have the most effective and appropriate impact on your community.
- c. Second Example --- I conducted a quick online scan before speaking at a community event on underage drinking. I ran across some photos where college age kids were engaged in sexual behavior. It was not immediately apparent whether the female was of legal age. This would certainly need to be reported to the appropriate authorities. However, I was able to quickly confirm she was of legal age. Therefore, there was not illegal behavior to report to the police, but I certainly wanted to implement my

“second set of eyes.” By doing this, my supervisor was able to confirm I did not need to report a criminal act and then documented I acted appropriately with the material I encountered.

- d. Third Example -- In another situation, I ran across information where it appeared to me that a 14-year-old girl might be engaging in sexual behaviors in exchange for alcohol and other drugs. The group of professionals I was training also had these suspicions long before I arrived. They were aware of the social media posts, yet had failed to report it to the appropriate authorities. They questioned whether their suspicions were valid and they did not want to make any false accusations. This is a situation where they should have reported this to their local law enforcement. The police are equipped to appropriately investigate the situation and take the appropriate course of action.
- e. Last example – I ran across a “teacher fan page.” This is not uncommon. I often come across these types of pages where students will rant about teachers they dislike. But this time the “teacher fan page” -- consisting of 89 students – stated they had received their “sex education” from this teacher. Their posts were vulgar, and if true, the posts certainly detailed illegal behavior. Yet, there was no doubt in my mind that this was an online bullying page and none of the claims were true. But it did not matter – I still reported the information to the police and let them make the final determination. I suggest this was the right course of action.

I don't want these examples and guidelines to scare you away from conducting an environmental scan. I have been presenting on this topic for over 10 years and have spent more time than I would like on social media sites all across the country. The above-cited examples are rare. Regardless, the safety procedures were thought of well beforehand and implemented. It has protected me personally and professionally and has protected my employer. I recommend you revisit your written safety plan as part of the final evaluation process after each environmental scan. You may find the need to add additional procedures or guidelines.

## **Conclusion**

This presentation is a very short introduction to the possibilities of conducting an online environmental scan. It is just skimming the surface and is meant for you to continue the conversation and consider the possibilities. One of the most important factors for reduction of substance use among youth is to impact the environment they live in. They certainly are a group that lives online! An online alcohol environmental scan has fantastic abilities to collect important data as long as there is a thoughtful and comprehensive planning process. I encourage you to start the conversation, consider the possibilities and then effectively make a positive impact in your community.



# Alcohol Environmental Scan

Assessment Team Member Names:

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Date of Scan: \_\_\_\_\_

Please check what type of site visited:

- Youth Social Networking Site
- Alcohol Retailer Social Networking Site
- Alcohol Retailer Website
- Alcohol Wholesaler Website
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

## Instructions

### Counting advertising, photos and other categories for alcohol use:

- Mark a line (I) in the correct place for each item.
- After there are 4 lines in each area (IIII), draw a diagonal line through the four lines to represent the 5th item.
- Start the next set of 4 lines and a diagonal line to continue counting items in that area.

### Totaling the Results:

- Count the number of groups of 5 marks in each area and multiply by 5.
- Add any marks not included in groups of 5.
- Write the total number at the end of each column.

# Alcohol Environmental Scan

Team Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Indicate where alcohol-related material(s) were found**

Facebook	Twitter	Pinterest	MySpace	Other

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**Team Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Placement - Indicate location of alcohol-related photos on Social Networking Site(s)</b>					
	<b>Cover Photo</b>	<b>Photo Album</b>	<b>Wallpaper</b>	<b>Videos</b>	<b>Other</b>
<b>Facebook</b>					
<b>Pinterest</b>					
<b>Twitter</b>					
<b>MySpace</b>					
<b>Other</b>					

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**Team Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Tally of alcohol-related photos on individual sites**

<b>Facebook</b>	<b>Twitter</b>	<b>Pinterest</b>	<b>MySpace</b>	<b>Other</b>

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**Team Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Description of Alcohol-related behaviors**

	<b>Games</b>	<b>Alone/Group</b>	<b>Amount (Shots/Kegs)</b>	<b>Videos</b>	<b>Other</b>
<b>Facebook</b>					
<b>Pinterest</b>					
<b>Twitter</b>					
<b>MySpace</b>					
<b>Other</b>					

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**Team Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Alcohol-related conversations

<b>Promoting risky behaviors</b>	<b>Party Location</b>	<b>Provider(s)</b>	<b>Law Enforcement</b>	<b>Other</b>

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**Team Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Can you determine the provider(s)?</b>					
	<b>Parent</b>	<b>Older Sibling/Friend</b>	<b>Stranger</b>	<b>Retailer</b>	<b>Other</b>
<b>Facebook</b>					
<b>Pinterest</b>					
<b>Twitter</b>					
<b>MySpace</b>					
<b>Other</b>					

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**Team Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

### Product

Indicate the top 3 brand names you see the most of in each category.

	Beer	Wine	Liquor	Wine Coolers	Other
1					
2					
3					

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**Team Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Product Promotion on Retailer Sites**  
 - Indicate the number of price promotion types you count for each category

	Beer	Wine	Liquor	Wine Coolers	Other
<b>Happy Hour</b>					
<b>Price Promotions</b>					
<b>Gifts w/ Purchase</b>					

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# Alcohol Environmental Scan

## DEBRIEFING REPORT

Team Name: \_\_\_\_\_

### TO THE TEAM:

It's important to always take the time to stop right after you finish collecting data to discuss and record your immediate thoughts and impressions. Although you have been communicating throughout the scan process, now is the time for you to consider the exercise as a whole. Take a few minutes to talk about each of the following questions and have a recorder write down the main points of the discussion for each question. Talking your answers over with the team helps everyone to understand the perspective of each member.

**Topics for the team debriefing:** (Feel free to add your own topics at the end of this form.)

**The most important thing from all the data we collected...**

Youth #1 \_\_\_\_\_

Youth #2 \_\_\_\_\_

Youth #3 \_\_\_\_\_

Youth #4 \_\_\_\_\_

Adult advisor \_\_\_\_\_

**The most surprising or unexpected thing from all the data we collected...**

Youth #1 \_\_\_\_\_

Youth #2 \_\_\_\_\_

Youth #3 \_\_\_\_\_

Youth #4 \_\_\_\_\_

Adult advisor \_\_\_\_\_

# Alcohol Environmental Scan DEBRIEFING REPORT

Team Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Adult Advisor \_\_\_\_\_

**In conducting the scan, the part of the research process that worked best or was most important...**

Youth #1 \_\_\_\_\_

Youth #2 \_\_\_\_\_

Youth #3 \_\_\_\_\_

Youth #4 \_\_\_\_\_

Adult advisor \_\_\_\_\_

**My top suggestion for improving the research process...**

Youth #1 \_\_\_\_\_

Youth #2 \_\_\_\_\_

Youth #3 \_\_\_\_\_

Youth #4 \_\_\_\_\_

Adult advisor \_\_\_\_\_

**What I liked the best about the way the team worked together...**

Youth #1 \_\_\_\_\_

Youth #2 \_\_\_\_\_

Youth #3 \_\_\_\_\_

Youth #4 \_\_\_\_\_

Adult advisor \_\_\_\_\_



