

Reining in the Bulls with Michael Marx
Interview with Michael Schade of Toxic-Free Future
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Name: Michael Schade

Current Title: Director, Mind the Store

Current Organization: Toxic-Free Future

Title during campaign: Director, Mind the Store

Organization during campaign: Safer Chemicals, Healthy Families

Name of campaign: Mind the Store

Date(s) of campaign: 2013-present

Target companies/corporations: The Home Depot, Lowe's, Sherwin-Williams, Walmart, Amazon, Ace Hardware, Menards



Summary: Mind the Store is Toxic-Free Future's market transformation program. We challenge the largest retailers in the nation to adopt strong policies to end the use of the most toxic chemicals and plastics in products, packaging, and global supply chains. This makes items on store shelves safer and drives change at a global scale. The retailers we engage have more than 200,000 stores in the United States and Canada and sell billions of dollars of products and packaging. Every commitment we get from a retailer is a step forward for protecting families, communities, and workers!

For more background, see <https://toxicfreefuture.org/mind-the-store/> and RetailerReportCard.com

00:03 Michael Marx:

Mike Schade, welcome to the interview. Thank you.

00:06 Mike Schade:

Yeah, thanks for having me.

00:08 MM:

Hey, could you tell us what your current organization and position is?

00:13 MS:

I direct the Mind the Store program for Toxic-Free Future.

00:17 MM:

And, what was the organization you were with at the time of the campaign we're going to talk about today and your role with them?

00:25 MS:

So it was the same campaign, the Mind the Store campaign. A few years ago we integrated the Mind the Store campaign into a new organization, Toxic-Free Future. But I've been directing this same campaign for over 10 years now. This is a national campaign we launched to challenge the nation's largest retailers, companies such as Walmart, Target, Amazon, and The Home Depot, to leverage their market power and influence to reduce and eliminate dangerous chemicals and plastics and move towards safer solutions.

01:00 MM:

Great. Before we launch into the campaign, can you just give us a brief overview of the organization and its mission, if there's anything in addition to what you just said.

01:13 MS:

Toxic Free Future is a national environmental health advocacy organization. We've been around for over 40 years. We have offices around the country. We're headquartered in Seattle. And essentially we work to protect the public, consumers, communities, and workers from exposure to hazardous chemicals and plastics that are contributing to an epidemic of diseases that are on the rise, such as cancer. And we have a few key program areas. One, we conduct original scientific research to uncover and highlight the hazards of chemicals and plastics. We work to advance policies at the state and federal levels to regulate and restrict dangerous chemicals and plastics and advance safer solutions. And through our Mind the Store program, we work to transform the policies and practices of the business community, particularly retailers to drive dangerous chemicals and plastics out of products and global supply chains.

02:15 MM:

Great. Good. Well, with that, let's launch into the campaign. What was the specific issue that initiated the campaign?

02:26 MS:

We launched Mind The Store over 10 years ago, as I mentioned. And when we launched Mind the Store, we were essentially saying to retailers, we'd like you to develop and implement corporate chemical policies to phase out and ban key chemicals of high concern. And over the years, we've focused our campaign on different chemicals, and different plastics. We've done work on PFAS, flame retardants, phthalates, bisphenols, and PVC plastic. This campaign that we're talking about today was a campaign that we launched to call on major home improvement chains such as Lowe's and the Home Depot and others to phase out and ban the sale of products called paint strippers or paint removal products containing the chemicals, methylene chloride and NMP.

03:17 MS:

These are products that people use to remove paint from products, for example. They're often used to refinish bathtubs, for example, or to remove glue from wood flooring. But unfortunately, when consumers and workers use these products, they can be exposed to chemicals that not only are known to cause cancer and birth defects, but actually can be deadly. Methylene chloride, which is the main chemical this campaign focused on, is a known human carcinogen. And it has killed dozens of consumers and workers in the United States in recent decades. So when the EPA announced proposed action on this chemical, well, the two chemicals actually, we sprang into action.

04:10 MM:

You alluded to The Home Depot, and Lowe's. Were they the companies that you chose to focus on or were there others and why did you choose them?

04:20 MS:

So we decided to focus on these companies because the chemicals we're concerned about were found in paint and removal products, and The Home Depot and Lowe's were among the key retailers that the campaign focused on. And we focus on them because they're the biggest retailers of these products here in the United States, and certainly among the biggest retailers globally that sell these products. But the campaign was not only focused on those companies, but other major retailers as well, such as Amazon, Walmart, Sherwin Williams, and Menards.

04:56 MS:

But originally we initially focused on Lowe's and The Home Depot because they're iconic retailers, they're publicly traded companies. So we knew that we could work with investors in the campaign. They were national in scope, so we can mobilize consumers and advocates around the country. These also are market leaders. They're the two largest home improvement chains in the United States.

05:21 MS:

We knew that if we could move them, that could help set a precedent for other competing retailers across the country. Also, these retailers sold products that had killed, in the case of Lowe's, one of their customers in the months leading up to the launch of the public-facing

campaign. So, while we were focused on both Home Depot and Lowe's, the campaign leaned into Lowe's because we were contacted by a family whose son purchased a product at Lowe's and was killed using it when he was stripping the floor of his small business, a man by the name of Drew Wynne. I can get into those details in a minute, but we wanted to focus on retailers because we knew that they could play a critical role in driving these toxic and deadly products off the market.

06:22 MS:

I should mention, that a key reason why we launched this campaign is because in 2016, we were successful in passing national legislation that was signed into law by President Obama, that reformed federal law called the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA). That's the primary law that is focused on regulating hazardous chemicals such as these. In the final days of the Obama administration, months after this law was signed, the Obama EPA announced that they were proposing to ban these two chemicals, methylene chloride and NMP. The Trump administration came into town literally days later. We knew that Trump was coming in with an anti-regulatory agenda, and we knew if we were going to get the EPA to ban these chemicals, we needed to mount a corporate campaign to begin to drive these chemicals off the market. And we knew that if we could get retailers to take action, that would help create political momentum for the federal EPA to ban these chemicals as well. So, there was a real intentional strategic interplay between the corporate campaign we were running at our federal policy campaign as well.

07:41 MM:

So that's actually a really interesting lesson and timely given that Trump is now coming back into office.

07:48 MS:

And four years later in a similar situation. Yes.

07:53 MM:

And it also underscores just how important corporate campaigns can be when regulatory agencies are weakened or legislations are proposed to be rolled back.

08:03 MS:

Absolutely. When we have administrations that maybe, don't want to do the right thing, and don't want to protect consumers, the public, and the environment, corporate campaigns can be incredibly effective in driving change, not only at the national level, but internationally as well, because major businesses like The Home Depot and Lowe's and Amazon and Walmart, we can impact their policy not only on a national level in many cases, but also internationally as well.

08:34 MM:

Before you started the campaign, was there a report documenting the harm associated with these particular chemicals that you were able to show to Lowe's or Home Depot?

08:46 MS:

When the EPA proposed banning these chemicals, EPA published a detailed assessment of the hazards that these chemicals pose to consumers and workers. So there was a lot of information within the EPA docket that we could point to. Additionally, there have been investigative journalism reports out there documenting the hazards that these chemicals pose to consumers and workers.

09:17 MS:

I believe it was the Center for Public Integrity that had done some really important reporting on this. So we pulled that information together and we sent letters to the CEOs of The Home Depot and Lowe's summarizing why we were concerned about this. Additionally, we developed fact sheets summarizing the hazards these chemicals pose. We also pulled together information about the availability of safer alternatives. Retailers like The Home Depot and Lowe's not only were selling the bad actor products that we were working to press them to phase out in ban, but they were already selling the safer alternatives as well.

10:00 MS:

So we pulled together that information. Additionally, over time, we created a map that highlighted the cities and the states around the country where consumers or workers were killed from using these products. We pulled together a lot of information to tell the story of how these products could harm consumers and workers, but also the availability of safer cost-effective alternatives that retailers could immediately start selling and stocking their store shelves with.

10:37 MM:

When you sent the letter and provided this information to Lowe's and The Home Depot, did that result in any meetings with them or contact from them?

10:47 MS:

Yes. And I should mention that we had been engaging both retailers for several years at that point. We had been successful in getting both Home Depot and Lowe's as well as other retailers to ban other chemicals in building products. Back in 2015, for example, we got Home Depot and Lowe's to phase out and ban the sale of vinyl flooring containing phthalates. So we had already developed relationships with sustainability leaders at both companies. And that was one of the other reasons why we decided to focus on these companies because we knew that they were movable. We had a track record of success. We had relationships that we had built with the companies. So, to answer your question, yes. About a month after the EPA proposed banning these chemicals, we sent letters to the CEOs of both companies, and we started engaging them. At first, The Home Depot was not very responsive to us, but Lowe's was. And we had a series of meetings with both companies over the course of a year.

11:58 MS:

But over time it was clear to us that we were just banging our heads against the wall, no matter how much information we provided to both companies about the dangers of the chemicals, the

business risks that they faced for continuing to sell them, and the availability of alternatives. We shared with them a lot of information, but despite that, they were not willing to budge. And it became clear that we needed to launch a more public-facing campaign to take the campaign to the next level. I will say that, after we first sent a letter to The Home Depot, they were not immediately responsive. We then launched an online petition focused on them that immediately got their attention and that opened the doors to dialogue and negotiation. But despite that, they were not willing to adopt a meaningful policy. And eventually, we decided to pivot the public campaign to Lowe's, which I can talk about in a minute.

13:04 MS:

One of the things that was important before I get to that is when we sent a letter to Home Depot and Lowe's that winter, we included a list of products that both retailers sold and that contained these chemicals, methylene chloride, and I'll talk about that more in a minute. But that's important to this story because it connects with the consumer who died purchasing the product from Lowe's.

13:37 MM:

Before we launch into the campaign specifically, did you have any organizations involved in the campaign?

13:47 MS:

Absolutely. In the early days of the campaign and through the campaign we worked with other national organizations and state-based partners. For example, one of our key partners in the campaign was NRDC who we worked closely with. We also worked with many other national and state-based environmental and public health advocacy organizations. For example, the National COSH Network, a network of organizations concerned about worker health and safety. We developed partnerships with online organizations such as Change.org. We worked with health-affected organizations such as the Learning Disabilities Association of America. And then we also worked with investors who were members of the Investor Environmental Health Network because we were engaging and working to move publicly traded companies. So it was important for us to also engage investors in the campaign. So yeah, we worked with a large network of organizations through the course of this campaign.

14:57 MS:

Not only after we sent the letters to the company, but also after we launched it, I should also mention that we worked with academic experts who had been studying these chemicals for decades who could speak to the hazards that these chemicals pose to workers and consumers. And then we also worked with academic researchers who were researching and developing new alternatives to these products that they were trying to bring to market. So there was kind of an ecosystem of different stakeholders that we had developed partnerships with as we built the campaign over time.

15:40 MM:

Good. So it really was a multi-track kind of campaign.

16:07 MS:

So yeah, it was certainly a multifaceted campaign that included inside engagement, outside engagement, public advocacy, shareholder activism, online campaigning, in-person campaigning, federal policy work, and state policy work. It was really interesting and one of the more exciting campaigns that I've been ever a part of and was honored to coordinate and something that I'm really proud of. Because we eventually won, which we'll talk about eventually, I'm sure.

16:36 MM:

Yeah, you should be, it is one of the reasons I chose you and this campaign to interview, because I consider it, in the last 20 years, to be really one of the seminal campaigns.

16:45 MS:

Oh, thank you.

16:47 MM:

No, no question in my mind, just given the diversity of it, the strategy, and the tactics that were employed, it was an example.

16:54 MS:

Oh, thank you. I appreciate that.

16:56 MM:

Well, let's get into it. The campaign itself, how did you launch it? What were the demands and, then how did it unfold?

17:07 MS:

Yeah, so as I mentioned, we sent a letter. We sent letters to the CEOs of Home Depot and Lowe's. We started meeting with them. We provided all this information to them, but we weren't getting anywhere in that. They were engaging their suppliers. Their suppliers weren't willing to budge and they weren't willing to essentially put their foot down and say, Hey, we're not going to sell these products anymore. So, fast forward about eight months after we had sent the letters and we had been meeting with the companies, we were contacted by this family, parents, and the brothers of this young man named Drew Wynne. And sadly, he had purchased a paint removal product from Lowe's. And coincidentally it was one of the very same products that we had flagged for Lowe's. When we sent them a letter, as I mentioned, we included a fact sheet that provided examples of products that they sold that could kill their customers.

18:09 MS:

So eight months after we had sent Lowe's this letter, this young man bought one of the very same products. And sadly, he was killed using this product. He was refinishing the floor of his business. He owned a small coffee roasting business. And he was literally found the next day by

someone after using this product. So we were contacted by this family because they had seen our website. Because we had published some blogs about the campaign before we escalated further. And they had read about it and they said, hey, you know, we've been directly affected. We've been through this awful situation and we want to ensure that no other family experiences what we have gone through. And we had already been thinking that we needed to escalate public pressure on these companies.

So fast forward a couple of months, roughly about a year after we had sent letters to the CEOs of the Home Depot and Lowe's, we kicked off the campaign with a national press conference with this family, the parents of Drew Wynne. We held a national press teleconference with the family where they told their story about how their son had been killed with this product that was purchased at Lowe's. Additionally, we launched a national online petition on Change.org in collaboration with the family. And it was a petition that we launched jointly with this family in their name and our name as well, where they essentially made the point that no other family should have to suffer.

20:28 MS:

DIY shouldn't spell danger. And that we wanted and they wanted retailers such as Lowe's to phase out and ban the sale of paint removal products that contained both methylene chloride and the regrettable substitute NMP. That's the other chemical that the EPA proposed banning. And it was really off to the races from there. Working with that family was essential to the campaign from the beginning to the end because it was really powerful to have a family that had been directly affected, advocating, organizing, and agitating for change. Having people who were directly affected, being spokespeople for the campaign, leveraging their anger and their trauma and their devastating story, and trying to essentially ensure that no other family had to go through what they had gone through. And that was, I think, transformative in the campaign, having a family that had been directly impacted. It's one thing for me as an advocate to talk about these issues, but it's a whole other ball of wax when you have people, a mom and a dad whose young son was in his early thirties who was killed unnecessarily from a product that he bought at Lowe's.

21:57 MM:

Did you record their statements or anything that allowed you to then use, and circulate them on Facebook, for example, or LinkedIn or on digital media? How did you get the word out and their story out?

22:15 MS:

As I mentioned, we worked with them on a collaborative online petition on Change.org, which over the course of the campaign generated tens of thousands of petition signatures. We put together social media graphics. I can't remember if we put together a video where we interviewed them or not. We certainly had videos on the campaign that featured the story of Drew Wynne. He had two brothers that we worked closely with on the campaign. But certainly, we were working with them to share their story. We would put journalists in touch with family members so that they could share their stories. We worked with a family on at least one op-ed

that was published. One of the things that was interesting was that once we launched the campaign publicly with them, we also started identifying and working with other families who also had been impacted.

23:18 MS:

One story of how we connected with another family was that there was another young man who bought a paint removal product from another retailer. But interestingly, this family heard about the campaign and they signed our petition to Lowe's. And we noticed in their comment on the petition, that they said, 'Hey, I'm a mom and my son was also just killed.' It had only been weeks or maybe even a month. And once we saw that, we reached out to this woman and we started developing a relationship with her as well as a couple of other moms who had been affected. So we worked with a network of parents, particularly moms whose children had been impacted. And that was another powerful element of the campaign because it wasn't just one family that had been impacted, but multiple families had been personally impacted and devastated.

24:26 MS:

They were advocating for change, not only to get retailers such as Lowe's and The Home Depot to act but also to put pressure on EPA to ban this chemical. Because I should note that once the Trump administration came into office, they essentially were dragging their feet. They weren't really doing anything to move the proposed ban on methylene chloride and NMP forward. Again, our campaign was designed not only to push retailers to take action but also to put public pressure on the EPA to take action and states like California to ban these chemicals as well.

25:11 MM:

Sometimes in these campaigns, there are also field tactics, demonstrations, or rallies. Were there any of that either in front of Lowe's or Home Depot?

25:26 MS:

We held a national week of action. We did a few different things. We did a call-in day to Lowe's. We had tactics where we encouraged supporters to share content on social media, tagging the company on platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. A key moment that we were building momentum towards was the company's annual shareholder meeting. So, we launched the campaign publicly, I believe it was February of that year. And the shareholder meeting was quickly approaching that May or June. So about a month before the annual shareholder meeting, literally about a month and a half or two months after we launched the campaign, roughly, we held the national week of action where advocates, grassroots activists, and state leaders around the country held leafleting actions, informational pickets, press conferences, media events in front of Lowe's stores across the country.

26:43 MS:

And that really kind of took the campaign to another level because at that point we had generated media attention. We had generated tens of thousands of petitions. And this really

kind of escalated the campaign because now, Lowe's was seeing us visiting their stores, and talking to their customers and talking to the workers at the stores and leafleting their employees and leafleting their customers. And they saw that, hey, this campaign is not going away, especially as we were approaching the company's annual shareholder meeting.

27:16 MS:

And certainly, that was not accidental. At the same time, investors that we had reached out to also started reaching out to Lowe's and had been meeting with them. So we had an inside-outside approach where we and investors were engaging the companies behind the scenes. And at the same time, we were escalating public pressure on the company to do the right thing.

27:39 MS:

As we were doing that, we were also continuing to, I would say, play nice with sustainability leaders at both Lowe's and Home Depot because we had developed relationships with the sustainability leaders over time. And we didn't want to alienate them and we didn't want to shut down the lines of communication. So not all the time, but several times when we were planning to escalate with a petition or the week of action, we intentionally gave the sustainability leaders at the company a heads up that this was coming so that they could be prepared. And so that we were essentially arming them with information so that they could be change makers inside the company. And so also their bosses could see that they also knew what was going on and that they weren't just being caught flatfooted on this issue.

28:33 MS:

And we were trying to essentially help them make the case internally within the company that, hey, this campaign is escalating, and I heard that this is going to be happening or that is going to be happening. We need to take this seriously. And that I think was really important and something that I think was critical in making change. So, we weren't just publicly calling on the company to improve, but we were trying to still work with the company behind the scenes and be reasonable with our demands and asks while we were still escalating public pressure.

29:09 MM:

It sounds like there was a real convergence. There was the day of action across the country, a lot of people showing up. There's the petitions, there's the shareholder meeting coming up, and also there's the empowering of internal champions in the form of sustainability directors to really move things along. Now, did that result in any meeting with the company executives to do a final negotiation on this?

29:44 MS:

Yeah. We had a series of meetings with both Lowe's and The Home Depot over the course of about a year and a half. When we launched the campaign more publicly in February or March, we had several different meetings, largely by phone or Zoom, but it was all leading up to the annual shareholder meeting. And we decided that we were going to continue to escalate. And the shareholder meeting, we decided it was going to be a real critical moment where we kind of took the campaign to corporate executives.

30:20 MS:

So, we were planning to attend the annual shareholder meeting. We rented a hotel room, a conference room at the same hotel where Lowe's was having their annual shareholder meeting. We were planning to hold a press conference inside the hotel the morning of the shareholder meeting. Investors that held stock at the company lent us their proxy so that I and a couple of other advocates could attend the meeting. One of the people that we were going to attend the Lowe's shareholder meeting was one of the moms whose son had died, and she was planning to speak at the meeting. And she was prepared to deliver the tens of thousands of petitions that we had mobilized in the campaign. And we gave Lowes a heads-up that we were planning to do this. About a week before the shareholder meeting was going to take place, we had given them a heads-up that we were going to be there. We were going to have the mom deliver the petitions. About a week before the shareholder meeting, we got a call from Lowe's, from their sustainability director. And they're like, Hey, you guys did it. We're ready to cut a deal. We're ready to announce a commitment to phase out and ban the sale of these products. We're ready to do it by the end of this year, and you're not going to need to come to our shareholder meeting. We're going to announce this in a couple of days. We're going to issue a press release and we want to work with you on announcing this and making this commitment publicly.

33:03 MS:

The shareholder meeting was the following Thursday, I believe. And the company announced their public commitment, literally that Tuesday or Wednesday, a day or day or two before the shareholder meeting. So, we won the Lowes campaign. They committed to phasing out and banning the sale of these products by the end of that calendar year, which we thought we felt pretty good about it. Because that was within, I think May or June. So that was within about a six or seven-month time period. And then from there we immediately started looking at pivoting to other competing retailers.

33:40 MM:

That was my next question, because usually inside a particular industry, when you get that victory, particularly when it's with one of the leading companies, that has a ripple effect. How did you pivot?

33:55 MS:

Well, that was the thing that was really exciting about it because once we moved Lowe's, we knew that we were going to be able to likely win similar commitments from other retailers. We've done this before, right? Once we got Home Depot to ban vinyl flooring with phthalates, we got Lowe's to make the same commitment within a week, a few years prior. So we immediately pivoted to The Home Depot as our next campaign focus. But as we started, we immediately started engaging Home Depot and letting them know, Hey, you're next. We're prepared to pivot to you as the next company we are focusing on. And it wasn't just us, it was other partners across the country, NRDC, other national organizations, state-based organizations, investors.

34:56 MS:

In engaging Home Depot, one of the things we learned immediately after Lowe's had made their commitment was The Home Depot was concerned that their customers, especially their professional contractors, would stop shopping at The Home Depot and go to Sherwin Williams instead. Interestingly, they weren't concerned about the paint removal products as much, but they were worried about their paint sales writ large, which is a huge source of income for The Home Depot. And they're concerned about losing their professional contractor customer. So when we learned that they were almost less worried about Lowe's, and they were more worried at this point with Sherwin Williams. We immediately pivoted to Sherwin Williams. So we had a multi-pronged approach. And the day we sent a letter to Sherwin Williams, they announced that they would phase out and ban the sale of paint removal products containing methylene chloride and NMP, literally the day we sent them the letter.

36:14 MS:

We immediately told Home Depot and they were like, yep, we're ready to adopt a policy on these chemicals. And a couple of days after Sherwin-Williams announced their commitment, Home Depot made the same commitment as well. I think it was within less than a month after Lowe's made their commitment, that both Sherwin Williams and The Home Depot made the same commitment as well. And then we started engaging other major retailers. About a month after that, Walmart announced the same commitment, and then eventually other major chains including Menards, Amazon, and ACE Hardware, and roughly a dozen major US retailers announced that they would phase out and ban the sale of these products within less than a year. So, it was really after we moved Lowe's, that really created a domino effect in the retail sector. And the biggest retailers in the US agreed to phase out and then not sell these products, not only in the US but globally as well. So the campaign had not only a national impact but a global impact as well.

37:30 MM:

That was huge.

37:34 MS:

I mean, it's massive.

37:34 MM:

It started out with the Trump administration coming in, concerns about the EPA not enforcing. Oftentimes when you get the victory, there's a tendency now to go look for ways to institutionalize the victory. Did you go back to the EPA now that a lot of the corporate opposition was neutralized?

38:02 MS:

Absolutely. And eventually, we were successful in getting the EPA to ban methylene chloride. The EPA announced a ban on all consumer uses of methylene chloride. That wasn't enough for us. So we and other groups eventually sued the EPA to essentially say, Hey, you need to not only ban this for consumer uses, but for industrial and commercial uses as well. Eventually, just

this past year, in April 2024, the EPA finally announced a comprehensive ban on all consumer uses of methylene chloride and most commercial and industrial uses. This corporate campaign we ran played a critical role in creating essentially political pressure on the administration, both the Trump administration, but also the Biden administration, to do the right thing.

39:23 MS:

The Trump administration announced a partial ban on methylene chloride just for retailers. But this was after we had already gotten all the major retailers, all the national retailers to take action. So it was a partial victory. And then in more recent years, the Biden EPA finalized a more comprehensive ban on methylene chloride, not only in paint removal products but dozens of other types of consumer products, commercial and industrial products. So they went even further than the retailers did. It was a huge win for us.

40:14 MM:

That's where I was going. When you look back on the campaign, what are some of the things that you think were absolutely critical? And you've already alluded to several of them, but what were some of the things that you go, Hmm, in retrospect, we would've done this differently?

40:31 MS:

A few different things. I think, one, the inside-outside approach was critical. Trying to engage the companies behind the scenes, giving them an opportunity to do the right thing as a way to build trust in the relationship. That's always a type of campaign that I prefer to run, to give a company the opportunity to do the right thing, so that we could seem reasonable, not only with the companies, but also with the media, investors, and other stakeholders. Working with people who have been directly impacted by the issue. And working with them to share their stories and to have them advocate for change is really important, working with real people. Having, as I noted, an inside-outside approach. So, while we're engaging the companies behind the scenes, mobilizing public pressure, focusing on companies that are market leaders, and focusing on the market leaders so that once we can move them, that can help create a domino effect in the sector.

41:28 MS:

Working with investors. And, leading up to the annual shareholder meeting, some of the tactics that we deployed, including online petitioning, social media graphics, and the days of the week of action, all these types of tactics helped create what I would describe as a perfect storm of activity, that created a political crisis for the retailers and essentially forced their hand to act. Because they knew that they needed to do this, and they knew it was the right thing to do. Honestly, they were getting pushback from their suppliers. This one company, the biggest manufacturer in the space was a company named WM Bar. They didn't want to do this. And so we needed to create, essentially, a political environment for the companies where they had to do the right thing. And they knew that this was a problem. There was no question that this was a deadly and dangerous product. They could see that there was no question that it was a known carcinogen. There was no question that it was killing consumers and workers, particularly disproportionately affecting workers of color, because a lot of professional

contractors that use these products are Latino folks. And we worked with EJ organizations and organizations that represent Latino workers during the campaign. So all of these things were essential.

42:53 MS:

But on the flip side, the thing that we didn't do enough of that I regret, is put greater emphasis on the need for them not only to ban the chemicals but also to ensure that the substitutes are truly safe. We shared with them a lot of information about safer cost-effective alternatives. But the thing that we didn't do enough of in the campaign that I regret, quite honestly, is we didn't put enough emphasis on the need when we were negotiating the deal with them, that they would phase out and ban the sale of these products for most retailers within less than a year, that they needed to ensure that the substitutes were also verifiably safer.

43:38 MS:

Unfortunately, in some cases, some of their suppliers started introducing alternatives that contained other bad actor chemicals. I think you can make an argument that those alternatives were safer compared to methylene chloride. They wouldn't kill their customers. But some of the ingredients in the alternatives are what we would describe as, what we call a regrettable substitute. So that's one of the things that is something that was a real lesson and has informed our public advocacy going forward. So now when we're campaigning around other chemicals of high concern, like PFAS, for example, which we've done a lot of work on in recent years with our Retailer Report Card, which is a tool we put out to benchmark retail progress on dangerous chemicals and plastics. We've put much greater emphasis on the need for companies to not only what we call "ban the bad", but to ensure that the substitutes are truly safe, not only for consumers but for communities and workers across the lifecycle of chemicals and plastics.

44:45 MS:

So that's, I think, my only regret and that is a hard lesson to swallow, but it has enabled us to become more effective advocates for change. And I think the campaign that we lead today, our policy work at the state, the federal level, the corporate campaigning we're running, we're putting much greater emphasis today on the need for companies to verify the safety of alternatives. So that is the biggest lesson that we learned with that campaign. And it was transformative in that regard because it was a real wake-up call in many ways.

45:26 MM:

You actually prefaced what was my last question: how has this really affected the evolution of the organization and its strategy?

45:37 MS:

That's it. Honestly. 2016 was the first year that we put out the Retailer Report Card. We just published the sixth iteration of the retail report card last month, fall of 2024. The most recent iteration of the report card puts much greater emphasis on safer solutions and safer alternatives.

46:12 MS:

We've doubled the number of possible points that companies can receive around safer solutions because we're never going to solve these problems if companies move from one bad actor, a chemical or plastic to another. And that's why we're pushing for more comprehensive systemic change in the government policy that we're advocating for. And also corporate policies that we're advocating for within the business community. And that's, I think, one of the lessons that we've learned with this campaign. And I think something that other corporate campaigners and marketplace transformation advocates really need to focus on in our advocacy. We need to ensure that the solutions systematically address the problems that we're working to solve. For example, if you're working on climate, well, it's not so great to go from coal to nuclear, right? You're just creating a different type of problem. So that's why we need to be advancing solutions that are protective across the life cycle of issues that we're working on, whether it's toxics or climate or water or workers' rights, you name it.

47:22 MM:

I think that's the perfect place to wrap the story. Mike Schade, of the Mind the Store methylene chloride campaign. Thank you so much for telling us the story.

47:37 MS:

Thank you so much. And I should say that I've learned a lot from you over the years. I attended business ethics network trainings in the past, and a lot of the information I gleaned from those trainings, really informed this campaign. So, thank you for sharing your work over the years because it's been transformative for me as an advocate over the years. One of the first protests I ever organized was in the late nineties in college outside of a Home Depot focused on Home Depot's sale of products sourced from lumber. So, the work that you've done over the years has been hugely inspirational and educational for me. So, thank you for all of your work.

48:15 MM:

Thanks. And thank you. That's very nice. And also now it's your turn to pass it on to the next generation. Mike, again, thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

48:26 MS:

Yeah, thank you. If folks want to learn more, they can visit our website at toxicfreefuture.org and retailerreportcard.com.

48:34 MM:

Okay, perfect. We'll end it there.

48:36 MS:

Excellent. Thanks