

Social Marketing Basics

What is it about Starbucks that keeps people coming back to spend over \$4.00 each time? Ask who goes to Starbucks, and most people will answer things like “yuppies,” “coffee connoisseurs,” or “people with money.” Starbucks is not just about coffee—it offers branded music collections, comfy chairs to sit in to chat with friends, Wi-Fi for your office away from home, social and environmental initiatives, and its own language (what is a “venti double half-caf skinny mochaccino” anyway?). The company has created an aspirational lifestyle that people can join just by walking around with a Starbucks cup.

What if we could create a brand for health or social behaviors that people kept returning to over and over? It would be a product that they aspired to “own” and wanted to make sure other people knew they liked. The product would be fun and easy to use, aligned with their values, and its communications would be tailored to feel like the brand was talking directly to them. The behavior would simply become the obvious choice, without having to make a conscious decision to do it. In fact, we can create this kind of brand using the tools and techniques of social marketing.

As organizations and government agencies search for solutions to bring about positive change on many of the most intractable problems in society, they are increasingly turning to the field of social marketing for answers. Whether it’s motivating kids to get active to prevent obesity, making recycling an automatic behavior, or tackling a massive issue such as poverty, professionals and policymakers are finding that social marketing offers an approach that brings together the most effective thinking from many different fields in a systematic process.

Traditionally, when organizations or government agencies have wanted to influence people’s behaviors on a mass scale, they have used either an educational or policy approach. The educational approach presumes that if you just give people the facts, they will make the rational decision to take action; all they need is information. With some topics, this approach works well; we’ve done a good job of teaching people the 911 phone number to call for emergency services. Unfortunately, education is necessary but may not be sufficient to bring about behavior change on more complex or emotion-based behaviors. Decades of showing kids pictures of smokers’ diseased lungs were not enough to keep teens from smoking in droves.

Policies that legislate a particular behavior under threat of jail or a fine, or increase the costs through taxation, can be very effective. These coercive methods make sense for behaviors that can hurt other people or are basic life-saving actions, such as preventing drinking and driving, wearing seatbelts, or not smoking in a public place. But do we want to live in a world where all

our health or social behaviors are regulated? Diminishing liberty and free choice should only be done as a last resort when other methods have not worked.

DEFINING SOCIAL MARKETING

Since the early 1970s, social marketing has emerged as an effective way of persuading people to voluntarily adopt healthy and prosocial behaviors for issues that may require more than just laying out the facts. Simply put, social marketing is the use of commercial marketing principles and techniques to promote the adoption of a behavior that will improve the health or well-being of the target audience or of society as a whole. These are the same methods that a company such as Coca-Cola uses to sell its soft drinks—a focus on its consumers, market research, and a systematic process for developing a marketing program. The key characteristic that distinguishes social marketing from commercial marketing is its purpose; that is, the benefits accrue to the individual or society rather than to the marketer's organization. In addition, the cross-pollination of disciplines with marketing, including anthropology, social psychology, design, public health, behavioral economics, and persuasive technology, keeps the field dynamic and brings the best thinking about behavior change together in a cohesive process.

Who Uses Social Marketing?

This is just a sample of the many types of organizations that use social marketing in their education and prevention efforts:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- National Cancer Institute
- National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
- U.S. Department of Agriculture
- U.S. Agency for International Development
- International health ministries
- State/provincial health departments
- Local health departments
- Community-based organizations
- National nonprofit organizations
- Universities
- Environmental agencies/nonprofits
- Social service agencies/nonprofits
- Private foundations
- Community coalitions
- Corporations

WHAT SOCIAL MARKETING IS NOT

All too often, the well-intentioned nonprofit director who uses marketing techniques to raise funds for the director's organization, or the health educator who creates a television commercial without even talking to the people the educator is trying to reach, believes that he or she is practicing social marketing. Conducting a focus group, creating an awareness campaign, designing communications for a nonprofit—all of these may or may not be part of a social marketing program; it depends on whether they are done systematically—following the social marketing process.

Use of the term to mean many different things has led to confusion about what social marketing is. In addition to misunderstanding what social marketing means in a health and social issue context, a growing number of people from outside the field have co-opted the term to refer to social media marketing. Since the emergence of social media in the mid-2000s, a large contingent of Internet-focused

marketers have managed inadvertently to sow extensive confusion as they took over “social marketing” for their own purposes and shifted the balance of online references to the term over to their definition. Although a feisty contingent of (real) social marketers works hard to combat the semantic takeover, there are more of them than us, and the field of social marketing needs to do a better job of marketing “social marketing.”

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

As with any tool, social marketing cannot be expected to solve every type of health and social problem. Social marketing is at its best when used to effect and sustain healthful or socially beneficial behavior change, increase program use, or build customer satisfaction with existing services. The same techniques can be used to move from a focus on individual-based changes to working more broadly for changes at the community level, including policymakers, media, and other community institutions.

A social marketing program would not be effective for certain issues such as complex problems with many contributing or confounding factors, problems not under individual control (e.g., genetic flaws), and addictive disorders. You also would be ill advised to undertake a social marketing approach if you are unwilling or unable to commit the resources needed to do it well.

In some cases, an organization might be better off using its funds to add staff or capacity to its current services rather than to develop a social marketing project.

What Issues Have Been Addressed With Social Marketing?

- HIV/AIDS
- Breast cancer
- Family planning
- Immunization
- High blood pressure
- Cholesterol
- Radon
- Nutrition
- Panic disorder
- Asthma
- Breastfeeding
- Drug abuse
- Energy conservation
- Smoking
- Oral rehydration therapy
- Volunteerism
- Child abuse
- Osteoporosis
- Physical activity
- Recycling
- Animal protection
- School enrollment
- Bicycle helmets
- Depression
- Educational opportunity
- Voting/civic engagement
- Pollution prevention