

Understanding Social Marketing

Fifty years ago, the word “marketing” belonged only to the world of cigarettes, junk food, sneakers, and cereals—not to the world of nonprofit social service agencies or substance misuse prevention. Today, as the science of marketing has evolved, social marketing has come to play an important role in health and social service efforts.

Social marketing can offer tools and techniques that prevention professionals can use to help improve prevention activities in their communities. If it’s clearly understood, adapted with care, and carried out professionally with research to back it up, social marketing can be a very useful tool for prevention professionals. Launching a full-scale marketing campaign can play a vital role in creating community change. But that is not the only reason, or even the main reason, to have a working knowledge of social marketing.

This technique can be used in other ways, for example:

- To sell ideas in meetings
- To sell participation in a community coalition
- To influence people who can make a difference in the success or failure of prevention efforts
- To increase effectiveness when working one-on-one with people at risk. For instance, instead of just saying, “Don’t use drugs,” the social marketer might try to understand by asking, “Why do you use drugs?”

Over the past 20 years, many health and social causes have used social marketing to raise awareness and produce behavior change within different audiences around the world. Social marketing techniques have also been used effectively in the fields of alcohol and other drug prevention, family planning, heart disease prevention, and energy conservation.

What is Social Marketing?

Definitions from experts usually emphasize various aspects of social marketing. Alan R. Andreasen, for instance, a major architect of social marketing, describes it as the application of commercial marketing principles and techniques to the “selling” of ideas, attitudes, and behaviors that benefit the audience and society as a whole. Philip Kotler, another social marketing expert, defines it as “applying marketing principles and techniques to advance a social cause, idea, or behavior.”

Key Elements of Social Marketing

Social marketing draws on techniques developed by marketing experts, particularly as they started to base their techniques on theories about what motivates human behavior. The foundation of social marketing is conducting research to understand what the consumer or target audience wants or needs. Social marketers can then “package” the product or behavior they want to “sell” so that it resonates with these wants and needs.

The Four “P’s”

Marketing strategies accommodate consumer focus by addressing the “Four P’s”: product, price, place, and promotion:

- **Product** refers to the item or concept social marketers want to promote. It could be a tangible object (like a condom), or a behavior (like exercising), or an idea (for example, that underage drinking isn’t cool). In order to have a viable product, people have to believe that using or adopting the product will somehow benefit them.
- **Price** refers to the cost of using a product or changing a behavior. This may include monetary costs, but more often refers to what people have to pay in terms of effort, energy, or time. For example, a teenager who stops smoking may actually save money by not having to buy cigarettes. However, the price of quitting may also have costs, such as dealing with friends who smoke or finding the willpower to remain smoke-free.
- **Place** describes the channels used to reach the target audience. Will the target audience include people in schools? Doctor’s offices? Shopping malls? On the Internet? Research will help identify the best venues for delivering the product.
- **Promotion** refers to the strategies used to create and sustain demand for the product. It involves the development of an effective message, as well as decisions about how the message will be communicated. Examples include electronic media, such as radio and television; print media, such as newspaper ads or bumper stickers; or non-conventional media such as airplane banners or tattoos.

Many of the techniques used in social marketing efforts are the same as in commercial marketing. The techniques aim to:

- Identify and analyze the target audience through carefully planned formative research
- Use the information derived from research to design a message
- Focus on creating an exchange: providing a *benefit to the audience* (such as not being fined) in exchange for a *desired behavior* (such as wearing a seatbelt)
- Test the message with members of the target audience, revising accordingly
- Determine the best media sources for communicating the message and the right people to deliver it
- Track the effectiveness of the message and refine it based on the results of the evaluation

There are two principles that differentiate social marketing from general marketing practices: audience focus and the exchange principle.

Audience Focus

Success of social marketing depends, in large part, on understanding the target audience. The first step in developing this understanding is to define an audience. Once it’s determined *who* to reach, and *why*, the messages can be tailored accordingly.

“General public” is not a helpful phrase when it comes to marketing. It assumes the existence of a vast, undifferentiated crowd of people with uniform needs and similar interests. Yet, everyday experience shows this is clearly not the case. Turn on the television to one of more than 100 channels, and chances are, you will hear someone make a comment with which you disagree.

Fortunately for social marketers, the general public comprises many smaller audiences, or segments, that *do* share interests, cultures, and backgrounds. Through a process called “audience segmentation,” these groups can be characterized and differentiated according to specific traits, such as age, gender, ethnicity, role in the community, skills, or experiences. Knowledge of these traits helps social marketers develop and deliver appropriate messages.

Exchange Principle

Another essential feature of social marketing is a concept known as the exchange principle. In order for people to try something new (like using condoms) or give something up (like stopping smoking), they need to benefit in some way. Furthermore, the reward or benefit of adopting the behavior needs to be greater than the “cost.” Finally, the new behavior must be worth the cost in the person’s mind.

Consider this example: A person is trying to lose weight and has decided to go to the gym three nights a week to do so. But what sacrifice will he or she be willing to make to get to the gym? If the benefit of losing weight is great enough, then it may be worth it to leave the comfort of home and head off into the night. However, if the goal seems unattainable, or the gym is too far away, too expensive, or there’s a great TV show on, then the likelihood of making it to the gym decreases on a given evening.

When thinking about the target audience and the exchange process, keep in mind that people don’t make choices in a vacuum. Research shows people are more likely to adopt a new behavior if friends, family, and/or their social group approve of it or practice it themselves. Advertisers often use this knowledge to sell products. For example, one popular Coke commercial depicts a group of young teenagers holding a car wash. Music is pumping and the kids are having fun. The exchange: “If you drink Coke, you’ll have fun. If you drink Coke, you’ll have friends.” Framed in this way, why would any teenager *not* want to drink Coke?

“Peer pressure” on adults may not be as great as on youth but can still affect behavior. Consider, for example, how much easier it is to take an early morning walk if you have a friend to walk with you. Or how much more comfortable it is for a new mother to breastfeed her infant if the behavior is supported by the other adults in her life.

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