

What Is Social Marketing?

by Nedra Kline Weinreich

The health communications field has been rapidly changing over the past two decades. It has evolved from a one-dimensional reliance on public service announcements to a more sophisticated approach which draws from successful techniques used by commercial marketers, termed "social marketing." Rather than dictating the way that information is to be conveyed from the top-down, public health professionals are learning to listen to the needs and desires of the target audience themselves, and building the program from there. This focus on the "consumer" involves in-depth research and constant re-evaluation of every aspect of the program. In fact, research and evaluation together form the very cornerstone of the social marketing process.

Social marketing was "born" as a discipline in the 1970s, when Philip Kotler and Gerald Zaltman realized that the same marketing principles that were being used to sell products to consumers could be used to "sell" ideas, attitudes and behaviors. Kotler and Andreasen define social marketing as "differing from other areas of marketing only with respect to the objectives of the marketer and his or her organization. Social marketing seeks to influence social behaviors not to benefit the marketer, but to benefit the target audience and the general society." This technique has been used extensively in international health programs, especially for contraceptives and oral rehydration therapy (ORT), and is being used with more frequency in the United States for such diverse topics as drug abuse, heart disease and organ donation.

Like commercial marketing, the primary focus is on the consumer--on learning what people want and need rather than trying to persuade them to buy what we happen to be producing. Marketing talks to the consumer, not about the product. The planning process takes this consumer focus into account by addressing the elements of the "marketing mix." This refers to decisions about 1) the conception of a Product, 2) Price, 3) distribution (Place), and 4) Promotion. These are often called the "Four Ps" of marketing. Social marketing also adds a few more "P's." At the end is an example of the marketing mix.

Product

The social marketing "product" is not necessarily a physical offering. A continuum of products exists, ranging from tangible, physical products (e.g., condoms), to services (e.g., medical exams), practices (e.g., breastfeeding, ORT or eating a heart-healthy diet) and finally, more intangible ideas (e.g., environmental protection). In order to have a viable product, people must first perceive that they have a genuine problem, and that the product offering is a good solution for that problem. The role of research here is to discover the consumers' perceptions of the problem and the product, and to determine how important they feel it is to take action against the problem.

Price

"Price" refers to what the consumer must do in order to obtain the social marketing product. This cost may be monetary, or it may instead require the consumer to give up intangibles, such as time or effort, or to risk embarrassment and disapproval. If the costs outweigh the benefits for an individual, the perceived value of the offering will be low and it will be unlikely to be adopted. However, if the benefits are perceived as greater than their costs, chances of trial and adoption of the product is much greater.

In setting the price, particularly for a physical product, such as contraceptives, there are many issues to consider. If the product is priced too low, or provided free of charge, the consumer may perceive it as being low in quality. On the other hand, if the price is too high,



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some will not be able to afford it. Social marketers must balance these considerations, and often end up charging at least a nominal fee to increase perceptions of quality and to confer a sense of "dignity" to the transaction. These perceptions of costs and benefits can be determined through research, and used in positioning the product.

Place

"Place" describes the way that the product reaches the consumer. For a tangible product, this refers to the distribution system--including the warehouse, trucks, sales force, retail outlets where it is sold, or places where it is given out for free. For an intangible product, place is less clear-cut, but refers to decisions about the channels through which consumers are reached with information or training. This may include doctors' offices, shopping malls, mass media vehicles or in-home demonstrations. Another element of place is deciding how to ensure accessibility of the offering and quality of the service delivery. By determining the activities and habits of the target audience, as well as their experience and satisfaction with the existing delivery system, researchers can pinpoint the most ideal means of distribution for the offering.

Promotion

Finally, the last "P" is promotion. Because of its visibility, this element is often mistakenly thought of as comprising the whole of social marketing. However, as can be seen by the previous discussion, it is only one piece. Promotion consists of the integrated use of advertising, public relations, promotions, media advocacy, personal selling and entertainment vehicles. The focus is on creating and sustaining demand for the product. Public service announcements or paid ads are one way, but there are other methods such as coupons, media events, editorials, "Tupperware"-style parties or in-store displays. Research is crucial to determine the most effective and efficient vehicles to reach the target audience and increase demand. The primary research findings themselves can also be used to gain publicity for the program at media events and in news stories.

Additional Social Marketing "P's"

Publics--Social marketers often have many different audiences that their program has to address in order to be successful. "Publics" refers to both the external and internal groups involved in the program. External publics include the target audience, secondary audiences, policymakers, and gatekeepers, while the internal publics are those who are involved in some way with either approval or implementation of the program.

Partnership--Social and health issues are often so complex that one agency can't make a dent by itself. You need to team up with other organizations in the community to really be effective. You need to figure out which organizations have similar goals to yours--not necessarily the same goals--and identify ways you can work together.

Policy--Social marketing programs can do well in motivating individual behavior change, but that is difficult to sustain unless the environment they're in supports that change for the long run. Often, policy change is needed, and media advocacy programs can be an effective complement to a social marketing program.

Purse Strings--Most organizations that develop social marketing programs operate through funds provided by sources such as foundations, governmental grants or donations. This adds another dimension to the strategy development--namely, where will you get the money to create your program?

Example of a Marketing Mix Strategy

As an example, the marketing mix strategy for a breast cancer screening campaign for older women might include the following elements:

- The product could be any of these three behaviors: getting an annual mammogram, seeing a physician each year for a breast exam and performing monthly breast self-exams.
- The price of engaging in these behaviors includes the monetary costs of the mammogram and exam, potential discomfort and/or embarrassment, time and even the possibility of actually finding a lump.
- The place that these medical and educational services are offered might be a mobile van, local hospitals, clinics and worksites, depending upon the needs of the target audience.
- Promotion could be done through public service announcements, billboards, mass mailings, media events and community outreach.
- The "publics" you might need to address include your target audience (let's say low-income women age 40 to 65), the people who influence their decisions like their husbands or physicians, policymakers, public service directors at local radio stations, as well as your board of directors and office staff.
- Partnerships could be cultivated with local or national women's groups, corporate sponsors, medical organizations, service clubs or media outlets.
- The policy aspects of the campaign might focus on increasing access to mammograms through lower costs, requiring insurance and Medicaid coverage of mammograms or increasing federal funding for breast cancer research.
- The purse strings, or where the funding will come from, may be governmental grants, such as from the National Cancer Institute or the local health department, foundation grants or an organization like the American Cancer Society.

Each element of the marketing mix should be taken into consideration as the program is developed, for they are the core of the marketing effort. Research is used to elucidate and shape the final product, price, place, promotion and related decisions.