

Social Marketing: The Science of Behavior Change

By Bill Weger, MA



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Buckle up. Stop smoking. Don't pollute. Exercise regularly. Welcome to the world of social marketing, the science of behavior change. Social marketing is a complex discipline with a sole purpose, getting an individual or community to modify their behavior for social good.

Change isn't always easy and neither is social marketing. In fact, it can be downright frustrating and measurable results can be slow to achieve. Think marathon, not a 10K race. How do you convince people to voluntarily adopt a positive behavior that actually sticks?

Social marketing came of age in the 1970s and is often misunderstood and mistaken for social media marketing in today's Web 2.0 environment. Social marketing brings together the use of social and behavioral sciences (sociology, anthropology and psychology) with marketing strategies and tactics used by the commercial and public sectors.

Give and Get In Return

To work effectively, social marketing must involve an exchange or mutual benefit. If I give something, what do I get in return? This concept is rooted in commercial marketing. Give me two bucks, and I will give you a bottle of Gatorade that comes with hydration benefits, along with the emotional brand rewards associated with the popular sports drink. The social marketing motive, in contrast, is not profit but instead change to benefit society. And just like consumers have choices; your audience can do something else, too. The competition is there! Your audience may decide to adopt another behavior. You want your audience to read, but they choose to play video games or watch television.

Social marketing practitioners are change agents. They are dedicated to important social issues and causes that result in positive behavior modification and improved outcomes, whether it's preventing injuries or saving lives. It's not just an advertising campaign or logo.

In the Beginning

With the publication of "Social Marketing: An Approach to Planned Social Change" by Philip Kotler and Gerald Zaltman, social marketing became a formal discipline in 1971. Other researchers and practitioners, including Alan Andreasen, Bill Novelli and Bill Smith, have advanced social marketing over the past three decades.

Today, social marketing's influence and reach are profound. Many government and nonprofit social marketing campaigns have had a powerful impact on public health, safety, education and the environment. Social marketing courses are now offered at major colleges, including Harvard and Georgetown University.

Social Marketing Issues

Social marketing has been used to address many social issues, including:

- Domestic violence
- Drug abuse
- Smoking
- Energy conservation
- Obesity
- Oral health
- Recycling
- Suicide
- Teen pregnancy
- Seat belts

The list goes on. And so do the many ways practitioners seek to apply social marketing principles and policy approaches to today's diverse social challenges.

Defining Social Marketing

Definitions for social marketing have evolved. Two widespread ones are:

- "Social marketing is a process that applies marketing principles and techniques to create, communicate

and deliver value in order to influence target audience behaviors that benefit society as well as the target audience.” (Philip Kotler, Nancy Lee, and Michael Rothschild, 2006)

- “Social marketing is a process for creating, communicating and delivering benefits that a target audience(s) wants in exchange for audience behavior that benefits society without financial profit to the marketer.” (Bill Smith, 2006)

Campaigns for Change

Two of my favorite campaigns are “Click It or Ticket” (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration) NHTSA and Go Red for Women (American Heart Association). Click It or Ticket was designed to increase the use of seat belts among young people in the United States, while Go Red for Women empowers women to take charge of their heart health. Heart disease is the number one killer of women in the United States. The use of red solidifies the cause, resonates with women and reinforces the American Heart Association’s brand identity.

Who can forget the famous USDA Forest Service mascots Smokey Bear (Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires) and Woodsy Owl (Give a Hoot – Don’t Pollute). I was a kid when the late Harold Bell created Woodsy Owl in time for the first Earth Day in 1970. Woodsy is still around today and his latest motto is “Lend a Hand—Care for the Land!”

A decade later, while in college, I remember a journalism professor making me write “Smokey Bear” 50 times because I incorrectly thought the Associated Press style was “Smokey the Bear.” According to the Ad Council, Smokey Bear’s message is recognized by 95% of adults and 77% of children in the United States. In 2001, the message was updated to “Only You Can Prevent Wildfires.” Smokey and Woodsy have been social marketing champions for a long time and convinced many of us to “do the right thing” for the environment.

Back in the early 1990s, while working at the Interstate Truckload Carriers Conference (now the Truckload Carriers Association), I got my first taste of social marketing, helping plan and implement a campaign working in conjunction with Mother Against Drunk Driving (MADD).

We launched a national highway safety awareness tour, *Drunk Driving Destroys Dreams*, and held “rolling press conferences” in cities across the country. More than 130,000 red ribbons were distributed to the public and displayed on trucks.

Millions of media impressions were generated with help from celebrities and professional athletes. An 18-wheeler displaying our campaign theme was seen by thousands as we moved along major interstates and interior routes. Our goal was to curb drunk driving during the holidays and increase highway safety awareness. Local schools, law enforcement and governments supported the campaign as well. At one press conference, Crash-Test Dummies Vince and Larry joined us. In 2010, NHTSA donated the famous dummies to Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History after they promoted seat belt usage for nearly 25 years.

In 2010, I worked closely with Equals Three Communications in Bethesda, Maryland and the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments to plan and implement a regional diesel idle reduction campaign (Avoid the Fine, Don’t Idle). The social marketing campaign was designed to encourage bus and truck drivers to reduce idling and promote public health. All these examples highlight how nonprofits and government, sometimes working with partners, engage social marketing principles for social good.

Five Social Marketing Campaign Phases

Different approaches and strategies have been used to achieve social marketing success. Here are five campaign phases to consider. (See Diagram A on page 4.)

Phase I: Identify Problem

Before you embark on a social marketing campaign, you need to identify the problem. What is your rationale and need for conducting a change campaign? For example, your community has a high incidence of obesity. A social marketing campaign may help to combat this health issue, but you need to ask questions, gather data and analyze. Get the big picture and an understanding on several levels, from the community down to the individual. Once the problem has been identified and clearly stated, you can begin the formative research phase,

which will help you to fill in critical information gaps and gain better insights about your target audience(s).

Phase II: Conduct Research

The research phase is critical to campaign success. It is here where you find out your target audience's attitudes, motivations and behaviors. Research can also determine the characteristics of your audiences and how to segment them into more homogeneous groups for better responsiveness to your campaign. Research will also help you learn about potential barriers to behavioral modification and your audience's readiness to change. Research is also conducted at the end of the campaign (evaluation) and to pre-test messages and materials.

Research will be used to align your strategy, goal, objectives, interventions and tactics with your audience's needs and wants and how to satisfy them. Audience needs versus wants may vary widely. Research may involve quantitative, qualitative or secondary research and include literature review, online surveys, focus groups, personal/telephone interviews and analysis of new and existing data. A SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis determines internal and external factors that could impact campaign success.

In some cases, research may involve monitoring and observation to gain a deeper understanding of your audience in their natural environment. For example, as part of our research for the diesel idle reduction campaign, I went out to a truck stop in Maryland and interviewed drivers as they were coming in. I also observed the idling

habits of bus and truck drivers at different locations. The stronger your research efforts, the better chances the campaign will resonate with stakeholders. Research will help answer the question whether old behavior can be abandoned and new behavior adopted.

Phase III: Develop Strategy

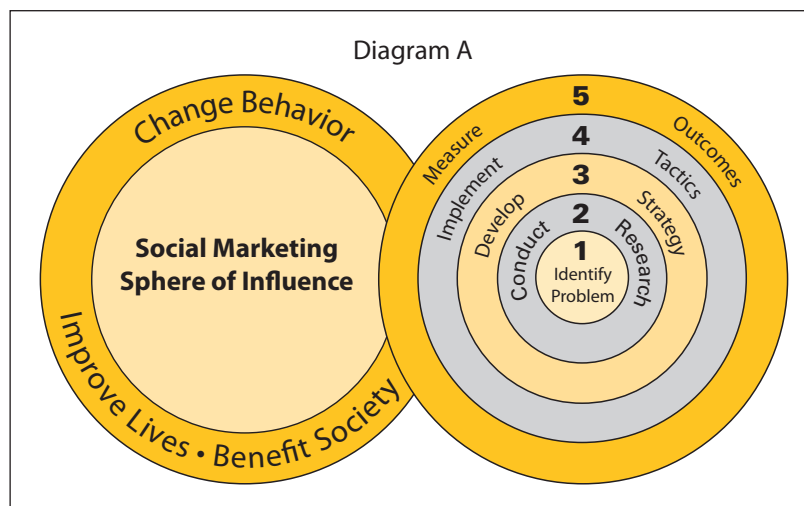
The strategy phase brings together all you have learned to create an integrated communications plan and marketing mix (the Four Ps) that will strike a responsive chord with your audience(s). The key to this stage is establishing a realistic goal, objectives, interventions and tactics based on your budget and the audience's ability to modify their behavior. Developing messages that move your audience to take action is paramount to success. Answer the question: How will we get the audience to change?

Social marketing practitioners often use the "Four Ps of Marketing" to develop the basis for their outreach strategy. The four Ps are Product, Price, Place and Promotion. The four Ps have been used in commercial marketing for decades and are often applied to social marketing principles. Sometimes a fifth P (Policy) is used, especially in public health campaigns. Advancing public policy through grassroots outreach, legislation or the media can lead to new laws or funding that can positively impact behavior change at the community and individual levels.

The Four Ps of Social Marketing

Product—The behavior you intend to achieve and how you make it happen. It's "packaging" or "selling" the social modification in ways that meet the wants, needs and desires of the target audience. So perhaps it's an education campaign or a poster contest, or a tangible product (such as a book about eating properly and exercising regularly) that motivates the audience to accept your message and change their behavior. It can also be intangible and tied to emotions, such as feeling safe or happy for contributing to a good cause like improving the environment. Because you are marketing a product, a positioning statement will be useful.

Price—The cost to make the behavior change, including money, recognition, time and inconvenience. The price may be incentives (such as



coupons or bonuses) or it may have negative consequences, such as fines and social stigma.

Place—Where the behavior change needs to take place. It's also the location campaign materials (products) are presented to the audience or where it's on their minds. It could be at home, a hotline, a mall, a clinic, a school or hundreds of other places where your target audience will be most receptive to your message.

Promotion—The messages and communications channels used in the campaign to bring about the desired behavioral change. It includes the messengers for the campaign, such as spokespersons, partners, and media. Promotion often involves an integrated communications platform with use of advertising, public service announcements, public relations, social media and direct mail. It may also include promotional items, coupons and special events.

Phase IV: Implement Tactics

With a well-researched strategy and plan in place, it's time to implement the tactics. Implementation works toward achieving your objectives and ultimately your goal to change behavior. It's sticking to a time schedule and putting your tactics and marketing mix into action. It's writing the news releases, giving speeches, posting blogs, putting up posters, building the website, calling reporters, staffing the hotline, placing ads and distributing t-shirts.

Phase V: Measure Outcomes

So how well did your campaign work? Did it actually change behavior in the community or target audience? Evaluation and monitoring instruments, whether these are follow-up surveys, interviews or data collection, are essential to determine if your campaign worked,

is working or needs adjusting. Evaluation should track whether your objectives were met and how much they contributed toward achievement of your goal. Campaign impact and outcomes can also be measured through statistical comparisons – before and after the campaign.

Social marketing is not for everyone. It's a challenging undertaking and an important marketing discipline that will continue to evolve as our environment, needs and wants change. It has a tremendous capacity to inspire good, improve lives and change communities.

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He earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Journalism from the University of Maryland, College Park, and a Master of Arts degree in Public Communications from American University. He is a former journalist who wrote for dailies, weeklies and Associated Press. Read Bill Weger's "inspire good" blog at www.imageonepr.com

About Image One PR

Image One PR is a social marketing and strategic communications firm based in Rockville, Maryland. We specialize in nonprofits, associations, healthcare and government. Since 2002, we have been helping our clients inspire good.

Image One PR has won 27 national and international awards for communications excellence, including APEX, Ava, Aurora, Aster, Communicator, Hermes Creative and MarCom Awards.

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