

Building Social Marketing Into Your Program

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First-time social marketers often feel overwhelmed by the rigorous market research processes they see in other large-scale programs. They may hesitate to incorporate social marketing activities into their own programs, unsure whether they have the resources and expertise to undertake such a project. The following ten tips are designed to help those new to the field to understand the basic principles of social marketing, with practical suggestions on how to implement these concepts in any type of program.

1. Talk to your customers.

The key to effective social marketing is talking (and listening!) to the people you are trying to reach. Social marketing is a customer-driven process. All aspects of your program must be developed with the wants and needs of the target audience as the central focus. In order to learn what your customers want, you must ask them!

A little ingenuity may be necessary to find cheap and easy ways of gathering information. It may be as simple as going to where the people are and talking to them. For example, sit out in the reception area and talk to people waiting to use your services. Go to the local mall to talk to teenagers hanging out there. Go to the laundromat and talk to people as they wait for their clothes. Ask them if they know of your organization and what you offer. See how they talk about experiences they have had with your issue and find out what they need to help them use your services or perform the behavior you're promoting. You'd be surprised at how willing people are to talk about themselves and how delighted they are to be asked for their opinions.

2. Segment your audience.

Good marketers know that there is no such thing as selling to the general public. Men and women, adults and teenagers respond differently to particular approaches. To be most effective, you need to segment your target audiences into groups that are as similar to each other as possible and to create messages specifically for each segment.

Typical attributes for segmentation include sex, age, geographical location and race/ethnicity.

You can also segment your audience by behavior. For example, rather than targeting all teenagers, a smoking prevention program might focus upon African American girls between the ages of 12 and 18 who have never smoked. A smoking prevention program for middle-aged men who are ex-smokers would use a very different approach. Of course, people still vary greatly within these segments, but the more specific you can get, the greater your potential impact.

The audience segments targeted may not always be the same people your campaign addresses. If your research shows the people you want to reach are more likely to listen to their family members or doctor, you may have more success with a message to those secondary groups urging them to talk about the issue with the person whose behavior you ultimately want to change. A nonprofit organization may have several audiences it needs to address: its "customers," its donors, the media, policymakers and the board of directors. Each of these groups requires its own marketing strategy.

3. Position your product.

In social marketing, our products are often hard to promote because of their high "price." Products like behaviors and attitudes require longterm commitments and do not sell as easily as a bar of soap or a car. The cost of a social marketing product often includes a person's time and effort (to attend a class or use services), giving up things he likes (high fat food), embarrassment or inconvenience (buying and using condoms), or social disapproval (resisting peer pressure to smoke). To counteract factors working against adoption of the product, we need to acknowledge these potential problems and address them.

Your product positioning determines how the people in your target audience think about your product as compared to the competition. Just as various cigarette brands bill themselves as the freshest, the most fun, the most athletic, the least expensive, the classiest, or the most feminine, your product needs to be positioned in relation to the alternatives.

Product positioning is usually based on either the benefits of the product (what will it do for me?) or removal of barriers (how difficult is it for me to do?). By talking about your product with the target audience, you can learn the benefits they value most and the barriers they foresee. For example, women may feel that breastfeeding is a way to bond with their babies, is healthier, and makes them better mothers. However, they may also think that breastfeeding doesn't fit into their lives, is difficult to do, and is painful. In this case, a program could either promote and reinforce the positive aspects of breastfeeding or provide ways to get around the barriers, by explaining how to work

breastfeeding into a busy schedule and teaching the proper way to do it to avoid discomfort.

4. Know your competition.

In the commercial sector, successful companies watch every move their competitors make. They know their selling environment intimately and are ready to react as soon as conditions change. Social marketers also need to be aware of the competing messages pulling on their target audiences. Your product's competition may be another product, such as french fries versus fruit, or it may be nonperformance of the behavior you are promoting; inaction is nearly always easier than adopting a new behavior. Your product must be more attractive than the alternatives to be accepted.

Just as Coke creates its marketing strategies based on what Pepsi is doing, we can take advantage of our competitors' tactics to promote our own products. Many successful health campaigns against tobacco and alcohol have parodied the well-known cigarette and beer slogans, creating ads that grab our attention because of their new twist on familiar images.

Other environmental factors may also affect people's reactions to your program. Political changes may require new approaches, news events may change the context in which people hear your message, and work done by other organizations in your field may affect how you portray your message. You must be able to monitor these changes in the environment and adjust your program accordingly.

5. Go to where your audience is.

People will not go out of their way to find your message. You will need to put your message in places your target audience will encounter. When you talk to your customers, ask them where they get their news, what radio stations they listen to, where they go in their free time.

If you learn that your target audience tends to read the local newspaper, place your ads there and work with that paper's reporters to get coverage of your issue. If the people in your audience are the ones who do the grocery shopping, work with local supermarkets to put information on healthy eating in their stores. If the people you are targeting like a particular type of music, go to rock concerts and pass out your materials. Bring a mobile mammography van to people's worksites.

You can research the audience demographics of local media outlets (i.e., television, radio, newspapers) in order to match your target group's characteristics with their favorite media. The only limit to reaching your audience is the extent of your creativity.

6. Utilize a variety of approaches.

Social marketing involves much more than television advertising campaigns. The most effective programs use a combination of mass media, community, small group and individual activities. When a simple, clear message is repeated in many places and formats throughout the community, it is more likely to be seen and remembered.

A social marketing program might contain television and radio spots, print ads, a community event, a poster contest, giveaways of your products or coupons for your services, a toll-free hotline for individual counseling or referrals, or classes on your topic offered in the community. The variety of approaches you use will depend on your program's budget and what will be most effective with the target audience. No matter what you do in your campaign, try to stick to one main "look" and slogan, or people may not realize all the pieces are from your organization. Consistency and continuity are key to a successful campaign.

7. Use models that work.

As with any field, social marketers design programs using the most effective and useful models available to them. In one model that incorporates elements of several well-established health behavior theories ("Stages of Change"), people move through several steps in a continuum before adopting a new behavior.

In the first stage, precontemplation, a person may not feel at risk for the condition or think the behavior is relevant to him. People at this stage must first be made aware of the problem and possible risk factors to move to the next stage, contemplation. To move from contemplation to action, messages should promote the benefits of performing the behavior and minimize the perceived costs. In this stage, the behavior should be portrayed as something that many other people do and agree with; skill-building messages and demonstrations of the behavior by others similar to themselves will help them move to action. Once they have tried the behavior, the last and often most difficult stage is maintenance. Motivational and reinforcing messages are necessary to prevent relapse to the contemplation stage.

This model provides a useful framework for segmenting the target audience. A program could address people in each stage over a period of time or select just those at a particular stage of the process.

8. Test, test, test.

All of the products, promotional materials, and services you develop for your program should be tested with your target audience to gauge their potential effectiveness. Social marketing recognizes that the customers are the experts on what works best for them.

Even the best minds on Madison Avenue test their ideas with their consumers (and consequently avoid spending lots of money on concepts that don't work).

One of the methods most associated with social marketing is the focus group. This involves bringing together 8 to 12 people with particular characteristics relevant to the program and leading them through a focused discussion on a given topic. Focus groups can be used to learn how people in the target audience think about the issue and why, the language they use to talk about the issue, and their reactions to messages or materials you've developed.

Surveys are a more generalizable method to find out people's knowledge, attitudes and behaviors regarding a particular topic. They work best when you have very specific questions that don't require the respondents to explain their answers (e.g., "yes" or "no" questions). These don't have to be very complicated, but do require care in administration and interpretation.

9. Build partnerships with key allies.

Just as the power of a choir derives from its union of many voices, a powerful message requires groups throughout the community to come together in a coordinated effort. Organizations concerned with your issue can sing the melody along with you, while other groups--the media, schools, businesses, government agencies--can provide the harmony, complementing your efforts through their involvement. By pooling resources with other organizations working toward the same goal, you can have a greater impact as well as access to new audiences.

Build connections with key people and organizations who have the potential to bring attention and credibility to your program. You can develop beneficial relationships with the reporters covering your issue at key media outlets; pitch stories to them with a fresh news angle, provide them with fact sheets or lists of experts they can contact for their stories, and be available when they call for information. Include your local politicians in activities to help them understand and support your issue. Invite businesses to sponsor your projects, exchanging positive corporate publicity for their financial support. Other potential allies include professional associations, local service organizations (e.g., Kiwanis, Rotary Club), religious groups and existing community coalitions.

10. See what you can do better next time.

The cornerstone of social marketing is evaluation--determining what you accomplished so you can use that information to improve your program. Evaluation occurs throughout the social marketing process. As you develop your program, you need to test and refine your messages or products with members of the target audience. When the program is implemented, you need to monitor activities to assess whether they are occurring as planned. How many brochures were disseminated? How many media

"hits," or mentions of your program, did you achieve? Are the people in your target audience the ones who are using your program? The answers to these questions will let you know whether you need to make adjustments while you have the opportunity to do so.

The big question, though, is: Did you make a difference? There are two ways this can be answered. One way is to see whether members of the target audience engaged in the desired behavior as a result of the program. This can be determined quantitatively through survey research with the people who participated in the program or who were exposed to the message.

A second way requires a longer-term perspective, investigating whether performing the behavior induced the desired change (e.g., a reduction in related mortality and/or morbidity). The actual impact of a social marketing program is difficult to assess accurately. Can a public service announcement reduce mortality from heart disease? Probably not, but many such efforts can combine synergistically over time. The only way to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between your social marketing program and changes in behavior and health outcomes is to conduct a community intervention study. At whatever level you perform evaluation, the information gained should be used to improve your program in the future.