



How to go beyond social marketing

Social marketing is the application of commercial marketing concepts and techniques to achieve ‘pro-social’ changes in attitudes and behaviour – and has become a popular approach for governmental and non-governmental campaigns to promote sustainable behaviours.

The basic principles of social marketing are straightforward. Recognising that simply providing people with information was insufficient to bring about changes in their behaviour, social marketers developed a framework for moving beyond the ‘pamphlet approach’ to behaviour change. First, the intended audience of a behaviour change campaign must be understood. This could mean conducting a survey, and dividing (or segmenting) the intended audience into different groups depending on their attitudes or behaviour. In an anti-smoking campaign, this might involve identifying people who want to stop smoking, and those who don’t – as these people are likely to respond differently to messages about smoking cessation.

Any potential barriers to behaviour change must be identified (and if possible, removed), and the context within which the behaviour is performed must be understood. A smoking cessation campaign is unlikely to work for individuals who regularly spend time in environments where smoking is the norm – this is the context in which the behaviour occurs and a barrier to changing it. Any behaviour change programme should be piloted with a small number of people before being extended to the rest of the target audience, and following the intervention there should be an opportunity for evaluation and feedback (Hastings, 2007).

It sounds sensible – and the techniques and strategies of social marketing have been successfully applied to campaigns aimed at changing exercise habits, reducing alcohol consumption, stopping smoking and eliminating drug use – as well as promoting pro-environmental behaviour (Peattie & Peattie, 2007). For example, a social marketing initiative from the Australian government named ‘Travelsmart’ achieved an impressive 14% reduction in car use over an 18 month period. Social marketing gets results. So what’s the problem?

Partly, it depends on what you mean by ‘getting results’. The effectiveness of social marketing for achieving well-defined behavioural change on a piecemeal basis is well established. But with strategies informed by social marketing ubiquitous among governmental and non-governmental programmes of public engagement on climate change, an important question is to what extent this represents a proportionate response to climate change. Does social marketing contain the right set of tools for catalysing the individual, social and political shifts that will be necessary to make the transition to a low-carbon society?

One concern is that social marketing has no capacity for strategic oversight. What if the most effective way of promoting pro-environmental behaviour ‘A’ was to pursue a strategy that was detrimental to the achievement of long term pro-environmental strategy ‘Z’? The principles of social marketing have no capacity to resolve this conflict – they are limited to maximising the success of the immediate behavioural programme. A perfect illustration of this was provided recently by Chris

Huhne, explaining the incentives that power companies will be able to use to promote home insulation and the Green Deal. Having apparently consulted with the Cabinet Office 'Nudge Unit' (the social marketing specialists advising the government on behaviour change), Huhne suggested that "... (I) f they want to offer the chance of a cruise for two to the Norwegian fjords that's something they can do".

The social marketing approach can lead to paradox, illustrated by a recent report from the Institute for Public Policy Research (Platt & Retallack, 2009). The report focussed on 'Now People' – members of the public who are high consuming and seek psychological rewards in status, fashion and success. The report recommended communicating with the Now People in the way that resonated most strongly for them – by appealing to their wallets. But this is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, low-carbon behaviours are by no means always low-cost: the correlation between saving energy and saving money cannot be assumed to hold in all situations. But more importantly, the attitudes of the Now People represent a group of individuals whose lifestyles are simply unsustainable. Ignoring this fact for the sake of more effectively tailoring a message about small changes in behaviour seems counterproductive. There are limits to the extent that a message can be tailored before its purpose is entirely subverted.

There are also limits to the usefulness of 'segmenting' an audience. It's certainly true that people differ in their attitudes towards climate change, and that 'one size fits all' is unlikely to work as a communication strategy. But segmentation processes *emphasise* the differences between people, which is problematic for two reasons.

Firstly, increasing the level of social capital in communities – the productive benefits associated with social relations – is an important component of sustainable development, and the effectiveness of environmental policies (Jones, 2010). Communities that have higher levels of social capital are more likely to respond positively to pro-environmental policies, and engage in pro-environmental behaviour, because they are already engaging in 'collectivist' problem solving and tend to trust each other more. While segmentation does not necessarily reduce social capital, it certainly does nothing to increase it. Individualised messages might work well *for individuals*, but will such carefully crafted messages retain their power in the context of social interaction?

Secondly, labelling and categorising people into distinct segments might be self-fulfilling. An individual who claims to only engage in environmental behaviour to save money might be identified as a 'waste watcher' (one of the Defra's seven audience segments – Defra, 2008). The principle of message tailoring would then dictate that this person should be engaged in environmental behaviours by financial incentives. But this will only strengthen their tendency to save energy for financial reasons – and there are compelling arguments against promoting this type of attitude in the longer term (Crompton & Kasser, 2009). It is critical to understand that people vary in their levels of concern about (and motivations for engaging in) pro-environmental behaviour. But the implication of seeking to engage people on the basis of these differences may be that these differences are *enhanced*.

This means that a strategy for climate change engagement needs to be about more than just social marketing. Environmental education, fostering ecological 'citizenship' (Dobson, 2010) and engaging people at the level of social networks rather than as segmented individuals holds out far greater promise for the sorts of ambitious societal transformations that will be required to tackle climate change. Although it is currently unpopular for governmental (and even non-governmental) bodies to talk about influencing people's values, there is a growing body of psychological research that shows that particular types of values (e.g. concern for others, respect for the environment) are associated with environmental behaviours, while others are not (e.g. materialism, personal power and ambition). Most people hold a range of values. The task for environmental campaigns is not to dictate values to people, but to make salient the values that will lead to serious engagement with climate change and sustainability. If they do not, they may undermine the very value-base they seek to appeal to in the future (Crompton, 2010).

Social marketing techniques are a set of tools for making a process more efficient – they do not tell you what that process should be. Given the scale of the challenge presented by climate change and the broader issues of environmental sustainability, we should not limit our ambition for engaging the public on climate change to the principles of social marketing. On their own, they do not constitute a proportional response to the scale of the challenge – and without the oversight provided by a more comprehensive strategy for engaging the public, there is a risk that social marketing for climate change will be counterproductive.

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