

11 Integrating social marketing into what we do

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Over the last decade there has been a growing appreciation at local, national and international levels, that social marketing approaches (where they are properly carried out) have real potential to strengthen the impact and effectiveness of local and national programmes.



In the UK the Government in 2004 agreed to commission a two year independent review to specifically assess its potential, and, with Professor Jeff French, myself and a small team produced the 'It's our health!' independent review report in June 2006.

At its core it concluded:

“Where social marketing was properly integrated alongside existing approaches it has great potential to not only enhance efforts to improve health and well-being, but also to better tackle often entrenched health inequalities. It can do this by providing a strong citizen- and insight-driven approach, while at the same time helping assess the wider social and societal context that impacts on peoples lives, and help in the more systematically assessment of key ‘upstream’ social determinants issues.”

(Clive Blair-Stevens 2009)

While in the UK social marketing may for some still be relatively new, it has been around for many years, coming out of debates in the 1950s and first being coined as a term by Philip Kotler in 1971. Originally it arose because some marketers back then began to question whether instead of just being able to sell more baked beans or Ford cars, they might actually be able to use their skills for more socially beneficial causes. However, like all good disciplines, social marketing has developed and matured.

While originally often simply presented as being about harnessing commercial marketing methods, in the last decade or so, social marketing has developed by integrating learning from many areas, such as the wealth of learning from social behavioural sciences, from health promotion, public health, community development and environmental approaches. There is now a wider appreciation that effective social marketing is much more than just a limited ‘marketing’ set of approaches and it is now being seen as a much more ‘mature and integrative discipline or approach’. Hence, in box 1 above, note the inclusion of the word ‘alongside’ to emphasise this integrative aspect to good social marketing practice.

Distinguishing strategic and operational social marketing

It is important to recognise that social marketing can be approached in quite different ways. It is common for people to simply see it as a programme or campaign, ‘tool’ or ‘method’ – or what can be described as ‘operational social marketing’. This is important and certainly the methods and tools within social marketing can significantly assist effective programme or project development.



However, importantly, social marketing can also be approached at a strategic level. This is where social marketing’s focus on gaining a deeper contextual understanding and insights into people’s lives can be used to directly inform policy and subsequent strategy development, long before any particular programme or campaign is decided upon.

The UK has increasingly been recognised as taking an international lead in this area; and work to connect social marketing with social determinants is part of this. The Department of Health, in particular in its 'Ambitions for Health' strategy, is working to integrate social marketing strategically across its policy and programmes.

It is helpful therefore to think of social marketing more broadly as a citizen- or customer-focused 'mind-set' that can inform policy and strategy discussions rather than just being seen as a particular tool to help do better campaigns. This is particularly important when it comes to addressing inequalities, since by adopting a more 'strategic social marketing' approach, the wider social determinant issues can really be assessed and then addressed.

In a nutshell... understanding, insights and behaviour

At its heart, it's all about developing a deeper contextual understanding and insight into people's lives, and then using this to craft interventions and approaches that are valued by those being addressed, which can achieve measurable impacts in what people actually do – their behaviour. The key words to take away here are therefore 'understanding', 'insights' and 'behaviour'.

This means effective social marketing goes way beyond trying to communicate information, build awareness or even influence attitudes. Social marketing should never be confused or conflated with 'social advertising'. While such information and message-based approaches can be valuable in specific contexts, effective social marketing goes beyond this to focus on how to achieve and sustain behaviour, rather than just communicating a message.

The key features of social marketing have been summarised in the 8 point national benchmark criteria sheet [Box 2]. These were developed to help people assess whether work being described was consistent with its key principles and approaches.

With the rise of social marketing and growing interest of those commissioning work at local or national levels, increasingly people have started to describe what they do as 'social marketing'. This is understandable but simply calling something social marketing doesn't make it good (or bad); what matters is that the work described is consistent with key features and criteria.

Integrating social marketing doesn't mean you have to become an expert over-night. The National Benchmark Criteria sheet therefore is a very simple and practical tool to assess whether what is being described as social marketing is really consistent with its key features. For example: commissioners of services (who do not need to be expert social marketers) are increasingly adding the sheet to their tender briefs, and asking those putting in proposals to indicate how they will ensure these will be incorporated into the work proposed. This is a simple, low cost way to begin to ensure the criteria are increasingly informing programme or intervention development. Similarly evaluators can also use the sheet to guide review of work and retrospective assessment of the extent to which work has integrated key social marketing criteria.

Finally it is important to recognise that there is a great deal of excellent work going on within local communities already. This may not be formally described as social marketing, but quite often it is consistent with key social marketing principles or criteria. Building on these as important assets within communities is key. The more we can find practical ways to integrated social marketing approaches into existing programmes (whether they choose to describe themselves as social marketing or not), the greater the chance that our collective efforts to address the key social determinants will begin to show a real impact on the entrenched inequalities that exist.



References and further reading

Further information is available via the National Social Marketing Centre website www.nsmcentre.org.uk

It's our health! – independent review of health-related campaigns and social marketing in England: www.nsmcentre.org.uk/what-is-social-marketing/independent-review-its-our-health.html