



The life trajectory of social marketing

Some implications

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***Abstract.** The history of social marketing has similarities to the growth and maturity of human beings from its birth in the 1960s through its present status as a respected discipline. After an extended childhood grappling with varying definitions and applications, the 1990s saw a breakthrough in concept and practice by focusing on behavior change. Despite the growth in the number of textbooks, practical guides and infrastructure, the field has many unanswered challenges that ought to be addressed if it is to continue its maturation and achieve wider respect. **Key Words** ● behavior change ● best practices ● diffusion ● health ● knowledge transfer ● social change ● social marketing*

Social marketing in the 21st century has achieved wide awareness and adoption as an innovative approach to social change. Its status has evolved over four decades, which have seen confusion about the field's scope, significant shifts in focus and eventual evidence of maturity along several dimensions. However, a recent evaluation of the field's current status suggests some important barriers to future growth (Andreasen, 2002). Understanding of how we got to this situation offers perspective on those challenges and possible solutions.

While metaphors are often tortured frameworks for understanding historical phenomena, it is useful to think of the growth of social marketing over the past 40-plus years as paralleling the formative years of a person. The field has had its infancy and adolescence and one could argue that it is just now entering early maturity. As with humans, each of these stages has reflected important conflicts and the early maturity phase can still be seen as time where identity needs to be affirmed and a future career trajectory established.



The birth of a field

Many marketing historians trace the first suggestions that marketing might be adapted to challenges other than promoting goods and services to the profit of commercial corporations to an article by a sociologist, G. D. Wiebe in the 1950s (Wiebe 1951–52). Wiebe was concerned that marketing was not being applied to such problems as ‘selling brotherhood like soap’. However, this notion did not really obtain traction until the mid-to-late 1960s and early 1970s when the Vietnam War and social unrest caused many sectors of the US society to rethink their social obligations. Harvey posits that the social marketing field project had its origins with the promotion of family planning in India in 1964 (Harvey, 1999). This early effort focused on marketing of Nirodh condoms with the assistance of major private sector marketers like Unilever and Brooke Bond Tea Company, who did much to secure wide distribution of the new low-cost private sector product. This venture was soon followed by a number of significant social marketing efforts over the next decade primarily involving the marketing of family products and services in a wide range of countries and with considerable success (Manoff, 1985).

It is not surprising that these first baby steps in social marketing involved relatively simple products where the principal marketing tools were conventional promotion and distribution. These were challenges that would not seem at all strange and difficult to marketers. The fact these product introductions met a huge pent-up market demand (for awhile at least) provided powerful reinforcement that they had discovered a potentially very powerful social force.

This nascent movement did not escape the academic community (Elliott, 1991). In 1969, Philip Kotler and Sidney Levy first argued that marketers were too narrow in their view of the field. Rather, they asserted:

... marketing is a pervasive societal activity that goes considerably beyond the selling of toothpaste, soap, and steel. . . . [An] increasing amount of society’s work is being performed by organizations other than business firms . . . [and] every organization performs marketing-like activities whether or not they are recognized as such. (Kotler and Levy, 1969: 10)

This oft-cited article did not sit well with the scholarly establishment at the time. Luck and Bartels argued that the ‘broadening’ of marketing was taking the field well beyond where it properly belonged because marketing obviously only involved *markets* and this meant buying and selling (Luck, 1969). Broadening the field, they asserted, would divert attention from critical issues and encroach on other disciplines (Luck, 1969). Kotler and Levy responded that marketing was about transactions, not just *market* transactions (Kotler and Levy, 1969). Bartels, a marketing historian, stated that this debate suggested that the field was facing an ‘identity crisis’ and needed to decide whether marketing was defined by its technology (the Kotler-Levy position) or by the class (or classes) of behaviors towards which it was directed (the Luck position) (Bartels, 1974; cf. Kotler, 1972).

Because Kotler saw marketing as a technology, he and his colleague Gerald Zaltman explored what it would mean to apply the technology to social issues



where, they suggested, it could be called 'social marketing' (Kotler and Zaltman, 1971). Thus, the new field was given a name!

This period of initial academic thinking and attempts at definition caused two kinds of confusion that would plague the field of social marketing for the next two decades. First, it tended to confuse practitioners about three potentially distinct topics – *nonprofit marketing*, *social marketing* and *socially responsible marketing*. Second, the definition that Kotler and Zaltman proposed for social marketing made it common to confuse it with just plain 'social advertising', public relations or, most simply, mere education.

Childhood

Growth of social marketing, except within the world of family planning, was relatively slow until the mid-1980s. Marketing academics in the United States shifted their social focus elsewhere, becoming caught up in what has been called 'the dark side' of the marketplace – problems of consumer exploitation, discrimination against disadvantaged consumers (Andreasen, 1975), inadequate market regulation, environmental degradation and the like (Wish and Gamble, 1971). During this period, collections of essays on social marketing appeared (Fine, 1981, 1990), but they tended to conflate the many possible meanings of the term. The first textbook by Kotler and Roberto did not appear until 1989.

Practitioners were held back in diversifying their applications, in my view, by the early association of social marketing with the marketing of (relatively simple, straightforward) products. Indeed, the most common use of the term in the 1970s and 1980s was in referring to 'contraceptive social marketing' programs,¹ where the transaction not only involved products but also happened to involve money payments, albeit very small, by customers – a form of transaction that would assuage early critics like Luck and Bartels. It might be suggested that this was not unlike a child venturing out into the wider world doing what he or she knows best! Unfortunately, this early focus precluded other organizations and agencies from seeing social marketing as applicable where there was not a sale or no product changed hands.

The limited expansion was, I have argued, also partly attributable to the original definition of social marketing of Kotler and Zaltman (1971). As restated later, Kotler and Roberto (1989: 24) said:

The term 'social marketing' was first introduced in 1971. . . . Since then, the term has come to mean a social change technology involving the design, implementation, and control of programs aimed at increasing the acceptability of a social idea or practice in one or more groups of target adopters.

This definition made it difficult for those in areas like health communication, diffusion or health education to understand how social marketing was in any important way different from what they were already concerned about – and doing (Hastings and Haywood, 1991, 1994; Hill, 2001).² If social marketing had a



goal of ‘increasing the acceptability of a social idea’, then how was this different from the many programs based on communications and education that were the goals of health educators and communicators?

The Kotler-Zaltman definition also made it hard to distinguish social marketing from ‘socially responsible marketing’ where the issue was: how could marketers change consumer attitudes so that they would treat the environment or minorities better and how could commercial marketers be induced to desist from evil practices? This confusion is evident in Lazer and Kelley’s definition in their 1973 readings book, *Social Marketing*:

Social marketing is concerned with the application of marketing knowledge, concepts, and techniques to enhance social as well as economic ends. *It is also concerned with the analysis of the social consequences of marketing policies, decisions and activities.* (p. ix; emphasis added)

Adolescence: The behavioral breakthrough

After an extended ‘identity crisis’ it might be said that social marketing finally recognized its true nature in the 1990s when a number of leading scholars and practitioners came to the realization that its essence was not changing ideas but *changing behavior*.³ A frequently cited version of this new definition is found in my 1999 article in the *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*:

Social marketing is the application of commercial marketing technologies to the analysis, planning, execution, and evaluation of programs designed to influence the voluntary behavior of target audiences in order to improve their personal welfare and that of the society of which they are a part.

This definition helped distinguish the field from its disciplinary competitors – i.e. it was not about education or attitude change except to the extent that this would lead to the intended influence on behavior. This positioning of behavior as the ‘bottom line’ of social marketing had other benefits. It made it clear that the ultimate criterion of effectiveness is behavioral influence – although, as Hornik has recently reconfirmed, such influence is often extremely hard to detect and attribute to precise causes (Hornik, 2002). In practical contexts, this new definition allowed various team players to see their role as contributing in various ways to this ultimate goal – and not fighting each other over which way is best.

On the scholarship side, the focus on behavior change directed researchers and thinkers toward more intensive evaluation of various behavior change theories and models and the creation of testable propositions around them. The evolving behavioral science conceptualizations and research then fed back to practitioners as frameworks around which they could craft and integrate program elements.

A third benefit of the new definition was that it made clear where social marketing stopped and when other approaches were more appropriate. Rothschild, for example, carefully distinguishes marketing as a clear alternative to education and the law. In simple terms, he argues that education may be all one needs in simple social situations where information alone will achieve the desired ends



(e.g. putting babies on their backs to prevent SIDS). Alternatively, where consumers are extremely reluctant to act – or reluctant to act if others are allowed to avoid the behavior – then the appropriate intervention is the law. Social marketing covers everything else (Rothschild, 1999).

Fourth, this new definition made clear the intersection between social marketing and ‘socially responsible marketing’. To the extent that, by the latter term, one means behavior that is socially responsible and one is focused on making this behavior happen, then this is the proper domain for social marketing. However, if one is merely concerned with documenting abuses or arguing policy, then this is not where social marketing is relevant or useful.

The final benefit is that it makes clear how social and commercial marketing are similar and why there ought to be few barriers to adopting virtually all concepts and tools from the commercial sector to social marketing. A moment’s reflection will make clear that the ultimate measure of success for commercial marketers is the influence of behavior – sales, repeat patronage, favorable word of mouth, cooperation in joint marketing ventures, etc. As Sergio Zyman argues: if what you do does not ‘move the needle’, you are not being a good marketer (Zyman, 1999). Thus, approaches to generating sales ought – in principle – to generate desirable social behaviors.

Early maturity

There is considerable evidence that social marketing has now moved beyond adolescence into some kind of early maturity. For example, on the conceptual and theoretical side:

- Several general textbooks have been published (Andreasen, 1995; Kotler et al., 2002) along with several specialized social behavior marketing books (Siegel and Doner, 1998) and workbooks (Weinreich 1999).
- Chapters devoted to social marketing are now included in nonprofit marketing textbooks (Andreasen and Kotler, 2003; Sargeant, 1999) and health communications readers (Glanz et al., 1999);
- A journal entirely devoted to the area, the *Social Marketing Quarterly*, was founded in 1994.
- There are now three annual social marketing conferences, one of which is now in its eleventh year. One of these conferences produced a frequently cited collection of papers (Goldberg et al., 1997).
- Social marketing centers have been established in Scotland, Canada, and Poland as well as at several sites in the US and social marketing training programs have been held in several parts of the world.
- The Social Marketing Institute was established in 1999
- Several summaries of best practices are now finding their way into the scholarly and practitioner literature (Alcaly and Bell, 2000).
- There is now a book devoted to social marketing ethics (Andreasen, 2001a).



On the practice side:

- Social marketing approaches have been adopted by a wide range of US federal agencies, most prominently the U.S. Department of Agriculture (5-a-Day program) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as well as state and local governments and a significant number of nonprofit organizations (see examples at www.social-marketing.org).
- UNAIDS has recently invoked social marketing as a primary tool in their fight against the AIDS disease and the World Bank is regularly conducting distance learning sessions using social marketing concepts.
- Requests for proposals for social change programs at federal and state levels and by nonprofit organizations now frequently require social marketing components and evidence of social marketing capabilities.
- A number of major consulting organizations, most prominently Porter Novelli, Academy for Educational Development, and Prospect Associates, have emerged as leading social marketing consultants abetted by a growing number of smaller consultancies, such as Equals3, and the Sutton Group.
- Major advertising and public relations organizations such as Fleishman-Hillard, Burson Marsteller, and Ogilvy Mather now claim specific social marketing capabilities.
- Senior executives with 'social marketing' in their titles have begun to appear.
- Interest in social marketing has grown significantly beyond North America and the UK, with particularly innovative work going on in Australia and New Zealand (Donovan, 1999; Donovan and Owen, 1994; Stannard and Young, 1998).
- The social marketing listserv maintained by the Social Marketing Institute now has over 950 participants.

As social marketing grows older, what's next?

If social marketing is to continue to flourish and have the impact that many of us hope it will have, a number of steps will need to be taken.

As I have argued elsewhere, we need to systematically *market social marketing* (Andreasen, 2002). As a maturing discipline, we need to take a self-confident approach to convincing a wider range of organizations and a wider range of applications areas as to the value of our approach. In part, this requires 'diffusion upwards'. Many of those appreciative of social marketing are managers and workers in a range of programs whereas their superiors may have little awareness and appreciation of their unique talents and approaches. Yet, the superiors possess the budgets and leadership positions to dramatically expand social marketing applications. To achieve this, we can use many of the approaches we urge on others because, after all, this is one more behavior change challenge.

We need to expand our share of the social change 'market'. There are two challenges here:



- Make as dramatically clear as we can when and where one should use social marketing to achieve social change as contrasted to other approaches including education, communications, the law, community mobilization, and so on. We need to make our distinctiveness increasingly sharp and consistent.
- Understand better – and then advocate – how we can *complement* other approaches to social change. For example, community mobilization requires that people take action, that resources be accumulated, that community leaders voice approval, and so forth. All of these involve behavior and it is here where we ought to be ‘players’ in bringing about the changes that will make this broader approach work. Similarly, laws don’t come about without someone writing a piece of legislation, others voting for it, and authorities enforcing it. And programs emphasizing education and communications often require partnerships and the donation of free services, media space and time, and research assistance. All of this requires action and this is our domain!

The assumption that commercial sector concepts and tools ought to migrate seamlessly to social marketing is, in point of fact, just an assumption. Scholars and researchers need to explore more carefully and extensively the conditions under which transfer is both possible and potentially easy (Andreasen, 2001b). Many writers such as Bloom and Novelli (1981) have argued that social marketing is different in important ways.⁴ What are the barriers to concept transfer? Do we even know what concepts work once they ‘arrive’? What adaptations need to be made to facilitate adoption?

Given our unique challenges, we should be bolder about suggesting ways in which social marketing lessons can be transferred back to the private sector. We should not think of ourselves as the little brother or sister but, rather, a special offspring that has much to teach the ‘parent’. I would argue that we have a grander vision of what marketing is all about – we see it as behavior change and it may or may not involve products and services. Conventional wisdom in the private sector is that it is all about generating commercial transactions – preferably at the cost to competitors. Would it not expand the potential influence of marketers if senior management saw them as important talents to be brought in whenever the corporation wants to influence the behavior of others – e.g. their own personnel, stock analysts, franchisees, channel partners and so forth?

Finally, researchers and practitioners alike need to double their efforts to build and test models to understand and guide what we do. There are a great many challenges. Let me suggest a few that I have considered – and sometimes proposed (see Andreasen, 1994):

- We glibly treat behavior as a monolithic concept. Yet, it is clear that not all behaviors are alike. *Starting* something is different from *stopping* something. Starting something alone (stopping abuse, getting a flu shot) is one thing; starting something involving others (dieting, family planning, AIDS protection) is different. What are these differences and parallels and how do these behavior traits affect the models we use to understand and then influence them?
- How ought we segment markets to achieve greater effectiveness and efficiency –



and does this differ in systematic ways depending on the behavior in question? When and how do ethical issues impact segmentation decisions – i.e. should one spend limited resources on ready-to-change targets if such segments are not the poorest, most desperate members of a society?

- A critical step in behavior change is the step between contemplation and action. Yet we have limited knowledge about the potential triggers to such action. We have studied readiness-to-change but know little about how to convert that to initial action. Is this a cognitive issue, a matter of accumulated time or are there social dynamics that are sometimes the propellant?
- There is what might be called a ‘starting change’ bias in the field. We are most attentive to the challenges of getting someone to begin to do something. This is often how we keep score. But in a great many important social domains, it is repeat behavior – or the maintenance of behavior that is ultimately critical to success. Getting someone to stop smoking or stop abusing another person or animal or start to exercise and diet is often a great accomplishment. Yet, we know that a huge proportion of ‘starters’ are drop-outs. How do we maintain change? What models are appropriate? Is it just a matter of rewards? Is it necessary to induce further change in the maintenance stage if the target is not to be bored and defect?

Early adulthood is a time where a person experiences a marvelous confluence of maturity and self-confidence, a limited history of mistakes and a wide world stretching out ahead to conquer. But we in social marketing must be conscientious and diligent if the field is to reach its full potential. There are important roles for all of us – academics and practitioners alike – to keep the young field learning and testing its environment – and growing into middle age!

Notes

- 1 At this writing, the website for DKT International, which describes itself as a social marketing organization, has a table of ‘Social Marketing Statistics’. However, the table lists only ‘Contraceptive Social Marketing Programs’.
- 2 Ironically, it was the public health community that would soon become very important to the growth of the field in the 1990s.
- 3 Strictly speaking, it is about *influencing* behavior – not necessarily changing it. That is, many social marketing programs are preventive in character in that they seek to have target audiences *not* do something (smoke, do drugs, abuse others). However, the term ‘behavior change’ has come to be accepted shorthand for the truer broader definition.
- 4 I have noted in speeches *that one of the ways in which we are often different is that, if we are successful, nothing happens!* This is true, for example, of immunization or family planning programs. Consider how daunting this challenge would be for a commercial marketer eager to ‘move the needle’ – selling a product with no obvious benefits!



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