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SOCIAL MARKETING AND ETHICAL CHALLENGES

Dr. Jagadisha Bala

Associate Professor in Commerce

Govt First Grade College for Women, Balmatta, Mangaluru

Abstract: Social Marketing is not an obsolete idea today; rather it can be used innovatively by addressing many social problems in collaboration with various social stakeholders. In the future, various national or local emergencies - such as water shortages, oil - energy crisis, waste disposal and epidemics - may increase the need for public agencies to know how to activate people swiftly through social marketing intervention.

Key Words: Social Marketing, Ethics, Commercial Marketing, Influence Behavior

Introduction:

Social Marketing, as a discipline, has made enormous strides since its distinction in the early 1970s. It is an approach which draws on social sciences, social policy and traditional commercial marketing techniques to influence behavior and has rapidly evolved to a well-established discipline during the past four decades. Various reform groups and government agencies have applied social marketing to such causes as family planning, energy conservation, improved nutrition, antismoking, prevention of alcohol and drug abuse, safer driving, environmental issues and many other causes. The social marketing approach became increasingly important when it became evident that it is not only enough to raise awareness about a certain issue, but also to follow an integrated strategy to change behaviors in the long-term. Thus, social marketing is now recognised as a bona fide sub-set of marketing.

Social Marketing:

Social marketing was originally named – as were other sub-branches of marketing such as business-to-business or industrial marketing – to refer to a specific sub-area of marketing. In practice, what occurred was that modern marketing techniques developed for consumer products began to be applied by other areas of business as they saw the apparent success of these techniques. These sub-disciplines were demarcated because, although the principles and tools of marketing could be applied in the different areas, the ‘marketplaces’ were very different for each. Marketers in these areas required an understanding of these marketplaces in addition to their understanding of marketing *per se*. Hence, we now have texts and courses entitled industrial or business-to-

business marketing, services marketing, financial services marketing, government or public sector marketing, events marketing, sports marketing, and even religious marketing. Social marketing came about as marketers and social change practitioners began to apply marketing techniques to achieve socially desirable goals (Donovan & Henley, 2010).

When we think of social marketing as “influencing public behavior,” it is clear that this is not a new phenomenon in India. Consider efforts to promote *swadeshi*, free India from British rule, liberate untouchables, abolish *sati* practice, or allow women to attend educational institutions (Deshpande & Lee, 2013).

The origins of the term ‘social marketing’ can be traced to Philip Kotler and Gerald Zaltman’s classic 1971 article in the *Journal of Marketing* titled “Social Marketing: An Approach to Planned Social Change” (Andreasen, 1994). However, much before that, in the late 1950s, India launched this practice to promote contraceptives as part of a family planning promotion program, the first of its kind in the world at the national level. In that sense, Nirodh and Mala are some of the first prominent social marketing brands in the world. Until 1990s, the Ministry of Health managed the contraceptive promotion program; however, in recent decades, the task of branding and promoting contraceptives has been handed over to the semi-autonomous and private social marketing sectors (Deshpande & Lee, 2013).

The very first formal definition of social marketing was that offered by Kotler and Zaltman (1971) as “Social marketing is the design, implementation and control of programs calculated to influence the acceptability of social ideas and involving considerations of product planning, pricing, communication, distribution, and marketing research.” Thus, it is the explicit use of marketing skills to help translate present social action efforts into more effectively designed and communicated programs that elicit desired audience response. In other words, marketing techniques are the bridging mechanisms between the simple possession of knowledge and the socially useful implementation of what knowledge allows (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971). The authors argued that the same marketing concepts and techniques used for selling consumer products could be effectively applied to planning and implementing social change. They suggested that the role of marketing encompasses helping solve some of the fundamental problems being faced by a nation’s economic and social environment.

Based on the insight that behavior is the “bottom line” of social marketing, Alan R. Andreasen (1994) proposed a version of a new definition, which is commonly cited and still valid, describing social marketing as “the adaption of commercial marketing technologies to 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”.

Donovan and Henley (2010) modified Andreasen’s definition to include involuntary behaviours, as there are many instances of social marketing where the individual’s voluntary behaviour is constrained, for example, under threat of legal sanction (drink driving) or other regulations (smoke-free venues), or where the individual’s choices are restricted (e.g. government restrictions on trans fatty acids in processed foods).

The following definition has been endorsed by the Boards of International Social Marketing Association, European Social Marketing Association and Australian Association of Social Marketing (iSMA, ESMA and AASM): “Social Marketing seeks to develop and integrate marketing concepts with other approaches to influence behaviours that benefit individuals and communities for the greater social good”.

Although social marketing has been defined in various and diverging ways during the past decades, it can be generally described as a framework that draws from commercial marketing, psychology, sociology, anthropology and communications to design and implement a “marketing mix” (product, price, promotion and place) in order to influence a socially beneficial behavior of a target audience. The acceptance of behaviors that are socially desirable should be promoted, while the undesirable ones should be dismissed.

Differences between Commercial and Social Marketing:

In 1952, G. D. Wiebe raised the question whether marketing principles and practices could be applied to non-commercial areas: ‘Can we sell brotherhood like we sell soap?’ (as cited in Donovan & Henley, 2010). Clearly the answer has been ‘yes’, although there are perhaps obvious differences between ‘selling’ soap and ‘selling’ social causes. Consumers’ buying decisions, sources of influence, amount of effort involved and so on are clearly quite different across these product categories, and hence so too are the marketing approaches. Nevertheless, while specific tools and tactics may differ, the overall principles of commercial marketing are applicable to all areas, including selling socially desirable products (Donovan & Henley, 2010).

Webster (as cited in Brenkert, 2002, p.15) stated that - Social marketing has clear relations to commercial marketing. Still, social marketing is distinct from commercial marketing in that social marketing focuses on resolving social problems, whereas commercial marketing focuses on producing various goods or services for a profit. The “customer” of social marketing is not expected “to pay a price equal to the cost of providing the service,” whereas the customer of commercial marketing is expected to do so.

Ethical Challenges:

Ethics is important in any area, but perhaps even more so in social marketing given the sensitivity of some issues in particular that social marketers are asked to address.

Murphy and Bloom (as cited in Donovan & Henley, 2010, p.195) argued that social marketers should be held to even higher ethical standards than commercial marketers because there is a greater potential for harm if social marketing practices are unethical than when commercial marketing practices are unethical. Andreasen (as cited in Donovan & Henley, 2010, p.195) also analyses that as social marketing is usually funded by governments (i.e., taxpayers), or non-profit organisations (i.e., charitable donations), the way the funding is used is a matter of public trust and should be subject to scrutiny at the highest ethical standards.

Brenkert (2002) identified and comprehensively analysed three ethical challenges specific to social marketing: first, he asked who decides what social problems should be addressed and who decides whether it is a problem; second, he questioned the rationale that social marketers use theories and models of behaviour change more suitable to the consumer behaviour process than to solving social problems that extend beyond an individual’s range; and third, he asked whether social marketers are acting ethically if they fail to recognise the

autonomy of their target markets: their right to full participation in solving a social problem issue, rather than just having a solution marketed to them.

People who view a social marketing campaign as unethical are likely to reject both the campaign itself and the campaign message. The result would be worse than doing nothing. As per Lusch, Laczniaik and Murphy (as cited in Donovan & Henley, 2010, p.196), this can have an adverse effect in two ways. If the social idea is seen by some as unethical, for example, gay rights, then it can reflect on the social marketer even if the marketing techniques used are ethical. Similarly, if the marketing techniques are seen as unethical, such as offering misleading or incomplete information, this can have an adverse effect on the public's response to a social idea which itself is ethical.

Table 1: Summary of Special Ethical Challenges Social Marketing Faces

Heading	General Challenge	Sub issues
The ends of social marketing	The determination of individual and social welfare ends through development of a theory of welfare exchange	Who makes the determination of these ends?
Marketing versus moral rationale	The substitution of marketing rationale for the ethical rationale to the problems social marketers address	Self-centered cost-benefit analyses versus other regarding reasons, appeals to effectiveness versus moral justification
Individual versus whole relation	The ethical implications of segmenting solutions to social problems	Continuation of status quo that occasions the social problem, neglect of those who are particularly in need
An indirect, asymmetric relationship	The indirect, asymmetric relationship of social marketers with those they target	Non-market power over targets, non-market determination of just price
Privatization	The effects of social marketing on self-determination of individuals and democracy within a society	Individual rights of voice and participation not recognised

Source: Brenkert, 2002.

Ethics - As with social marketing itself, there is no common agreement regarding a definition of ethics as it applies in the business / marketing context (Eagle, 2009).

The word 'ethics' is used in the broad sense to denote a moral philosophy or to refer to a system of moral or value judgements. It is the study of what people ought to do or *feel* they ought to do. When there is a legal issue our way is clearer. It's against the law to manufacture and sell illegal drugs and most would agree it's unethical to do so. But while it's legal to manufacture and sell cigarettes, not everyone would agree that it's ethical to do so. Through ethics, we attempt to come up with a system of rules based on commonly agreed values. Unfortunately, the complexity of human experience means that we can never come to an absolute agreement about what is ethical. Instead, we hold some general rules and then apply reason to each new

situation. The debates over abortion and euthanasia are good examples of divergent thinking on ethical issues (Donovan & Henley, 2010).

Code of Ethics:

Social marketers need to ensure the highest ethical standards in promoting social causes. There is great potential for doing harm if social marketing practices are unethical. Ethical practice can be achieved by asking a few simple questions before proceeding with a campaign, and keeping them in mind throughout the life of the campaign. The questions are designed to alert marketers to issues relating to basic, shared ideas about what is held to be right, fair and just in our society. These questions refer to the principles of non-maleficence (doing no harm), beneficence (doing good), justice (fair and equal treatment) and utility (providing the greatest good to the greatest number) (Donovan & Henley, 2010).

In 2001, Smith (as cited in Jones & Hall, 2006; Donovan & Henley, 2010, p.201) lists a number of moral principles that are particularly relevant in the context of social marketing:

- **Truth:** are we being entirely truthful? Is there some exaggeration or inaccuracy or omission?
- **Privacy:** are we invading the privacy of any group of people? Are we revealing information about people that is not appropriate?
- **Modelling:** are we inadvertently modelling anti-social or undesirable behaviours?
- **Morally offensive:** are we demonstrating or encouraging behaviour that society finds offensive?
- **Fair and balanced:** are we being fair to all groups?
- **Stereotyping:** are we inadvertently perpetuating inappropriate or harmful stereotypes?
- **Protecting children:** if our programmes are going to be seen by children, are they appropriate for their age?

Smith, however, cautions that such questions cannot be used as a simple ethical score card, assigning equal weight to each and achieving a minimum score before proceeding with a campaign. Ethical dilemmas occur when principles collide, such as the need to be truthful and the requirement to respect privacy. It is often difficult to decide whether one principle should take precedence over another.

Social marketing campaigns that fail to recognise the autonomy of a target market are justly criticised for being paternalistic. Fundamental to all ethical questions is the assumption that all people deserve to be treated as autonomous beings (Donovan & Henley, 2010).

However, codes can never be exhaustive and there will need to be mechanism by which those facing ethical dilemmas can gain advice and support. Coupled with this should be awareness raising and training to highlight the types of issues that should be considered at all stages of social marketing intervention development (Eagle, 2009).

Conclusions:

Effective social marketing requires coordinated approaches both upstream (environmental, policy changes) and downstream (individual behaviour changes). In practice, social marketing campaigns need to be sustained over time to create change at a cultural or societal level. There are many examples of how social marketing campaigns have successfully changed normative attitudes in recent years. Examples include attitude changes towards drinking and driving, as well as smoking. Awareness has also been raised in public health fields such as HIV/AIDS, cot deaths and some cancers (Henley *et al.*, 2011).

A marketing planning approach does not guarantee that the social objectives will be achieved, or that the costs will be acceptable. Yet social marketing appears to represent a bridging mechanism which links the behavioral scientist's knowledge of human behavior with the socially useful implementation of what that knowledge allows. It offers a useful framework for effective social planning at a time when social issues have become more relevant and critical (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971). Advances in conceptualizing social marketing problems and in evaluating the impacts of social marketing programs will further enhance their effectiveness (Fox & Kotler, 1980).

Social Marketing is not an obsolete idea today; rather it can be used innovatively by addressing many social problems in collaboration with various social stakeholders. In the future, various national or local emergencies - such as water shortages, oil - energy crisis, waste disposal and epidemics - may increase the need for public agencies to know how to activate people swiftly through social marketing intervention.

Social marketers need to apply this tool beyond health promotion, in areas of environment protection, financial wellbeing, and community harmony in India. It need not be restricted to the government and non-profit sector. With new CSR regulations, Indian corporate sector should consider social marketing to effectively invest their budget. Formative research needs to be conducted to enhance the efficacy of social marketing in India.

The task of social marketing is to move people from intention to action. As a vibrant nation, let us not lose the traditional knowledge of those whom we wish to change such as rural, poor, tribal, women, illiterate, and seniors. This will definitely improve our social marketing campaign effectiveness.

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