

A Declaration of Social Marketing's Unique Principles and Distinctions

Nancy R. Lee, Michael L. Rothschild, William Smith – March, 2011

The purpose of this “Declaration” is to address two very narrow questions: What does social marketing add to the already considerable understanding about social change contributed to by many other disciplines? What is social marketing’s unique value proposition?

This document emerged from a concern that much of social marketing practice today is dominated by communication and, to a lesser extent, regulatory approaches to social change. These efforts, while valuable, are not unique to social marketing. In contrast, the study and practice of integrating product, place, price and promotion to create an exchange of value between the consumer and the marketer is unique to Social Marketing.

This document is organized as follows:

Definition of Social Marketing,

Shared Principles that are core to Social Marketing but widely utilized by other disciplines as well,

Unique Principles that are not shared by other disciplines and are our unique contribution,

Distinctiveness of Social Marketing versus other major approaches to influencing behavior,

Unique Value Proposition that defines a uniqueness in the marketplace of behavior change.

Definition

Social Marketing is a process that uses marketing principles and techniques to influence target audience behaviors that will benefit society, as well as the individual. This strategically oriented discipline relies on creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have positive value for individuals, clients, partners, and society at large.

Principles Shared with Other Disciplines

Many of social marketing’s key characteristics have been widely adopted by other fields, and in turn social marketing has integrated practices developed elsewhere. Among the important characteristics it shares with others are:

- **AUDIENCE ORIENTATION:** Social marketers view their audience as decision-makers with choices, rather than students to be educated, or incorrigibles to be regulated. Social Marketing begins with a bottom-up versus a top-down perspective, and therefore rejects the paternalist notion that “experts know what is best and will tell people how to behave for their own good” in favor of an audience-centered approach which seeks to understand what people want and provides them support in acquiring it.
- **SEGMENTATION:** In order to enhance efficiency and effectiveness, subsets of populations are selected, evaluated, and then prioritized as targets based on useful aggregation variables. The segments selected are those most likely to adopt the intended behavior or most important to the organization’s goals, and to provide value in yielding societal benefit. Even among difficult to reach populations, strategies are developed that appeal to those within the chosen population that are the “most ready for action.”
- **BEHAVIOR FOCUS:** Behavior is defined as an individual’s observable action or lack of action. Social marketing is interested in behavior that results in societal benefit. Many marketing strategies also have intermediate responses, but Social Marketing success is ultimately measured on whether the desired behavior was adopted. It is not sufficient to merely change awareness, knowledge, attitudes, or behavioral intentions.
- **EVALUATION:** Efforts are evaluated, focusing on ongoing measurement of outcomes (levels of target audience behavior change), and the intended impact this has had on societal benefits. Social Marketing is a continuous process in which evaluation and monitoring provide data on the audience’s preferences and the environmental changes necessary to maintain and expand the impact of programs.
- **CONSIDERATION OF UPSTREAM & MIDSTREAM TARGET AUDIENCES:** Efforts to influence individuals downstream are often enhanced by also targeting those who are upstream (policy makers, corporations), and/or those who are midstream (e.g. friends, family and other influential others).

Unique Principles

While social marketing integrates many characteristics common to other forms of behavior change, four core principles remain truly unique to social marketing.

- **VALUE EXCHANGE:** Social Marketing is unique with respect to other behavior change tools in that the offer that is made is based on an understanding of the target audience's perceived self-interest that will be rewarded for performing the desired behavior. The concept of value exchange states that consumers will choose a behavior in exchange for receiving benefits they consider valuable and/or reducing barriers that they consider to be important. An exchange may result when the marketer has created a program that is perceived by each side to provide value.

- **RECOGNITION OF COMPETITION:** In a free-choice society there are always alternative options available. Competition can be described in terms of choice offerings available in the environment that lead to alternative behaviors. Social Marketing strategies lead to a unique exchange offering that is perceived by the audience to have greater value than that of any other available option.
- **THE 4Ps OF MARKETING:** Product, Place, Price and Promotion represent the fundamental building blocks of Social Marketing interventions. These tools are used to reduce the barriers that make it difficult for people to behave as desired, and to increase the benefits that induce people to be more likely to behave. The tools are used in concert to develop a favorably perceived relationship that is more appealing than all alternate choices. Social marketers assess and then balance the need for, and use of, these four elements to influence optimal change.
- **SUSTAINABILITY:** Sustainability results from continuous program monitoring and subsequent adjustment to changes occurring in the audience and environmental condition. This is necessary to achieve long run behavior.

Distinctions

It is not enough to define Social Marketing and show its shared and unique principles. It also is important to be clear about how it differs from other important approaches to behavior change. Being different does not make any approach superior to any other, but these distinctions signal opportunities for Social Marketing to make a unique contribution.

- **COMMERCIAL MARKETING:** Social marketing is built upon many of the traditional processes and principles of commercial marketing, especially Customer Orientation, Exchange Theory, Competition, Segmentation, the 4Ps, Relationships, and a Service Orientation. Social Marketing differs in that the primary responsibility of commercial marketers is to increase the company's wealth by increasing individuals' well being, whereas the primary responsibility of social marketers is to increase individual and societal well-being.
- **COMMUNICATIONS:** Communications is a process involved with every human activity and is widely used by many approaches to behavior change. In Social Marketing, communications refers to the activity that describes the benefits of the offering, its price and accessibility to the target audience. Communicating the integrated value of the marketing mix is unique to social marketing, and is not offered by any other communication discipline. Communications alone generally is not sufficient to influence behaviors.
- **REGULATION:** Regulation also seeks to influence behaviors for the benefit of society, but often does so by increasing the cost of undesired competing behaviors (e.g.: penalties for breaking laws), rather than increasing the benefits of desired behaviors. Those regulations that offer a benefit for an appropriate behavior (e.g.: various tax incentives) more closely fit within the rubric of social marketing. Social marketers also have a role to play in influencing policy makers to adopt regulations (upstream changes) that complement and accelerate behavior changes among large-scale audiences, and to increase compliance with existing regulations.
- **SOCIAL MEDIA:** Social media leverage the social networks of target audiences, and are more personal and interactive forms of message delivery than are the traditional mass media. From a conceptual perspective, though, these electronic systems are similar to print, broadcast, and outdoor, in that each are ways of delivering messages and are, therefore, a subset of Communications.
- **NONPROFIT MARKETING:** The marketing function for nonprofit organizations often focuses on fund-raising, advocacy and program development, as well as, supporting utilization of the organization's products and services.

Unique Value Proposition

Social Marketing's unique position in the marketplace of behavior change ideas is to integrate the shared and unique characteristics described above into a program of behavior change. Social marketing is a process rooted in the belief that more than words and/or regulations are needed in order to succeed at influencing people's behavior. Social marketers understand and build upon the consumer's perception of:

- Self-interest
- Barriers to behavior, and
- Competitive forces that create attractive choices.

These lead to interventions that

- Reduce barriers, and
- Increase benefits that matter to the audience and, in the end, move people to action.

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