

## Some Notes on Social Marketing

Just as law, media, and guns are neutral devices that serve the ends of human motives, marketing is a tool that can foster community benefits in the hands of knowledgeable, ethical people. Marketing's folk history of unethical manipulation makes the ethical activist wary, but the success stories of marketing are worth gleaning for seeds of positive potential. Social Marketing takes as its first principle an ethic: That the desired end is benefit to the community and individual "buying" it. As long as that end is kept in sight, it is a powerful and benign device.

**Social Marketing** provides four key methods to the agent of change.

1. It **targets barriers** to specific behaviors. Through research, the advocate learns why some people, for example, take an interest in Xeriscape and others don't. It identifies the incentives that prompt action. More important, it identifies -- through interviews, focus groups, and historical research -- the *barriers* that non-doers find impassable. All specialists and experts have their anecdotal theories about incentives and barriers, and most of them have theories about the nature of the barriers and incentives that will work. All too often, those theories are slanted toward the values of the experts. "People don't care about the environment [as I do]." "People [unlike me] only care about money." Research tests the anecdotal evidence and either validates it or replaces it with scientific observation. This validated knowledge is essential to the design of effective programs.

"If a program is not designed from the outset to overcome the barriers that inhibit individuals from engaging in a sustainable behavior, it has little chance of success. "

-- Douglas McKenzie-Mohr

"Workshop Overview," <http://www.cbsm.com>.

2. It **provides a set of tools** that have proven effective in promoting behavior change. The literature on Social Marketing documents the success of these tools. Three broad categories are gaining individual commitment to engage in an activity, using prompts to remind people of those commitments, and developing community norms to the adopted behavior.  
The tools of social marketing stress "customer" engagement over "seller" persuasion. Effective communication means telling people the truth, incentive are chosen with an eye to their feasibility, their "ground-level scope, and their potential to foster larger commitments.  
Finally, the customer perspective emphasizes how important convenience is to encouraging behavior change. An easy behavior we want to do is more likely to get done than a hard one we want to do.
3. Social marketing stresses the need to **test and review** programs targeting behavior change. In this respect it is, unfortunately, hard work. But the methodology of designing, piloting, and reviewing is not so hard if the program begins with small experimental domains. For example, a Xeriscape pilot might select twenty volunteers from the pool of seminar attendees, learn some things about them, and then test a method of behavior change on them. The success and the fine-tuning from that experience might lead to an

approach to all the seminar attendees, and the success of that, fine-tuned again, might be the nucleus for a community-wide effort. An entirely different pilot might follow a sample of the 200-300 attendees at clinics, learning how they acted on the knowledge they committed time and significant money to attaining.

Such research must be done with adequate technical safeguards, such as control groups and careful attention to communication content and implication.

4. Social marketing, like sophisticated and disciplined commercial marketing, is vitally self-conscious. Program **success must be evaluated**, not on a pass/fail basis but in detail, to determine how successful it was, what made it successful, and what interfered with even greater success.

You do not need a degree in marketing to develop a social marketing approach to behavior change. Elements of the process require the supplemental help of trained professionals, but a great deal of what must be done is common sense once the basic principles are grasped. And those basic principles are fundamentals of communication and persuasion that date back to the beginnings of educated discourse:

- *Know your audience.* Know what they want, what they value, what worries them. Recognize that their differences from you are not failings. Listen to them as they listen to you. Let them tell you what they think.
- *Know your objectives.* Find the connections between your desires, values and concerns and those of the people you wish to influence. Mince what you want into digestible pieces, without losing sight of the rest of the elephant.
- *Define your goals in measurable ways.* Don't set out to make people "like weasels" or "support conservation." How would you measure success? What measurable goal would have as a likely side effect, the immeasurable larger goal? Measurable goals have the additional value of giving your supporters meaningful feedback. We spent a million dollars on washing machines. So how much water did we save?

The social marketing approach to achieving community goals is an excellent one. But in order to use it, we need to know how, and why, it works. That learning process will be part of the task ahead.

— Mick McAllister