

## Confronting The Challenges In Social Marketing Theory And Practice

Josephine Previte, University of Queensland, UQ Business School  
Susan Dann, National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre, Brisbane

### Abstract

Andreasen (2002) has argued that the continued confusion and lack of consensus surrounding the definition and the domain of social marketing has the potential to ultimately lead to the demise of the sub-discipline both theoretically and practically. This paper explores the renewed arguments from the academy about the definition and domain of social marketing. This is important because it has implications for the types of strategic tools used by social marketing practitioners when they undertake to influence individual and community behaviours. In particular, the authors examine the way in which definitional issues surrounding 'social marketing' create challenges and barriers to social marketing practice. The paper concludes by highlighting that the recent redefinition of commercial marketing provides clarification on some of the issues *and* raises further challenges for social marketing theory and practice.

**Keywords:** social marketing definition, practitioners' perspectives

### Background

Recent special issues about social marketing in journals such as *Marketing Theory* (2003) the *Australasian Marketing Journal* (2003) and the *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* (2002) have highlighted a growing divergence in social marketing thinking that can be summarised broadly as a divide between the 'upstream' and 'downstream' purviews. Evidenced in these special issues is an implied argument for the further broadening of social marketing beyond Andreasen's (2002) accepted framework, which argues that social marketing's primary niche is individual change. Donovan and Henley (2003) and Hastings and colleagues (2000) suggest that marketing strategies targeted at structural change also constitute social marketing. They argue that an individual's ability to change is materially constrained by the social structures of laws, institutions, available technologies and public policies. Andreasen (2002) labels these social change strategies as not social marketing but as the concerns of structuralists who use media advocacy, law making and regulation to achieve social ends. Andreasen (2002) argues that that field's growth and increased prominence is based on its perception as an individual-level intervention. This debate is more than academic. Without an agreed upon definition of the parameters of social marketing, application of social marketing in practice is limited as practitioners seek to implement innovative social marketing approaches to behavioural change.

### What is social marketing?

Recently Andreasen (2003, p. 300) noted that, after an extended 'identity crisis', social marketing has recognised its true nature, which is not changing ideas but rather *influencing* behaviour. Elsewhere however Andreasen (2002, p. 3) has argued that there remain some 'problems of perception' about social marketing, resulting in 'an absence of clear understanding of what the field is and what its role should be in relation to other approaches in social change'. Dann and Dann (1998) state that Andreasen's (1995, p. 7) definition of social marketing is most widely accepted because it focuses on the key element of voluntary behaviour change, and embraces marketing's philosophy of consumer orientation. Andreasen's (1995) definition converts this philosophy into practice by including market

research, segmentation, the adaptation of the marketing mix, and the use of implementation and control strategies (Dann & Dann, 1998). Andreasen's (1994, p. 110) definition of social marketing encapsulates these points, stating *social marketing [is] the application of commercial marketing technologies to the analysis, planning, execution and evaluation of programs designed to influence the voluntary behaviour of target audiences in order to improve their personal welfare and that of society of which they are a part*. At the time, this definition was important because it introduced the critical attribute that distinguishes social marketing from commercial marketing; that is, the primary beneficiaries of social marketing programs are members of the target audience *and* wider society. An alternative perspective to Andreasen's (1994) definition is offered by Donovan and Henley (2003) who argue that social marketing has been constrained by the definitional adherence to traditional marketing techniques. These accepted commercial strategies tend to exclude areas such as media advocacy, lobbying, legislative and policy action, and more broadly a focus on structural change. Whilst social marketing was established based on successes in changing individual behaviour, in more recent times selected social marketers have questioned Andreasen's (1995) emphasis on individual, voluntary behaviour change. As Hastings et al. argue (2000, p. 46), 'people's behaviour is not just determined by their own choices, but also by their social context'. Maibach and Cotton (1995) agree with this thinking, and argue that behaviour is socially as well as individually determined. Other social marketers have also pointed out that the domain of commercial marketing has continued to grow and has not been restricted to the traditional marketing toolkit to achieve sales and profit goals (Peattie & Peattie, 2003). However, little of this 'new' commercial marketing thinking has transferred to social marketing.

What is evident within these scholars' qualifications about 'what is social marketing' is a shifting perspective on the strategic focus and whether the discipline should seek to narrow or broaden its focus by drawing on additional social change strategies. Andreasen (2003) advocate separation between 'competing' communication and behaviour models — such as education, communication, lobbying, the law and community mobilisation. In contrast, other scholars such as Hastings et al. (2000), Hastings & Saren (2003a), Donovan and Henley (2003) and Smith (2000) argue that social marketing is not a singular model, but an integrating system for many models and theories. Hastings and Saren (2003b, p. 315) take this further, suggesting that while Andreasen's (1995) definition emphasises the core of social marketing, the behaviour change agenda, further development of social marketing is dependent upon the discipline embracing a critical analysis of marketing, so as to bridge marketing's division between the social and the commercial. To accomplish this task, Hastings and Saren (2003b) recommend drawing away from Andreasen's (1995) accepted definition and advocate instead adopting societal marketers' Lazer and Kelly's (1973, p. 4) earlier definition of the discipline, which states: *Social marketing is concerned with the uses of marketing knowledge, concepts and techniques to enhance social ends as well as with the social consequences of marketing policies, decisions, and actions. The purview of social marketing is, therefore, broader than that of managerial marketing. It refers to the study of markets and marketing activities within a total social system*. These definitional debates have implications on how social marketing is conducted in practice. Therefore interviews were conducted with social change practitioners to examine how theory translates to social marketing practice.

## **Methodology**

Informant interviews were conducted with twenty social change practitioners and analysed using qualitative data analysis software — NVivo 2.0 (QSR, 1999-2002). Participants were

interviewed for one to two-hours. The aim of the qualitative interviewing was not to obtain a sample representative of a particular population, setting or group. Rather, the aim was — as Mason (1996, p. 96) explains in terms of interpretive research — to select those who could provide access to ‘something that the researcher was interested in’ (that is, their experiences of combining organisational and social practices with a social marketing technology) instead of actually ‘being what the research was interested in’ (that is, the social change agents themselves or type of organisation). Consequently, whilst social change agents have been sampled, it was their experience and their interactions with customers, and social change programs that were of interest.

### **The problematic nature of defining social marketing: The view of practitioners**

Recently, when Alan Andreasen (2002, p. 5) addressed the barriers to social marketing’s growth, he noted that ‘social marketing should be considered a brand in the marketplace of social change approaches’. In the context of this current study it was interesting to note that whilst awareness of social marketing was high amongst the social change organisations sampled ( $n=20$ ), their application of it as a social change strategy was modest. Of the twenty interviewed participants, seventeen were aware of social marketing as a social change tool. However, of these participants, only five currently applied social marketing as the organising framework that guided their social change programs and campaigns. This is indicative of the fact that, as interviewees explained, there are major barriers that confront practitioners as they seek to apply social marketing strategy. The four main impediments to social marketing practice are: poor ‘brand positioning’ of social marketing in the field (also highlighted by Andreasen, 2002); a negative view of marketing and consequently social marketing; a short-term, rather than long-term commitment to social marketing; and a view by government decision-makers that social marketing is peripheral to the ‘core business’ of public policy.

### **Social marketing has poor ‘brand positioning’**

In marketing, brands communicate the core benefits and value of a product. However, as Andreasen (2002, p. 4) has argued “the field’s image is fuzzy because there are too many definitions of social marketing being used, and these definitions conflict in major and minor ways”. The majority of participants interviewed acknowledged the value and contribution of social marketing in behaviour change. In the extract below, Stewart draws on twenty years of experience as a social marketer to reflect on this point: ... *I’d say [social marketing has] become much more accepted in recent years obviously; certainly much more through the ’90s particularly. I think a lot of people have been applying what would now be referred to as a social marketing framework without calling it such. The use of a human orientation, integrated strategy — use of formative research in understanding the mindset of a target in terms of communications challenges, barriers, opportunities and things like that ...* (In-depth interview, June 2002). Arguably a lack of definitional clarity and consensus has led to practitioner confusion in labelling their programs as social marketing. Interview participants were united in their assertion that within the social change marketplace there is evidence of confusion surrounding the nature of social marketing. Interestingly, being conversant with mainstream marketing or having success with mainstream marketing strategy did not translate to the strategic application of social marketing due possibly to failure to adapt, rather than simply adopt, marketing tools and practices. For example, a representative from a nonprofit organisation, explained: ... *when we did the ... appeal ... they wanted to do a fundraiser around youth suicide and they wanted to give that money to us; and in terms of social marketing that’s certainly something we would never do again ... we would never run fundraiser around suicide, when you think in retrospect* (In-depth interview, July 2002).

## **Social marketing is considered manipulative**

Related to the poor 'brand positioning' of social marketing with the resultant lack of knowledge and understanding about the process of social marketing, is a second barrier. This is that some people, particularly within the social sector, have a negative attitude towards marketing and advertising which is compounded by the tendency to conflate marketing and advertising. As one interviewee noted, *'a lot of policy people don't like the word "marketing", and "social marketing" has a bad taint to it'*. A different interviewee shared similar experiences and suggested this was a significant factor in explaining why some government agencies do not use social marketing: *[There are] ... those who see social marketing as simply advertising ... I think that's where there's a lot of negativity about it is because people would see that as a very simplistic notion; that by creating a television commercial for instance, that you're going to "change" people* (In-depth interview, June 2002). This misunderstanding of social marketing is related to the continued confusion between health education, health promotion and social marketing. Furthermore, the conflation of marketing and advertising demonstrates that practitioners' have had limited success in demonstrating that social marketing involves more than persuasive communication.

## **Decision-makers demand short-term results**

Additional marketing challenges confront social marketers working in or with government departments. Firstly, interviewees noted that governments typically require short-term results. The consequence of this thinking is the creation of barriers to developing a long-term program view, required to effect social change involving complex social problems. The majority of social marketing in Australia is either financed or undertaken by government organisations. The fact that Australian governments may change in cycles of three years, with ministerial tenure often being less than a full term, was cited as problematic by interviewees working with government. Secondly, and more critically, budget allocation constraints result because of three-year cycles. Long-term projects and documented evaluations of sustained behaviour change, critical benchmarks in social marketing practice, are difficult to achieve in this volatile environment. As one social marketer interviewed explained: *You actually have to take [the target market] on ...an iterative journey and government can't do that, because they're looking for short-term results ... the budget cycle and the constraints of government are such that while social marketing can have impact and does derive behavioural benefits and can, it's not worth doing if you only do it for a two-month period* (In-depth interview, June 2002).

In another interview, a different social marketer further explained that social marketing program successes in other departments such as road safety were achievable, because they had external funding that supported continuity in campaigns. He stated: *... the reason that road safety campaigns have been able to continue over a period of time is they work outside the budget process. They actually have a revenue stream that feeds to them from speed cameras and speeding fines ..., which is not being taken away from services anywhere* (In-depth interview, August 2002). Later in the interview, he also explained that adopting a social marketing framework, with its implied pre and post research elements, created additional resource demands upon government beyond that of simply funding a campaign. He explained: *I think the real concerns are that ... you can actually create more workload for areas that are already stressed ... in the short-term; ...there's some internal resistance as a result of that* (In-depth interview, August 2002). Therefore social marketing practice remains constrained in a campaign view by top-level decision-makers, because they require short-term results. This further demonstrates a lack of understanding that social marketing's bottom line is behaviour

change, which typically requires a long term commitment from the organisation involved.  
**Social marketing is considered peripheral to the ‘core business’**

Another challenge facing social marketers working with government is that for some political and bureaucratic managers, social marketing is considered to be peripheral to “core business”. Arguably this is related to the perception that social marketing delivers short-term results. In general, interviewees that had worked with government believed that there is a lack of appreciation of social marketing at top management levels (Andreasen, 2002). Additionally, interviewees believed that the marginal place of social marketing in the agenda of senior government management impacts on the ability of social marketers to plan and implement *program* strategies that require long term commitment to effect change. As one of the social marketer’s interviewed explained: ‘*organisations that are fairly resource-sensitive and strapped for resources ... would dismiss social marketing [they see them] as an “add-on” or “adjunct” rather than central to the organisation*’. Such barriers have potentially fuelled the divide between ‘upstream’ and ‘downstream’ social marketing strategy and rejuvenated definitional debates in the academy.

### **Confusion compounded?**

In response to the continued developments in commercial marketing the AMA recently redefined its definition to: *an organisational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating and delivering value to customers for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organisation and its stakeholder (see Marketing News, Sept. 15, 2004, p. 17)*. The AMA’s new definition reflects marketing’s continued consumer philosophy, however the removal of the ‘four Ps’ from the formal definition and the embracing of a relationship perspective is positive for social marketing. This is because the marketing mix has often been an awkward fit for social marketers. For the marketing mix to work effectively in social marketing considerable adaptation, for example in terms of articulating the social “product” and social “price”, has been needed and this has not always been easy to either achieve or communicate.

Hastings (2003) argues that social marketers should think of exchange as not being constrained to transactions, and to think in terms of relationships. Furthermore, he proposes that social marketing focus on relationships not just with customers, but with suppliers, stakeholders, competitors and employees (Hastings 2003, p. 9) — reflecting the inclusion of both the organisation and stakeholders in AMA definition. This new definition from the AMA however should not go unchallenged by social marketing, because societal issues are unrepresented and benefits to wider society are critical in social marketing strategy.

In conclusion, this paper argues that a lack of consensus amongst the academy around social marketing’s definition and domain, has lead of its application in the social change marketplace. Consensus among social marketers on the key defining features of a social marketing functions and processes will enable effective “selling” of social marketing in the social change marketplace. The recent redefinition of commercial marketing is a timely opportunity to clarify what social marketing is by inviting further debate and equal participation of both the academy and practitioners in that discussion.

## References

- Andreasen, A. R. 2003. The life trajectory of social marketing: some implications. *Marketing Theory*, 3(3): 293-303.
- Andreasen, A. R. 2002. Marketing social marketing in the social change marketplace. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 21(1): 3-13.
- Andreasen, A. R. 1995. *Marketing social change: changing behaviour to promote health, social development, and the environment*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Andreasen, A. R. 1994. Social marketing: its definition and domain. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 13(1): 108-114.
- Dann, S., & Dann, S. 1998. Cybercommuning: global village halls. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 25: 379-385.
- Donovan, R., & Henley, N. 2003. *Social Marketing: Principles and practice*. Melbourne: IP Communications.
- Glenane-Antoniadis, A., Whitwell, G., Bell, S. J., & Menguc, B. 2003. Extending the vision of social marketing through social capital theory: Marketing in the context of intricate exchange and market failure. *Marketing Theory*, 3(3): 323-343.
- Goldberg, M. E. 1995. Social marketing: are we fiddling while Rome burns? *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 4(4): 347-370.
- Hastings, G. 2003, 'Relational paradigms in social marketing'. *Journal of Macromarketing*, 23(1): 6-15.
- Hastings, G., & Saren, M. 2003a. 'Special Issue on Social Marketing'. *Marketing Theory*, 3(3): 291-405.
- Hastings, G., & Saren, M. 2003b. 'The critical contribution of social marketing: Theory and application'. *Marketing Theory*, 3(3): 305-322.
- Hastings, G., MacFadyen, L., & Anderson, S. 2000. Whose behaviour is it anyway? the broader potential of social marketing. *Social Marketing Quarterly*, 6(2): 46-58.
- Keefe, L. M. 2004. What is the meaning of 'marketing'? *Marketing News*, September 15: 17-18.
- Lazer, W., & Kelley, E. J. 1973. *Social Marketing: Perspectives and viewpoints*. Homewood, Ill.: R.D. Irwin.
- Maibach, E. W., & Cotton, D. 1995. Moving people to behaviour change: A staged social cognitive approach to message design. In E. W. Maibach, & R. L. Parrott (Eds.), *Designing Health Messages: Approaches from communication theory and public health practice*: 41-64. London: Sage.
- Mason, J. (1996). *Qualitative Researching*. London: Sage Publications.

Peattie, S., & Peattie, K. 2003. Ready to fly solo? Reducing social marketing's dependence on commercial marketing theory. *Marketing Theory*, 3(3): 365-385.

QSR (Qualitative Solutions and Research). (2002). NVivo (Version 2.0.161) [Qualitative Software]. Melbourne: QSR.

Rothschild, M. L. 1999. Carrots, sticks, and promises: A conceptual framework for the management of public health and social issues behaviour. *Journal of Marketing*, 63(October): 24-37.

Smith, B. 2000. Notes from the field - There's a lion in the village: The fight over individual behaviour versus social context. *Social Marketing Quarterly*, 6(3): 6-12.

Smith, W. A. 2002. Systems of change: Introduction and overview. *Social Marketing Quarterly*, 8(2): 3.