Decisions, Decisions

Using Social Marketing to Help People Make the “Right” Choices

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When was the last time you changed your behavior? You stopped smoking, or you started exercising with regularity and focus, or you committed yourself to recycling and even composting with vigor? While there might have been a moment that felt like a snap-decision, it didn’t happen quite that fast.

Why did you do it? Probably, it was a combination of factors. You learned enough about the behavior to understand your options and better weigh your risks and rewards. You had people encourage you, or even lay it on the line—thanks, doc. It still wasn’t easy. But you did it. You advanced.

This is a key component of the process of social marketing. While social marketing borrows from the razzle-dazzle and pizzazz of splashy consumer marketing techniques, it adds to it the complexity of the behavior change process. Most consumer products can be “sold” when they spark impulse reactions, or become so widely available and universally accepted, it seems there isn’t even much of a choice being made—it feels natural. But most behavior changes face a far steeper climb to the “sale.”

At the heart of this process is the audience. No matter what behavior is involved, you are trying to “sell” something—an idea, an action—to someone. The National Cancer Institute “Five a Day” campaign asks us to eat more fruits and vegetables. It’s a reminder to do what we know is good for us, for a longer, healthier life. Even this can be a tough “sell” even though people get to buy all those pretty, brightly colored and tasty foods.

The same rules hold for source water protection, but even more so, as Jeffrey Hoffman reminds us in “Using Social Marketing for Water Source Protection” (Small Flows, June 2008). It’s not a particularly pleasant topic for most—something we bury, avoid, and ignore, much to our detriment.
If Only They Knew

Often, when it comes to changing behaviors, the first challenge is, as the experts in our field, we get in the way of things. We have all this science, all this proof, all these case studies, to explain—in excruciating detail—what should be done, and all the intricate steps to take to do it. We know just what they need to do, if only they’d listen to us! So, how do you get them to listen? Stop talking and start listening.

Usually the first step in a social marketing process is to set aside what we know—all our science and serious stuff—at least for a while, to make room for the most important component of behavior change process: the audience, or more accurately, audiences.

As Hoffman tells us, there is a bell curve, where a few are at each end, creating the “the choir” and “the never wills.”

Dividing up this bell curve is what audience segmentation does, a sorting out of different groups by various dimensions, such as homeowners, public activists, elected officials, business owners, and the like. Each one of these audiences may require a different approach. And since most campaigns do not have the resources to work with all of the different audiences, the choice of the audience(s) is a critical component to the construction of a successful social marketing campaign.

Going through the Stages

To work on this segmentation, we need to go back to our decision-making process. Research has shown that when people make decisions, they go through a series of “stages.” James Prochaska and Carlo DiClemente developed the Stages of Change Model while they were studying smoking cessation behavior at the University of Rhode Island. These stages include pre-contemplation, contemplation, trial, maintenance, and advocacy.

Pre-contemplation: This is where it all begins. The “problem” is off the radar for these folks. They are either completely unaware of any need for change, or they have dismissed it as something that only others need to do. “There are never any problems with my septic so I'm not going to worry about it.” In this group may be lurking some “never wills,” but most can be advanced to the next stage. But most in this group need at least one compelling reason and at least one manageable way to change.

Contemplation: In this stage, people are actively wondering about making a change. They are trying it on mentally, and probably looking for information—instructions, people to tell them how and why, an understanding of the benefits of action, and the consequences of not changing behavior. “Gee, I wonder if everything is going OK down there? Will my system backup if I don’t do anything about it?” This group is in need of the resources to give it a try, some form of incentive and/or device that can make it easy for them to give it a real try.

Trial: Now the toes are in the water, so to speak. They acquire skills from a class or seminar, or they purchase a device. Here they are trying to figure out if they can really do the action/change their behavior. But a trial is not a habit, so folks in this group still need more nudging. “I had my system inspected and pumped. Now I know it’s OK.” This group needs encouragement.

Maintenance: Now it’s a habit. They’d never go back to their old ways. It’s as common a practice as, say, brushing your teeth. “It’s that time of year again to check the septic.” What this group needs are reminders.

Advocacy: The ultimate stage is this group of rabid (or at least very energetic) activists, “the choir.” They are so convinced they are doing the right thing, and that others need to do so as well, that they spend some of their spare time trying to change other people’s behavior, to make converts. “Every septic needs to be tested every two years, no excuses!” This group needs the social marketing campaign’s support—members of this group, harnessed properly, can be a tremendous asset.

Change comes from people moving through these stages. Some do it more slowly, some rapidly. Some get stuck in one stage for a long time. It’s the job of a social marketing campaign to move a selected audience from one stage to another.

The way to foster movement through these stages to not think up clever ideas in our ivory towers (with all those science reports and stacks of brochures at the ready), but to get real, live members of the audience directly involved create and, better yet, to help disseminate the campaign. It’s not about our facts. It’s about their behavior. If we are not in
the same stage, we need to begin to see the world from their perspective. What are their concerns? How do they relate to the behavior we want them to change? What would motivate them to take action?

To get started, begin to segment your audience. Find out what stage members are in. Work with a group in one stage to advance them to the next. Maybe enlist the help of those crazy advocates and focus on building a success that can create some momentum.

For those of us who recall the days of cars without seatbelts, followed by cars with seatbelts but with few users, it’s encouraging that now more than eight in 10 people in passenger vehicles buckle up. Now that’s widespread behavior change. It didn’t come easy, fast, or cheaply. And while not all efforts to change behavior have the resources of such a national campaign, there is a lot to be learned from it, no matter the scale of the change desired.

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