Assessing Resistance to Social Marketing Programs

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When the principles of commercial marketing were introduced to social change management in 1970s the concept of social marketing emerged. Since then, the success/failure of social marketing programs has been debated. That success should not be based solely on awareness and attitude shift assessment but on behavior change, has increasing academic and practitioner acceptance. Though behavior is the final objective of social programs, tools to diagnose and to direct behavior change strategies are few. Rothschild (1999) proposed a diagnostic framework based on motivation, opportunity and ability and argued that change strategies can be based on education programs, regulation and incentives. This paper accepts the logic of Rothschild’s approach but argues that his framework needs refining and extending. An argument for the refinement of Rothschild’s and a diagnostics/strategic framework drawn from the diffusion of innovations theory that extends Rothschild’s framework is presented.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

When the principles of commercial marketing were introduced to social change management in the 1970s, the concept of social marketing emerged. Since then, the success/failure of social marketing programs has been debated. That success should not be based solely on awareness and attitude shift assessment but on behavior change, has increasing academic and practitioner acceptance. Though behavior is the final objective of social programs, tools to diagnose and to direct behavior change strategies are few. Rothschild (1999) proposed a diagnostic framework based on motivation, opportunity, and ability and argued that change strategies can be based on education programs, regulation and incentives. This paper accepts the logic of Rothschild’s approach but argues that his framework needs refining and extending. An argument for the refinement of Rothschild’s and a diagnostics/strategic framework drawn from the diffusion of innovations theory that extends Rothschild’s framework is presented.

Though social marketing practitioners point to successful campaigns, since the 1980s a substantial number of practitioners and academics have pointed out that many social marketing programs have failed and that social marketing as a concept and a practice would benefit from critical discourse (Flay et al., 1987; Gitching and Barber 1987, cited in Barber, Bradshaw and Walsh 1989; Morehead and Penman 1989; Baumann et al., 1991; Elliot 1991; Murray, Prokhorov and Harty 1994; Campion et al., 1994; Andreasen 1997; Maibach et al., 1997; Lefebvre 1997; Rothschild 1999; Hae-Kyong Bang 2000; McKenzie-Mohr 2000; Wells and Macdowall 2000; Curtis et al., 2001; Agha and van Rossem 2002; Andreasen 2002; Crane and Desmond 2002; Clapp et al., 2003; Wechsler et al. 2003; Thoms et al., 2004; Rossiter and Bellman 2005). The reasons given for the failure are multifarious. Hastings and Elliott (1993) and Foxall, (2002), argue that much of the problem lies with the assumption that the 4P paradigm can be applied to social marketing endeavours. Rothschild (1999) contended that social marketing practice did not incorporate marketing theory or practice and Andreasen (2002) argued that social marketing is in a stage of uncertainty and that substantive debate among academics is minimal. He attributed this to the fact that despite its ‘ivory tower’ origin, much of the growth in research and writing over subsequent years emerged out of field experiences and practitioner needs.

The focus on behavior has influenced practitioners such as Prose and McKenzie-Mohr to promote the notion of community based social marketing (CBSM). The question ‘Who do we want to take action? What do we want them to do? Why might they do it or not do it—the barriers? How can we affect the barriers?’, underpin the CBSM approach and the notion that the barriers to the behavior change should be assessed before strategies/tactics are developed accepted.

Rothschild’s ‘Carrots, Stick, Promises’ approach to assessing barriers has gained wide acceptance. Rothschild (1999) suggested that resistance to behavior change can be assessed by applying the Motivation, Opportunity and Ability (MOA) model of information processing proposed by Macniss, Moorman, and Jaworski (1991).

The MOA model focuses on understanding an audience’s motivation, opportunity and ability to process the message delivered and Rothschild suggests that the propensity to engage in the desired behavior change is a function of the target’s motivation to adopt the behavior and the opportunity and ability to do so. Once this is assessed, Rothschild suggests that a campaign with the appropriate mix of education, law (the regulation of behavior) and marketing (promises in the form of incentives) can be applied to elicit the desired behavior. According to Rothschild, if motivation is present and the individual has the opportunity and ability to behave then education would be sufficient to elicit the desired behavior. If motivation and ability are high and opportunity low, then law (regulation) comes into play. His framework however does not allow the recognition of the need to manage (create or remove) structural conditions nor to provide strategies to cope with situations such as the resistance to condom use described in the work of Cohen et al. (1999) and Agha and van Rossem (2002). In this instance, motivation to use condoms is low, opportunity (availability of condoms) is high and ability to use also high. According to Rothschild’s framework the best strategy would involve regulation. However given the nature of the behavior required it is difficult to see how regulation could be implemented.

To address the limitations of Rothschild’s framework this paper argues that the framework could be improved by incorporating elements used to assess and manage innovation resistance. A diagnostic formula to gauge the propensity of the target market to adopt an innovation was first proposed by Ram and Sheth (1989) and refined by others and Rogers (1995) into Relative Advantage, Compatibility, Complexity and, Observability. These four factors have been incorporated into Rothschild’s framework (Figure 1). Compatibility and Relative Advantage, because of their basis in values and benefits would have a bearing on the motivation to adopt the behavior. Complexity and trialability would affect the individual’s ability to adopt the behavior. Observability can facilitate adoption via vicarious learning and under conditions where the behavior has status implications. It can also have a direct impact on whether or not regulation is feasible since public acts are more easily policed than private acts.

In addition to the innovation characteristics, a factor labeled Impediments has been incorporated and directly linked to opportunity in line with Roger’s focus on the social context and Rothschild’s explanations for the factors that affect the individual’s opportunity to act. Impediments can take two forms-structural and legal (current regulations). Structural represents the existence of socio-economic conditions that either sustain or restrain the behavior, such as available products (goods or services). Rothschild’s three tools, though included, have been adjusted. Rothschild separates communication and marketing and his interpretation links the process of social marketing to three of the 4P’s and does not present a clear demarcation between social and commercial marketing. The framework presented in Figure 1 views the availability of products as a structural condition which is essentially managed via commercial marketing and the cost-benefit factor as influencing the degree of relative advantage perceived. Communication and incentives are presented as the marketing tools. The law tool has been retained and training added as often new behaviors require direction and/or the addition of new skills.

References

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