

# Differences between the worlds of social marketing and commercial marketing



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Thesis: Significant differences between the worlds of social marketing and commercial marketing mean that the transfer of commercial marketing concepts into the social marketing arena poses a number of problems to the social marketing program

Introduction:

Andreasen defines social marketing as “ 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”.

However, significant differences between the worlds of social marketing and commercial marketing mean that the transfer of commercial marketing concepts into the social marketing arena pose a number of problems to the social marketing program (Andreasen, 2000; Bloom and Novelli, 1981). The rest of this essay will explore the inherent differences between these two marketing applications and expose why it is difficult to adopt the commercial marketing framework and methodology to social marketing endeavours.

BUPA Health Services is the chosen company, whose case history will be perused for presenting concrete evidence in support of the above mentioned thesis.

In a general sense, Social Marketing is a novel way of conceiving and implementing a very old human endeavour. From time immemorial, “ there have been social systems, there have been attempts to inform, persuade, influence, motivate, to gain acceptance for new adherents to certain sets of ideas, to promote causes and to win over particular groups, to reinforce

behaviour or to change it — whether by favour, argument or force” (Gulas, 2000). Social Marketing has its origins in religion, politics, academics, and also in military strategy. It also has intellectual roots in “ disciplines such as psychology, sociology, political science, communication theory and anthropology” (Gulas, 2000). Its practical development is related to such disciplines as “ advertising, public relations and market research, as well as to the work and experience of social activists, advocacy groups and community organizers” (Gulas, 2000).

Commercial marketing, on the other hand is defined as the understanding, targeting and advertisement of products and services to consumers, with the expectation of making profits out of the enterprise. This profit motive is what essentially separates the two concepts and in most cases makes them conceptually incompatible. Social Marketing is an integrated part of health promotion strategies across agencies and government departments in the United Kingdom Healthcare Sector. It is employed to deliver health promotion and disease awareness messages to specific target groups in the British demography and is “ designed to help individuals make decisions related to maintaining and improving their health and well-being and that of their families and communities” (Lefebvre, 2001).

Customer Profiling and Commercial Marketing:

BUPA, alongside other major healthcare sector players like Allianz Cornhill, Scottish Life and First Active has forwarded plans to form a database repository and customer relationship marketing group called Sword.

Although this venture is quite new and its results are yet to be discerned, the

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commercial nature of the group has made it in-conducive for propagating healthcare messages from government agencies. So far as one can discern from the group's website, its aim has been to "use customer profiling to better target products to customer segments", which says nothing about influencing the voluntary behaviour of target audiences in order to improve their personal welfare and that of society (Lefebvre, 2005).

In mid 2002, Bupa employed WCRS to start an expensive multimedia campaign that aimed to improve "the consumers' understanding of the private health brand and its offering". (Ferguson, 1989) The campaign, which is still running, continues Bupa's traditional practice of using its staff to participate in its commercials in an attempt to highlight the personal expertise, earnestness and dedication of those working for the company. Focusing on specific healthcare problems, the campaign runs across all kinds of media TV, press, radio and internet. While this campaign is hailed as a successful marketing effort by the business press, it has little to offer social marketers. For example, according to one marketing expert, the million of pounds pumped into the campaign could have only been possible by a business corporation, which is generally cash rich. All government health agencies operate on tight budgets and cannot undertake such marketing campaigns as that of BUPA's. Hence, what we see is a lack of adaptability of any commercial model of operation to social marketing (Ferguson, 1989).

Legal advantages for commercial enterprises:

Also, the laws pertaining to commercial advertising are much more liberal when compared to government run campaigns. One of the keys for the

successful Bupa advertisement campaign was its portrayal of appealing and eye-catching visuals and attractive sloganeering, which cannot be reflecting the product or service accurately. In other words, there is an element of dishonesty and economy with the truth associated with these commercial campaigns. But a government agency cannot employ such techniques for their purpose as they are more liable than their business counterparts and are more accountable to the general public. This is another reason for the inappropriateness of comparing commercial and social marketing campaigns. To illustrate the point, let us consider the following description about the Bupa campaign.

An advertisement for back-care, is shown with a montage of images illustrating how back problems affect more than sixteen million people a year in the United Kingdom. It later shows viewers a team of Bupa back specialists providing “ personal assessments, treatment and care”. But, more importantly, there is no time in the short advertisement for revealing the relatively high premiums required by those plans, as well as some other hidden costs. A business corporation like Bupa can get away with such economy with truth and achieve product awareness among its target audience, but a government department is required by law to be much more straight-forward and act in the real interest of the public as opposed to acting with the sole motive of profit-making (Fergenson, 1989).

The differences in advertisement content:

In recent years, marketing campaigns have been started in areas such as health promotion like anti-smoking, safety, recreational drug use, driving

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under the influence of alcohol, prevention of HIV/AIDS, healthy food and nutrition, physical fitness, inoculation and immunization campaigns, cancer support and screening, mental illnesses like depression, family planning and baby care, etc. Some other campaigns have aimed toward curbing indirect causes of ill-health, like “ safer water, clean air, energy conservation, preservation of national parks and forests), education (e. g., literacy, stay in school ), economy (e. g., boost job skills and training, attract investors, revitalize older cities), and other issues like family violence, human rights, and racism”. In these popular campaigns a combination of the best elements of the conventional approaches to social change is integrated with sophisticated design and development framework, and employs cutting-edge communications technology and new theories in commercial marketing. In other words, commercial marketing is still of help to social marketing efforts. So, while the many disadvantages of employing a commercial marketing framework is the main theme of this essay, the utility of commercial marketing techniques deserves mention nevertheless. Through these techniques public discussions can be generated and awareness information promoted, resulting in changes in attitudes, values and behaviours. By doing so, it helps to create a climate conducive to social and behavioural change (Kotler, 2002).

#### Measures of Success:

While the measure of success for commercial marketing campaigns is the profits returned by them, the parameters of success for social marketing campaigns are quite different. In the case of the latter, the voluntary change in the public consciousness regarding a particular health issue is the

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yardstick of measuring success. So, while the medium is common, the method and the desired outcomes of the two marketing concepts are quite different (Fox, 1980). This is a strong argument against the employment of commercial marketing techniques for social purposes. To go back to our case study of Bupa, after six years of association with Ogilvy & Mather, the private medical insurance company is looking for a new advertising agency to run its campaigns. For example,

“ The agency had been put on notice in the summer that its work was not thought to be up to scratch. A re-launch of the brand at the start of the year failed to materialise. Instead, TV viewers saw an evolved version of the ‘ You’re amazing. We want you to stay that way’ campaign. Recently this has been supplemented with ads promoting BUPA’s hospitals and its screening service. But, all of these have failed in retaining the Bupa customer base and has led to subsequent dip in revenues”. (Cobb, 2005)