

The Importance of Social Marketing in Health

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Publication Online: 11 May 2019	Social marketing is an effective way to change behaviors in the health field. Social marketing is the optimal strategy when social objectives are not directly and immediately consistent with people's personal interests, but they can be influenced to change, the consequences becoming more advantageous. Marketing promotes voluntary behavioral change, giving citizens freedom of choice. Marketing creates a more favorable environment for change by increasing the attractiveness of the benefits and minimizing costs.
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KEYWORDS: behavior, change, health, marketing.	

Worldwide, humankind is facing a growing array of public health challenges. Health is not a fixed characteristic, determined by a singular event and meant to remain so indifferent to the taken actions. Individual behavior, social and familiar interactions, resources and relationships from community and workplace, as well as the public policies effectual, all contribute to an individual's health and behavioral influence.

Health status and disease are determined by dynamic interactions between biological, psychological, behavioral, and social factors (Pellmar et al., 2002). The health status is not a single construct, but consists of several interdependent determinants. Some of them can be modified by medical procedures and others through education and information processes. The behavior can be changed, and those changes can influence the health of individuals. It is difficult to initiate and maintain a behavioral change. In order for the behavioral modification to be permanent, an individual must be prepared to make a change and receive the appropriate motivation (McKenzie et al., 2005). Using social marketing in health to design and implement programs to promote change in beneficial social behavior has increased in popularity and use within the public health community.

Health marketing is the component of marketing that deals with the "sale" of a behavior, rather than a product. Philip Kotler and Gerald Zaltman have introduced the concept of social marketing for the first time, in the academic literature, in 1971, defining social marketing as designing, implementing and controlling programs, for influencing the acceptability of social ideas by analyzing marketing mix variables.

In the work *Marketing social change*, Alan Andreasen defines social marketing as „the application of proven business concepts and techniques to promote change in various important social behaviors such as drug use, smoking, sexual behavior ...”.

In U.S.A., social marketers had as main objective influencing the behavior of volunteer individuals in relation to reducing obesity, smoking cessation, encouraging walking, cycling and in Africa, the focus moved to solving some major health problems, such as the prevention of malaria, poliomyelitis eradication, decreasing infant mortality, stopping the spread of HIV/AIDS.

MacFadyen and collaborators (1999) state that social marketing provides the necessary tools to address these problems by influencing individuals with the purpose of adopting new behaviors and healthier lifestyles.

At the same time, social marketing can influence the behavior of those who decide public policies and of those belonging to various interest groups, with positive effects in social change, including law, public policy, and community involvement, educational curriculum, business practices, and others (Donovan and Henley, 2010 ; Lee and Kotler, 2016; MacFadyen et al., 1999).

Social marketing is a process of social program planning that promotes voluntary change of the target audience behavior by offering the desired benefits and reducing or removing barriers to behavioral change process that the target audience considers important. Social marketing programs aim to influence behavior by providing an attractive benefit package by reducing barriers that discourage behavioral change. Social marketing consists of a voluntary exchange between two or more parts in which

each part tries to achieve its own interest while taking into account the interests of other parts (Maibach et al., 2002).

Social marketing is a process that applies marketing principles and techniques to create and communicate ideas that influence the target group towards behaviors that bring benefits for society (public health, safety, the environment and the community), as well as the target group itself (Kotler and Lee, 2008).

Although there are similar principles and techniques implemented, between commercial and social marketing there are a number of differences. Thus, while commercial marketing is aimed at the sale of goods and services, which bring profits for the organization, social marketing seeks to sell a change in behavior for the benefit of the individual and society.

Also, specialists consider that social marketing is much more complex than commercial marketing regarding the following aspects:

- the products of social marketing are much more diverse;
- the application of products is different from individual to individual;
- target groups are much more difficult to attain;
- the involvement of the consumer is much higher;
- the competition is much more subtle and more varied.

A major feature of Social Marketing is that of recognizing positive behaviors more than the punishment of the negative ones by forms of influencing economic or compelling.

The social marketer must offer products that the target audience sees as adequate for the realization of their own interests; instead, the consumers of the marketing products have to behave (or change their behavior) in order to realize the marketer interests (Maibach et al., 2002).

As an agent of change, the marketer can not promise effects and immediate benefits in exchange for the adoption of the proposed behavior, but they may determine the target audience to take action in the following directions (Lee and Kotler, 2016):

- to accept new behavior (e.g. not to smoke);
- to reject potential behavior (e.g. use a condom);
- to modify current behavior (e.g. to consume alcohol with moderation);
- to abandon old behavior (e.g. not drink alcohol during pregnancy).

Some experts consider that along time, the financial resources of individuals have made unhealthy habits to become normal and therefore it is necessary to support behavioral changes with respect to modifying their lifestyles, stopping unhealthy habits, by establishment of new habits, build physiological resistance to their unhealthy needs.

The main purpose of social marketing is to bring a benefit for society. This benefit may relate to health or

living conditions, the protection or preservation of the environment, the reduction of the level of crimes or the fear of crime or other individual benefits.

This focus on the "social well-being" as the first priority makes the distinction between social marketing and commercial marketing. From the point of view of the main purpose, the difference between the two ones is that, opposed to commercial marketing, social marketing has as a final goal the set of benefits to society (French et al., 2010).

MacFadyen, Stead and Hastings highlight the types of behavioral change produced by the social marketing. So, on the short term, at the individual level may take place behavioral changes, at the level of the group of individuals may be registered changes in the rules and administrative policies and at the level of society, may be registered changes in public policies, respectively. On the long term, the level of the individual changes occurs in lifestyle, at the level of the group of individuals, changes may occur in organizations and at the level of society, change may take place a social and cultural environment.

Presently, social marketing uses commercial marketing techniques such as:

- target audience analysis;
- identifying the objectives of the targeted behavioral changes;
- adapting messages;
- adapting strategies such as branding to promote the adoption and maintenance of health behaviors.

A number of large-scale social marketing programs have been carried out in community environments where organization theories have played an important role in developing and implementing programs. Social marketing uses theory to identify determinants that can be changed. For example, obesity social marketing could use behavioral theory to identify links between inappropriate nutritional behavior factors such as family eating habits, availability of high calories food, and low nutrient density in the community. Social marketing uses convincing behavioral and exposure theories to target changes in health risk behaviors (Douglas, 2006).

The messages regarding health behaviors range from prevention to promotion and maintenance. There is a need for unified messaging strategies and methods for measuring responses and results (Douglas, 2006).

Due to the fact that the negative effects of the behaviors on health status are more visible, a series of policies and strategies have been drawn up to change them. At the same time, it should be taken in consideration that health has multiple determinants, of genetic origin, psychological, social, economic factors which interact and determine determining their outcome the behavior of the individual (Mittelmark, 1999).

In their work "Theory and Research in Promoting Public Health", Earle and collaborators (2007) identify three levels at which behavioral change may operate: at the

biomedical level, behavioral level and at the social level (Wills and Earle, 2007).

The competition is a fundamental aspect in marketing and must be taken into account because the marketer aims to satisfy the needs and desires of the consumer more effectively than those whom he is in competition (Peattie and Peattie, 2003).

Social marketing for behavioral health change is facing a great internal and external competition. Digital communications, television, the Internet, video games offer countless unhealthy food messages along with seductive lifestyle images associated with cigarette brands. Product traders add to the confusion the marketing of low-risk cigarettes or the dark benefits of food with low salt content, but rich in saturated fats (Douglas, 2006).

What must be kept in mind is that one of the most important aspects of the competition is commercial counter-marketing, which is often aimed at promoting products, services, ideas or behaviors that are directly opposed to those promoted by the social marketer. In this struggle of ideas, there is a need for creativity to overcome the social barriers represented by the dominant values in society, the pressures of membership groups, the pressures of friends and family (Peattie and Peattie, 2003).

In order to cope with the competition in social marketing, the same principles and techniques used in commercial marketing are used by placing the product consumers to (Kotler et al., 2002):

- perceive the greater benefits associated with the behavior promoted against current behavior or other preferred behaviors;
- perceive the lower costs of adopting the behavior promoted against current behavior or other preferred behaviors;
- perceive the smaller barriers to adopting the behavior promoted to current behavior or other preferred behaviors;
- perceive social norms and social pressure that indicate the fact that an accepted cultural value is promoted.

The role of a social marketing program is to change the relationship between benefits and barriers to adopting behavior, so that the promoted behavior becomes more attractive.

There are four non-exclusive tactics that can be used to modify the benefit/ barriers ratio in favor of the proposed behavior (Kotler et al., 2002):

- increasing the benefits associated with the proposed behavior;
- lowering the barriers and/ or costs associated with the proposed behavior;
- reducing the benefits of behaviors competing with the proposed behavior;
- increasing barriers and/ or costs of behaviors competing with the proposed behavior.

An important aspect of commercial marketing is the structuring, planning and implementation of campaigns, always taking into account the behavioral change and the difficult process involved, which leads to the difficulty of identifying the necessary motivations.

Social marketing is an adaptable approach increasingly used to achieve and sustain the objectives of behavior in a number of social aspects. These perspectives have enriched the understanding of the complexities of the challenges faced by society in the 21st century, but have created substantial confusions and ambiguities about what social marketing means.

Because the behavioral change is a complex and difficult process that requires a lot of time and a great deal of resources, healthcare marketing needs permanent support from marketers.

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