



Social marketing

What is social marketing?

Michaela

Hi Gerard. My name's Michaela and I work for the NHS and I have a role in ensuring that we get patient intelligence and we capture what our patients want. So I was really interested in what your thoughts were about what social marketing was.

Gerard

Well social marketing really tries to take some of the insights that come out of commerce, by no means all of them, it's not about commercialisation but it's about the way in which businesses spend a lot of time and effort and resource in trying to understand what their customers want. And they think very carefully about it. They do a whole raft of different research techniques to get inside the heads of people they're doing business with, to walk in their shoes to use the Chinese cliché.

Michaela

So if I was doing that locally for example wanting to speak to people about what they needed, what they wanted, what would I need to do?

Gerard

In research terms if you wanted to conduct formal research which is an important part of getting to know your customers then you can do everything from qualitative techniques right through to quantitative massive social surveys of one sort and another and the range is important because sometimes you do want to count heads and just get an idea of the prevalence of a particular behaviour for example and then you need large samples and questionnaires and tick boxing almost. On the other hand if you're trying to find out more about why people do a particular behaviour, take smoking as an example - you want on the one hand to count how many smokers there are but also you want to drill down a bit and find out why people started to smoke in the first place, what they get out of it, why they continue to do so. Get beyond the tick box in other words the top of the head answers and really get inside people's heads then you'll use much more qualitative procedures. Perhaps the best known one is the focus group where you get a small group of people together and just talk informally, a bit like we are now. but you can do that with individuals. You can also do observations. if you want to know for example about young people's drinking behaviour you could do a lot worse than go and sit in a pub where young people go and see what happens. You'll get an idea of where the young people themselves are coming from and how they interface with all the activities in the pub to understand their behaviour.

Michaela

Yeah I mean often when I speak to practitioners, GPs and nurses, they feel that they do know their customers and their clients but I sometimes struggle with trying to enhance that. If I was sat at work and I wanted to try and introduce these types of techniques into my job, what advice would you give me? How would I get GP's and nurses on side?

Gerard

One of the best ways I think is if you can get them to interface with the customer themselves. If somehow you can manage a situation where they meet and talk to ordinary people and can hear how they make sense of the world I think often in public health we end up with an over inflated sense of our own power. We think people are waiting to hear the words of wisdom before they organise their lives. Whereas in reality of course people get on with it and public health may impinge on them but not a lot which really I think brings us to a core marketing idea which is that we need to have a certain amount of trust and faith in our customer base. We will touch their lives periodically but we are not going to run their lives so we have to get them on side, pushing in the same direction as we are and to do that we've got to get some

alignment between their hopes and aspirations and our hopes and aspirations and always keep in mind that when those two vary it's at least worth stopping and thinking well it's not because they're wrong or stupid, they see the world differently for good reasons and we need to get our heads round those.

Michaela

So do you see social marketing sitting with public health or with communications within a health environment?

Gerard

Well take the latter of those. I think it's very important to recognise that marketing and social marketing are not synonyms for communication. Marketing does include some communication so the classic text book definition going back decades of marketing you know takes in the four P's of product, price, promotion and place. Promotion is the communication side of that and includes every sort of communication you can imagine. But it's only a quarter of what is going on so it's also about making sure that whatever it is you want people to buy is available. It's at a price they're prepared to pay and price doesn't necessarily have to be commercial. It might not be a financial price you pay but it may be a convenience price; it may be an embarrassment price; it may be an effort price. So need to recognise those as well. But in many ways marketing can't even be seen just in terms of the four P's. It's about understanding where your customers are coming from and building a meaningful relationship with them. And you can almost get to a place where the actual exchange of money for product just becomes a symbol of that relationship

Michaela

I spoke to a lady who smoked and on a fairly low income and she felt that smoking gave her a time away for herself, away from her kids and her "me" time and I found that quite a difficult one to challenge because for that lady that was almost her luxury. And she wasn't interested – she knew it wasn't good for her but it gave her her "me" time away from her kids. And that I thought – that's a real challenge isn't it?

Gerard

It is a real challenge but on the other hand Michaela if you talk to people who have succeeded in giving up people like the single mother you're just talking about it is such a fantastic achievement that it empowers all parts of their lives. I remember speaking to a chap who had given up twenty years previously. It was still front of mind. He wore it as a badge of honour that he had succeeded in defeating this and he was now smoke free.

Michaela

He was an ex smoker yeah

Gerard

And you do meet ex smokers don't you who are a bit like converts – but there is a good reason why they are like that. It's not because they are arrogant people. It's because it is a great achievement and they feel really good about it. Now that brings us back to marketing. What has happened there is that public health, either through the mass campaigns or through increasingly – cessation services, have delivered a fantastic consumer benefit. That is a golden nugget from a marketing point of view. You've now got a customer who thinks you're great and what you should do is keep those people involved. You should give them a loyalty card. You should get them involved in helping to run cessation services.

Michaela

Talk to other people –

Gerard

Yeah absolutely. The source credibility of that is just to die for.

Michaela

To die for – yeah!

Gerard

But yeah the potential is enormous and people like Weight Watchers that's exactly what they do.

Michaela

So if you can give me some advice about going back to work and trying to get my chief exec's to buy in to a social marketing tool and some techniques and I'm actually going to ask for some money. What advice would you give me?

Gerard

I think first of all an aspect of social marketing and marketing for that matter that tends to get overlooked because it's kind of hidden – is the importance of strategic planning. And I think that would be my starting point which would in turn start with some sort of situation analysis, some environmental scans so you can see how this fits in to what else is going on in the patch and in the country

Michaela

So if we've got some limited resource where would you start? Would you start with the younger end, the children? Or would you put a lot of emphasis in supporting people that have maybe already got a long term condition or are already in one of these situations. Where would you pick to start?

Gerard

I would start anywhere where you think you are delivering a tangible benefit that people genuinely appreciate. So to go back to stopping smoking you know if you're stop smoking services are working well and you're helping people to quit on a regular basis I would – first of all get in touch with those people. Use them as conduits into your communities particularly poorer and low income communities and you've got people there who are already on side.

What we've not done – done it a little bit in Scotland but less in England and not enough in either place, is if you will post market. You know package that progress away from tobacco; reinforce it, brand it, make people feel really good about it. What's happening here is that public health, the NHS if you will, has delivered a fantastic population level benefit. One in two people who don't quit will be killed by their smoking so it's phenomenal amounts of people who are affected by this and who have made this tremendous step forward and it's almost like we've not bothered to sort of pat ourselves on the back and pat perhaps more importantly the population on the back for having the wisdom to recognise this.

Michael

I agree with that. I think sometimes we do get the comment that it wouldn't work here. So if for example something worked really well in Scotland and maybe you're in London or you're in Swindon or somewhere completely different and you consider your area to be different what advice would you give for somebody that's trying to replicate some of the good practice?

Gerard

Clearly there are regional differences and there maybe times when you want to customise things to particular areas. Other times I don't think that's true and to go back to origins of social marketing, which is commercial marketing, some marketing strategies are global. They're literally putting the same sort of imagery and messages across to people north and south of the equator let alone north and south of the Tweed. Clearly it's possible to do that and you know certain human needs and certain perceptions transcend. Other times there will be very specific things. And we do need to target and segment not just in terms of geography but in terms of gender, in terms of age, in terms of life experience. Clearly you're going to think about doing slightly different things with smokers and non-smokers for example. So that makes sense. But the danger is we think every time we do something we necessarily need to target and segment and there are times when that actually can be a counter productive option.

Michaela

And an expensive option –

Gerard

Yeah and the obvious one at the moment I think and there's a lovely contrast here between England and Scotland in this respect is on alcohol, where in England they have very much gone down the route one that's advocated and loved dearly by the alcohol industry that the problems that we have with drink now are ones of misuse by minority sub groups particularly young binge drinkers. So you have a policy that focuses on targeting teenagers drinking in the street and so on and ignores largely everything else that's going on. Whereas the public health evidence basis that it's all our drinking that's got out of hand.

Michaela

Absolutely. People drinking at home –

Gerard

And indeed you know philosophically but with very practical ramifications this is a collective problem and if we don't handle it collectively then we're missing the core engine here. And interesting enough, in Scotland, they have grasped that nettle and Kenny McCaskill as you know produced a document and Nicolas Sturgen produced a document which specifically says this is about re-balancing Scotland's relationship with alcohol. It's not about a few kids misbehaving. It's about the whole population's use of alcohol, not a few people's misuse.

Michaela

Excellent. So we do need to start looking at each other and sharing a bit more –

Gerard

Absolutely

Michaela

Okay.

Michaela

I just wanted to ask you a question that would help me in my job. I do have to go to my chief exec and my senior managers to ask for money to do social marketing projects. So what advice would you give me?

Gerard

Well there's two or three things I would mention. One is go in with a plan. Don't just go in with a project. Go in with a strategic plan that shows how this is going to fit in with everything else that's going on because you've got to remember we're not just dealing with individuals. We have to deal with their social context. I think the other thing I would try and do is get them closer to the people they're trying to do business with, the ordinary folk whose behaviours you want to engage with and influence. And particularly recognise that this is a long-term game. That you're not just trying to change one behaviour. You're trying to change lots of behaviours and you're trying to change them permanently very often. So really what you're in is a lifestyle business and you know maybe even a cultural change business. So it's a long term process that they should recognise which means that they need to stop thinking in terms of spending money – more in terms of investing money in the health and welfare of the people they're doing business with. Nonetheless they're going to want feedback that their money is not just being poured into, you know, take this on trust. They want some evidence. And I think a lesson that's come out of the commercial sector over the last ten years where heretofore perhaps the equivalent to behaviour change for them would have been sales figures. What's tended to happen is a recognition in business that actually sales figures are a surprisingly bad indication of how well the business is doing because I might well buy a washing machine from a retailer but if it breaks down or actually what I wanted was an oven not a washing machine but the salesman was on commission if he sold a washing machine they have apparently a great success, they've made a sale but the customer is fed up and won't go back there again and in the longer term actually it's not a mark of success. It's a mark of failure but they don't know that. A better measure business has decided is customer satisfaction. And I think we in public health could learn a trick from that that if we stopped always focusing on the behaviour change which any way is only going to be a fragment of

what we are trying to achieve. Because as I say we are in lifestyles. We are not in individual behaviours. If we started to think in terms of how people feel about public health, feel about the process of changing their behaviours. Do they feel they're in the driving seat on this? Do they buy in to the idea what they do now will have an impact on how they feel tomorrow and if we can convert people to that and make them feel this is going to sound a bit New Age but they're on a journey with us. And I think the potential is palpable. Take tobacco as an example. If we could get to a place where people in your patch were all collectively agreed that tobacco is a really bad idea and we – I as an individual don't like it but we as a community don't like it and we are going to move away from it. There's a nice example of a campaign in New Zealand actually looking at problem gambling and the initial reaction to problem gambling tends to be the classic one that you might take with binge drinking. You look at people who are obviously behaving badly and focus on them and ignore everything else. Whereas in New Zealand what they decided was it's not just about the individuals who problem gamble. That is a difficulty and needs addressing and help and support but it's about the impact on the whole community. So they actually ended up running a campaign saying not in our Community. No thank you. Not in our name. We don't approve of what is happening here and we object to it. The beauty of that is it is collective. It recognises – it doesn't just fall into the trap of just focusing on the individual and you know perversely often ending up blaming them for their own predicament, a predicament that has come about partly through individual choices but mainly through social circumstances. I mean poor people smoke more than rich people, not because they're stupid but because the circumstances they find themselves in mean that – it seems a better idea than it would if you lived in a mansion.

Michaela

That's actually given me some good evidence for world class commissioning as well as about the NHS locally leading so that's really helpful. So thank you very much for that. It's really good. Thanks very much.

Gerard

My pleasure.