



## **Social marketing**

### *Critical marketing*

Marketing is one of the most controversial ideas of modern times. According to its critics it makes us more materialistic. It manipulates us. It makes us fat and unhealthy and it makes us drive too quickly. Hence the recent emergence – hence the recent emergency of a body of thought called critical marketing which questions marketing practices which otherwise might be taken for granted.

### **Terry**

I'm Terry O'Sullivan from the Open University Business School and I am very pleased to be discussing these issues with our Professor of Social Marketing, Gerard Hastings.

Gerard, what do you mean by the term “critical marketing”?

### **Gerard**

I think it's just a matter of looking with an informed eye at what is going on in the world about us and part of that is what is going on in the business sector which on the one hand is the origin of a lot of the wealth that we have but on the other hand is also something that has an enormous influence on our lives and what we consume. And you know just to take one very bold and bald example if we think of the problems of global warming and over consumption it is marketing that is driving a lot of that consumption. And so at the very least we – it is sensible to give pause and think about what is going on.

### **Terry**

What about the argument that there is something inherently manipulative about marketing itself however good its intentions for example so social marketing could be seen as part of the problem?

### **Gerard**

I think there is that danger and it's easy for it to spin into a manipulative relationship but the word relationship is the important one I think that if you are really going to succeed as a marketer you have to look after your customers and if you are going to succeed as a social marketer you equally have to look after them and looking after them has to include a degree of respect. Where marketing goes wrong in the commercial sector is where that respect has for some reason gone astray and you know the most blatant example of that would be in the case of tobacco companies where we now know, have known for twenty years, that they kill one in two of their long term customers. You know that is a big journey away from respect.

### **Terry**

People who criticise marketing tend to see it as something modern dating from the early Twentieth Century. But isn't marketing something that people have been doing for good or for evil throughout history?

### **Gerard**

It is and you could argue without getting too fanciful that marketing in many ways is what distinguishes us from the animals in that I think marketing began when the human species first realised that there was some benefit in working collectively; that you know you may be better at chasing the dinosaur but I was better at clubbing it to death and therefore if we did some sort of deal you know we would both be better off. And it's that doing of a deal, that notion of exchange, which when taken over a period of time becomes the building up of a relationship that's at the core of marketing. What's changed in the last century is the power and the amount of effort that's put into marketing and put into marketing not on a one to one basis but on a mass societal level basis which leaves us in a position where we've got marketing organisations i.e. corporations that are bigger than countries and yet have none of

the democratic checks and balances in place. They are immensely powerful. If you think of something like the News Corporation and the impact that has on global affairs and you know the incident of taking Gordon Brown's capacity to write even though his sight is so poor and making political capital out of it – where are the checks and balances? Is that acceptable behaviour? I think at the very least it behoves us to ask the question.

**Terry**

With major global companies like Shell for example, sometimes what they're doing is replacing some of the services that governments might be expected to provide in some of their markets. I'm thinking of some of the developing countries where Shell has played a very major role in providing health care and education facilities. So major companies do a lot of things that are very good in society around the world so part of the power that enables to do them – to do that is their marketing clout. So what I'm saying is you can't have you can't on the one hand criticise marketing through becoming too good but on the other hand allow the fact – allow for the fact that it's precisely because of the scale in which it takes place that these companies can actually exert these sorts of positive influences in society.

**Gerard**

I think we might be getting into difficulties here because we are using too crude a term when we talk about “good”. Certainly major corporations can and do do things that bring benefits to society so to take a particular contentious example Philip Morris invests a lot in domestic violence campaigns to provide shelters for battered women for example. You know clearly a good thing but you've got to pan out a bit and say Philip Morris is also killing one in two of his long term customers therefore is this a moral good or not. And secondly are Philip Morris in a position to make judgements about what social needs society has and where that money should be invested or should that be democratically elected governments doing proper needs assessment and deciding that you know the problems of racial abuse for example also require a lot of investment in them rather than a corporation who will a cynic might say pick things that are particularly sexy from a PR point of view rather than things that reflect people's real needs. In this sense what I'm saying isn't particularly radical. It's – it's actually quite conservative in the sense that the business of business is business as Milton Friedman said and he also pointed out that companies are not necessarily the best people to make judgements about what the social needs of society are and I would agree with him on that one.

**Terry**

Is there a danger that social markets are all going to become civil servants by default then?

**Gerard**

How do you mean civil servants are? –

**Terry**

Because you're saying that companies can't set the agenda for what's seen as beneficial social change therefore I take it that you mean that governments have to and the way that government policy is put into place is through various initiatives using the civil service for example and –

**Gerard**

Yeah I take what you mean and yes. I think at the risk of sounding like Sir Humphrey I would say civil servants don't make those decisions. The elected representatives should be making those decisions and civil servants have the job of carrying them through. But you raise a really vital issue here you know. It is probably the most fundamental ethical issue for social markets that who decides which behaviours should be changed you know. And to take a really contentious line on this, a really extreme line on it, one could argue that the Nazis were making those sorts of decisions about what changes were needed in society and the behavioural changes we wanted to do and engaging in a series of social marketing interventions so to do. And I think marketing, whether in the commercial sector, or social sector, is amoral and we should come to it with great care and make sure that we have very clear and morally acceptable decision making processes for setting priorities on this. It's absolutely vital.

### **Terry**

Well you describe it as amoral. I think a lot of people who have seen the growth of social marketing and delivering government policy might feel that it's a little bit more like immoral because it's using mechanisms if you like, albeit exchange mechanisms, which do imply an unequal relationship between the marketer and the consumer. Whereas democracy which I think these old fashioned types would rather see taking place, actually puts the government at the mercy of the consumer in that sense. Governments are accountable to the electorate on a regular basis. Companies are accountable to their shareholders but their shareholders are citizens too so don't you think that there is a danger that by taking the moral high ground, critical marketers will actually alienate their commercial peers to the extent where it becomes very difficult to work with them.

### **Gerard**

Certainly there is a danger of that and I think the if we get to a place where we really start to think of business as demonic I think that's quite dangerous because business is what underpins wealth creation. It is I would argue one of the things that separates us from the animals – you know the doing of deals, the exchanging that goes with that are all very positive things. But nonetheless they are very powerful operators in society so we should look critically at what they are doing and indeed if you think of the amount of resource and effort and capacity that goes in to making us feel good about corporations you know the beverage alcohol industry spends eight hundred million pounds a year boosting it's own image one way or another and you know you have the odd little squeaky voiced academic saying maybe that's doing some things that aren't so good. You know that is if you are talking about equality of effort I think you know the corporations are not going to be shaking in their boots at this point. But we really do need to raise those sorts of questions. Related to what you're saying I think there is another point and that is you know whenever you start to talk about relationships and exchange then you raise a really important word which is "power". And how much power the respective agents in those relationships have and whenever you get a situation when there is a imbalance of power then likely things will tip into a manipulative situation and you've got to watch that very carefully. I think however there's an equal pressure on the marketer that if they get wrong, even when they are trying to manipulate, if they get that wrong very often it will backfire on them and I think sometimes social markers fall into that trap. They think they can push people into doing things rather than persuade them and as a result their campaigns do not succeed because ultimately what you're trying to do as a marketer whether social or commercial is get people on side. You want people to be shoulder to shoulder to you and you know have joint ownership – you know indeed the commercial sector now talks quite unashamedly and seriously about the co-creation of value – you know. It's not you know Coke isn't the sole owner of the Coca Cola brand. It also belongs to everybody, all their customers. It's in their customers heads and hearts and when they forget that, as they have done on one or two occasions in the past, they come to grief. So even with all their power they have to retain that degree of humility. And it's an odd truth that these corporations are massive. They are fantastically powerful. They are bigger than small countries, etc, etc, etc. But they are also vulnerable to consumers turning around and saying we've had enough of you. And we won't buy your product any more and you know the market is littered with people who have got arrogant and forgotten that basic truth. So they have their power but they have it they have to keep a weather eye on what they are doing. As soon as they get complacent they are doomed. So it's a difficult combination to match in the social sector because I think the social sector tends to is also prone to feeling overly powerful and you know overly right so they begin by asking us to change our behaviour and when we don't listen and do what they say they start to shout rather than saying if they're not changing maybe they've got good reasons for not changing. We should understand those first and respect those and build on that and you know a bit more evolutionary about what we're doing rather than immediately resorting to pressurising people, slapping them around the lugs and saying get on with it. We should may be listen more and the commercial sector paradoxically balances power with that humility.

### **Terry**

Marketers usually steer away from politics, at least on the surface. Would you say that critical marketing is a political process?

**Gerard**

What do you mean by political process?

**Terry**

I'm thinking of the way that critical marketing addresses not only the idea of marketing as it goes on but also the way that critical marketers want to get involved in policy debates further up the stream.

**Gerard**

Oh right. I understand. I would utterly and absolutely refute your suggestion that business does not get involved in politics though. It absolutely does. That's what corporate social responsibility is about. It's what advocacy is about. It's about what corporate governance is about. It's you know it's what breakfast at Number Ten is about. It's – you know whenever I have been involved in policy discussions at a senior level at a you know a Scottish level, a British level, a European level, a global level, the public health social advocates have always been outnumbered fifty to one by very nicely be-suited very well resourced representatives of the commercial sector. So the idea that they're not involved with policy makers and decision-makers and stakeholders is nonsense.

**Terry**

So similarly critical marketing has to become political would you say?

**Gerard**

Absolutely. And in a sense you know quite right too. All that political marketing in that sense is - all it's doing is recognising that our decisions are not just a function of us as individuals but also the social context in which we find ourselves. So if we want kids to avoid taking up smoking yes we should be telling them about the health consequences and empowering them to make individual decisions about their smoking behaviour but we should also recognise that if you know you have a society where there is lots of advertising for tobacco, that's going to impinge on their freedom to make a decision because it's going to impact their sense of the normal see of smoking and the acceptability of smoking and you know it's well established in that instance that the removal of advertising will reduce the amount of teenage smoking that's going on and then you factor on top of that going back to the issue of power you know people's wealth and the equalities in society and you know the fact of the matter is poor people in Britain die decades before rich people. And that's not do to with poor people being stupid or aberrant. It's to do with the fact that the conditions that you find yourself in as a poor one – poor person are much less sympathetic than the position you find yourself in as a prosperous person in Britain. And so you know to focus just on the individual not only becomes ineffective it becomes downright immoral.

**Terry**

I see. Do you think that a critical approach to marketing could neglect the amount of good things that businesses do in society through marketing?

**Gerard**

I certainly think that there is a danger here that we throw the baby out with the bath water. The – it's important to recognise that critical thinking is not just about finding what's wrong with what's going on in the world it's also about learning from what's good that's going on in the world. And the very existence of social marketing is in fact doffing the cap to the fact that marketers know a lot about behaviour change and how it can encourage people down positive as well as negative behavioural paths. And what one neat example of that for example would be the whole area of dental hygiene which the commercial sector has done so well I would submit that the dental public health tends not now to run campaigns on brushing your teeth and so on because they really don't need to. The commercial sector is handling that very well, thank you. However the sort of the grit in the oyster if you will or the speck in the eye there is that you know the toothpaste manufacturers are running these campaigns not to improve dental health. They're running it to improve sales of their products and so there is always that tension there. So it still needs to be watched that you know our toothpaste manufacturers for example selling us things that we don't need you know. Is there a need for

fluoridated toothpaste when we have fluoridated water or whatever it might be? So we just need to watch that fact that a commercial operator is doing things for its shareholders not the general public. But yeah there is a lot that we can learn from them. There is a lot of things we can do. And with adequate regulation this isn't an argument here for doing away with business. I don't think there is any evidence that that would work you know. What happened behind the Iron Curtain was not a success. But I think it does raise questions about how free business should be to do just what it wants and to address its own agendas and to feed its own shareholders rather than the population as a whole. If you want to get in to a bigger philosophical argument and you know I'm happy to go there although it's a very big area, I think there are issues about the impact of capitalism. The ownership of the means of production and to the extent to which that alienates and turns into passive consumers people who you know a generation ago might have been more proactive. So you know ... lets work on the nature of society now where people tend to define themselves not in terms of what they produce you know, the cooper who made barrels or whatever it was. But in terms of what they consume and whether we are comfortable with that I think that is a much more fundamental question beyond our remit but it's worth just marking it up there as something to debate.

### **Terry**

I think that's a very interesting point possibly one that we don't have time to go into but it certainly provides an interesting backdrop to the critical marketing effort. It seems to me that you have as social marketers, got a number of major industries on the run at the moment, most notably tobacco, at least in the UK. I'm just wondering if you've ever envisaged a situation where you're going to run out of targets?

### **Gerard**

No. Not in the near future. I think – well first of all just take a UK perspective and the most extreme one which is tobacco as you say. I think plausibly now and the Department of Health said this, expert academics in the field have said this, we are looking at a time now when smoking will cease in Britain that it's becoming – it's already you know only a fifth of the population smoke and that's been going steadily down and you know there is a social pattern of that. Rich people have stopped smoking and middle class people have stopped smoking. Working class and poorer people have been more reluctant to do so but they are catching up and doing so. So there is a time I think you know in a generation's time when we will have such low numbers it will virtually cease to exist. But – and it's an enormous but – if we pan out and look on a global level there is the tobacco companies still continue to make fantastic profits you now. They boast about how good their stock is and what a good investment it is and I was just at a meeting of the World Health Organisation recently where they were talking about the Middle East and Middle Eastern countries were represented there and whilst smoking is beginning to steady there in the older generation, the new generation coming up, particularly the young women, are smoking actually more than their mothers did because it was so socially unacceptable for their mothers to smoke and that's relatively speaking those controls have been loosened and believe you me the tobacco industry is looking on those trends and looking to exploit them as actively and as powerfully as it can and history suggests that they will at least for a time succeed. So we do need to be vigilant and we can't relax and say job done. It's a long, long way from that.

### **Terry**

Thank you very much indeed Professor Gerard Hastings.