



Social marketing

Ethics and advertising

Tom

Hello. I'm Tom Prowle from the Open University Business School and I'm talking to Professor of Social Marketing Gerard Hastings. We are discussing the ethically questionable use of shock tactics and fear appeals to advertise good causes such as smoking cessation, safe driving or charities.

Tom

Hello Gerard.

Gerard

Hello Tom

Tom

I was quite interested in reading your recent book – “How the Devil has all the best tunes”. The section on the use of fear appeals for good causes – is it ever justifiable to use these shock tactics showing violent images to promote social marketing messages?

Gerard

I think getting people to change their behaviour is a difficult and complex process and there are undoubtedly times when a simple fear appeal will be by far the best thing to do. So if a theatre is burning down shouting “Fire” and getting people motivated to shift out of their seats out of fear is a very effective way of doing it. However a lot of the behaviours we are trying to change are much more complex than just running from a burning building. We want people to move away from addiction for example or practice safer sex over a lifetime, not just once. So we're really talking about lifestyle issues rather than simple one off behaviours in which case I think we have to think a little bit more imaginatively than just rely on the big stick.

Tom

I was particularly sort of interested in your reactions to a number of campaigns for example there was one for the Department of Health. It was a smoking cessation campaign, which portrayed the addiction as people being hooked and literally they showed people being dragged by fishhooks back and forwards. Surely that's going to put off more people due to it's over graphic detail.

Gerard

It's a tricky one Tom because on the other hand nicotine is phenomenally addictive. It's more addictive than heroin is and most people wouldn't realise that. So you know there is an educative side to portraying it in that way. But it also illustrates the problem here that if you over emphasise that point of addiction then do you actually dis-empower people from quitting smoking, bearing in mind that the vast majority of people do not use intense cessation services. They go cold turkey. They do it themselves. And many millions of people across the world have succeeded in so doing. The danger is that the urge to cut through the clutter and produce a dramatic ad you end up dis-empowering people - over emphasising the difficulty of the behaviour and the importance of the behaviour in you know both in terms of the rest of their lives and what they're doing with that and their own personal ability to take control of what is going on.

Tom

The point about the focus of the campaigns there is this sort of issue of a campaign in terms of it's advertising models that we would take people through various stages perhaps going from attention, interest, desire, action to use the standard ... model. Is there an over emphasis perhaps on the getting attention when social marketers really want to focus on the

behaviour change end so effectively these one off campaigns are concentrating too much at this attention getting stage.

Gerard

I think you're making a very important point that you used that phrase "one off" and a similar phrase would be ad hoc and I think very often if you go down this very dramatic communications route you are being driven by the one off need to get people's attention now – here and now. Whereas in reality a lot of what the learning coming out of business over the last few decades has been what matters more is to build up on going relationships with your customers. And you know you want people to be on side, to own the message that you're putting across whether it be the brand values of Nike or Coke or whether it be the concept in public health that you know the good news is there's lots of things we can do to make our own lives healthier and happier and longer and make people feel in charge. And I don't think a good basis for a relationship is threatening people all the time.

Tom

I suppose there is this issue that if we are trying to get a behaviour which might be to donate to a charity or whatever the risk that these people are doing is also playing with the brand values because in effect there can be unintended consequences from these particular types of campaigns. I'm thinking of the use of negative campaigning in politics for example often backfires quite – quite a lot. I know it's more in the US in the US but it can actually damage the brand and therefore put off the people you are actually targeting.

Gerard

I think that's absolutely right and if you look across the profit divide if you will and look at how commercial marketers use advertising you get very few of these very dramatic fear inducing campaigns. The emphasis is much more on the positive, much more on the "can do"; much more on the opportunity to make life better, even when advertising something like life insurance you know which is the ultimate isn't it? The product you never want to claim on! You never want to get the benefit because you have to die to do it. But you know when they're advertising that it's you know it's about umbrellas, it's about clouds clearing. It's about the sun coming out after a storm. It's about taking away the worry and the threats and the stress rather than all so often in charity and public health and safety advertising where it's over emphasising the storm clouds that are gathering.

Tom

I feel that a lot of the expenditure that is spent on these advertising campaigns I mean I'm thinking about maybe the Barnardos' case where the example where the young lady was being shown sort of slapped continuously about the head while being verbally abused is there also sort of a moral question here in fact that victims of abuse for example are being shown the very thing that has caused them these problems so that you have this perpetuation in the betrayal and the portrayal of abuse. Also with campaigns for example like the NSPCC that there is a chance that this publicity is also triggering emotional psychological problems where people who have been themselves abused?

Gerard

Yeah – I think that's absolutely right Tom and this is very deep and difficult water. I know a few years ago we worked on a campaign that was – did some research around a campaign on domestic violence and as well as talking to the general public we also talked to women who had been the victim of domestic violence. And one of the things that they alerted us to is that the coverage of this issue in the medial, whether in an advertising campaign or editorial or you know an article in the newspaper, could actually trigger attacks. It's a very serious potential implication there. A less dramatic one but again one that gives one pause for thought is another campaign that we conducted some research around in Scotland which was looking at glue sniffing and it was a very dramatic campaign in that it was a TV ad with a black screen throughout and the only thing – the only sense you got was of somebody crying, an adult crying. And it turned out that the resolution of it was that their child had died from a glue sniffing incident and the government had a campaign where there was a leaflet available of parents giving them advice on glue sniffing and the import of it was you know get this leaflet and then this won't happen to you. Which is fine – unless you happen to be the parent of a

child who has already died of glue sniffing in which case the import of the campaign is if only you'd read this damn leaflet this wouldn't have happened to your child. And I remember being quite upset about this as a parent as much as anything and discussing it with the organisation who had run the campaign. And I asked the chief exec and I said you know I have a problem with this. This is going to hurt people who find themselves in this position. And his answer lives with me and still chills me. He simply said you cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs. And I just think that was entirely unsatisfactory. I think we have to raise our game considerably.

Tom

Does this really point out the issue that perhaps there isn't enough research going into the planning of these campaigns or even after the event really looking at the effects and unintended consequences. Is there any for example research that would back up that these are ever acceptable as a tactic?

Gerard

First of all as a researcher I would always there's a need for more research – yeah absolutely – lots and lots of it. I think you raise a very important issue about what sort of research you do which is that it shouldn't just be looking at intended consequences but also unintended consequences. It shouldn't just focus on the target audience. but if you're talking about a mass media campaign it needs to look at other audiences that you don't intend but may well be exposed to the campaign. So you need to look at these things. Whether on the other hand that you know – I would add a note of caution – the danger is you end up going down the road where every bit of communication you do is subjected to a massive randomised control trial to see what affect it's having and I don't think that is practical. I'm not sure it even works and it's certainly not what commercial marketers do. I think what's more important actually is to broaden the perspective of what we are trying to achieve in social marketing and recognising that ultimately this isn't about shifting individual behaviours or bits of behaviours. It's about engaging the general public in the issues of the case - of Barnardos - of you know abused children and what we can do about that in public health. It's about helping them recognise that there's lots of things they can do to make their lives better. and you know if that's the input of public health research and it is you know. It's not that there's a bunch of capricious threats about to strike you down at any moment. It's actually that we've learnt so much about how the body works and we know that if you do things like eat veg or avoid smoking or drink moderately you know it will make your life better and your body stronger and fitter and healthier and happier. And that's the emphasis there should be. Given that then using fear all the time seems a really perverse approach.

Tom

The use of shock tactics - has there been any sort of research say in terms of library search as to the long term effects or short term effects of these particular campaigns? I'm saying if for example we had – if we were going to plan an ad for road safety campaign or whatever what evidence is there to show that these have actually got – going to deliver the effects that we want in terms of getting people to change their behaviour?

Gerard

I think you've picked up on an important point that a lot of the research that's been done on fear messages, and there has been a lot of research, has been done in a laboratory setting. What that suggests is that we are not sure whether it works or not and I suspect we've got a problem here of asking the wrong question. You know – you can't say fear messages do work or don't work in that very general way. As I say you can very easily come up with scenarios in which a fear message will be an absolutely appropriate thing to do you know – burning theatre or you know a child about run across the road then you know there are times when you know scaring people half to death is absolutely the right thing to do and will result in the swiftest possible response. But there are lots of times when that is not going to be the case. And indeed you know if there is a theme that comes out of that research is that the harder the behaviour is to shift the less likely any particular message, but particularly a fear message, is likely to be because you need a more sophisticated response to it. You know it's going to take time. It's going to take effort. It's going to take support – not just you know - a bit like bringing up a child – you know you're not going to produce a well rounded adult by simply

scaring them about all the things that are going to go wrong in life if they don't do exactly as you tell them to. What you're trying to do is implant in them the ability to make those judgements and decisions for themselves. And that's a more sophisticated task. But as I say a lot of the research that has been done and the results of it are ambivalent; have been done in very artificial settings. And really what we are trying to do is influence the way people behave in the real world. the way indeed not just individuals but whole communities and groups of people behave in a complex, multifaceted society. So you know the only way we are going to make progress with this is to make people feel in charge, empowered, able to make clear decisions. And that means that we need to give them a sense of control over it. We also need to ensure that we address the environment in which they live to increase that control so they feel more able to respond to any messages that we put out. So going back to the metaphor of the burning theatre you know the best fear message in the world isn't going to work if all the fire doors are locked. So you need to make sure you have regulations, which say there have to be good, adequate fire doors. You know on the Titanic there weren't enough lifeboats. However good at swimming people were or getting out of the – their cabins and mustering at the various points on the boat, you know if there aren't enough boats you'd die. So you need to look at that social context as well. And again it's a kind of sub-clause of the problems with fear messages. But the danger is they over emphasise the role of the individual, a clearly important individual, but they are not the sole authors of their own fate.

Tom

Is there a sense of self efficacy here in that people have to do engage, they have to have almost within themselves the power and the resources to be able to do that so that in a way the campaigns really need to be so much more integrated in terms of even just the marketing mix that you have to put support services around it and it's more about getting sort of ownership, getting people to engage with the issues but more so engage with the solutions perhaps the use of the fear appeal actually puts a barrier in the way there.

Gerard

Absolutely. Beautifully expressed I might say. It is exactly that. What happens if you get too hooked up on fear messages is that you exaggerate the role of the individual and you exaggerate the role of communications in this process. And there was a lovely review - just focusing on public health for a moment because that's where most research has been done - there was a lovely review commissioned by the government of a guy called Derek Wanless a few years ago now, that just looked at – you know asked the big question “how do we improve the public health of Britain?” - and the key point that emerged from that is that you are only going to make serious steps forward when we what Wanless called fully engage people in the process of public health; fully engage the British public so that people buy into it and say yeah – this is a good, helpful, enjoyable thing to do. You know if all you've got is a group of people who you've made neurotic with fear that you know if they don't do exactly as they're told the foot is going to stamp them down on them like in Monty Python you know. You've – I'm not sure you've improved – you've produced a healthier population actually.

Tom

I suppose if we take the marketing concept to heart it is this idea that we are really putting the customer at the centre that the heart of what we are doing is really about the customer. One seems to find that there is a certain patronisation going on in a lot of the campaigns in other words we know what's best for you and as a result of which that's again – it sends out a different message altogether. Whereas if you are addicted you know it's a sort of high and mighty voice saying you should be doing this when really the practitioners and the people on the ground are trying to change – change addictive behaviours. It's a much more personalised thing. It isn't a one size fits all so therefore to a certain extent you could argue it's unethical to spend all this money when we could be doing stuff really at the grass roots.

Gerard

You also used a really important word in what you were saying there Tom - “heart”. Now you were meaning it in the sense of the bull's eye as it were, the core. But it also brings in that idea of emotion and what fear messages are doing are playing on people's emotions. But what social marketers seem to have a fixation on is that one emotion of fear. You know there is a whole palette of emotions out there. There is love; there's hope; there's aspiration;

there's happiness; there's laughter. There's all sorts of things that you can harness in order to engage people not just in their mind but in their heart as well, which is very important and indeed the commercial sector does this in spades. The ultimate example of this is the brand you know and the immense effort and time that's put in to perfecting and moulding that brand so it expresses exactly what the company wants it to express about their offering and the whole organisation. And you talked earlier about the dangers of you know over discordant messaging absolutely damaging the communicator or the source of that message. I think that's absolutely right and one of the reasons that you know Coke or Mercedes or Standard Life don't go in there waving shrouds and shouting at people is because they want to be people's friend. They don't want to be their dominee. They don't want to be you know their slave master. They don't want to be wielding a big stick. They want to be shoulder to shoulder and that takes us to a really important place as far as behaviour change is concerned. You know picking up on what Derek Wanless said this isn't – success isn't going to be built on doing things to people. It's going to be built on doing things with people. You know – engaging people, getting them involved. You know working with them to improve their behaviour and also enabling and empowering them to work with other people. You know some of the most powerful health programmes I've witnessed haven't been formal campaigns. It's been one guy talking to another guy in the pub saying, "don't smoke" for example. You know far more powerful than anybody in a white coat saying it or a TV advert saying it you know ... telling Jimmy that you know it's a bad idea is - is much more persuasive.

Tom

Well the – it's a lot of the campaigns that I've seen recently because of regulatory difficulties – I'm just going to talk about advertising control – do you feel that there is a chance that because of this idea of trying to cut through the clutter and the expense we are into recession that perhaps this possibility that people to get more bangs for the buck are going to perhaps try and get – go for these easier sort of tactics in terms of lets get it out there. Let's generate word of mouth. Let's get this extra free publicity. Do you feel that the the use of virals and going more off line takes us into this area where it's not as controlled as it was before? How do you feel about the regulator's ability to curb let's say the use of more sort of sinister and viral approaches?

Gerard

I think there are a couple of things in what you said. One is the extent to which people will push the limits and because times are hard they will push the limits a bit more. And that I think is really built on the old adage that you know there is no such thing as bad publicity. And I think that's a canard. I think that's a fallacy. I really don't think that's the case. You know advertisers have known for generations that they can get lots of awareness if they put naked ladies in their – in their advertising or whatever it might be. You can certainly get people to pay attention. But if they pay attention at the cost of their respect for the company or respect for the offering or whatever I think that's dubious. Also as a social marketer you are going to cut through the clutter to a large extent because you're one of the few ads on Tele that's not trying to sell people something. So you've already got a good advantage. Coming on to new media – I'm not sure that - yeah there is less regulation and I think certainly commercial marketers will do things and on line that they would not do on main stream media if only because they would fall foul of the regulators but also because you can target more effectively. If you know your material is going out to teenagers rather than to adults and you know you can approach it slightly differently. So there is an issue that people push these limits. But more importantly I think with new media is that it gives you an opportunity to engage with people in an interactive way that traditional media didn't. Traditional media were very much about designing a message centrally and broadcasting it out and you know the audience at least at the stage the campaign runs are essentially passive. Whereas with viral campaigns it's not quite like that. People have you know you are dependent on your audience to actually transmit the message so you've got to be actually a bit cleverer if anything rather than more oafish and I suspect that this is an area that social marketers find a little bit challenging for that reason because the - time and again – you know it's something we've not really touched on but one of the reasons we end up in this sort of rather pedagogical patronising you know stick threatening mode is that in the case of public health particularly it's an expert driven discipline. You know it's ultimately it's about doctors

telling – active and intelligent and highly qualified doctors – telling ignorant and passive patients what to do. And in those circumstances you very rapidly get in to you know if you get into relationships at all it's parent/child whereas what we are trying to do I think in public health is get much more peer lead rather than top down.

Tom

The message that I'm taking there really – the opportunity if you like for social marketers is to really engage more in relationship management, be more involved more empathetically in sort of building these relationships which are on going. I think perhaps that even the use of viral and word of mouth could actually be quite an effective way of doing that because you would then engage the audience to pass on the messages. And also because of the – because of the targeting it could even be a way of sort of building awareness but again at the point of where it's most needed. The I was – I just wanted to get your opinion about the regulation though. Do you feel that the existing codes of practice for advertising are specific enough on the use of these messages because the ASA do get a lot of complaints from people about these types of campaigns? I'm thinking of one that again very recently where we had again a smoking cessation campaign which again was changing the emphasis perhaps about sort of the fear appeal on the individual using as a parent if you smoked for example using that – well think about your kids give up smoking for your kids. So again a slightly different emphasis there. But there was complaints about that particular ad which showed a small child watching the mother smoking and then they started smoking themselves with a crayon. Now some of the complaints were unusual in this instance in that they felt some parents felt that you're encouraging my child to copy an adult smoking. So even though they didn't smoke their own children were now going around the house with a crayon in their mouth. So in a sense the regulation of that were almost waiting for the problems to occur and then we sort them out post hoc. I was wondering if you had any thoughts about the effectiveness of the regulations around these areas?

Gerard

I think it comes back to a point where we discussed earlier which is we need to be very alert to the unintended consequences of what we do. So if we take that example of the child mimicking the parent smoking there is good research evidence to show that if you smoke your children are more likely to smoke. So you know if you want to get precious about it this is a child protection issue and you know it is therefore vitally important and we can't duck it and we can't you know – if people are upset by it then to a certain extent that's justified you know. These are important issues, far more important for example than trying to sell a soft drink to people. So you know we have to recognise that we are going to get into more difficult territory. But you know the real issue here I think is that if this is actually stimulating some children who wouldn't otherwise do to think about smoking then you have to question the whole campaign and say well is this – is this the right way of going about it? And I think then you come back to everything we've said. You're over emphasising the need to stimulate directly from one campaign rather than thinking about the strategic direction in which you're trying to go here you know. Build the brand, build the relationship, engage people, involve them, because I don't think there are many parents out there in Britain who are pleased at the effect their smoking is having on children or are oblivious to the effect their smoking is having on children either directly through second hand smoke or through the lead they are giving, the unfortunate, unhealthy lead, they are giving. So you know there is an extent to which also you know you're perhaps patronising people again.

Tom

Well thank you very much Gerard. That's been most interesting and it's been really good talking to you.