



Social marketing

Evaluating social marketing programmes

Michaela

I'm Michaela Firth. I work for the local NHS as a social marketing lead. I work with my public health colleagues and we're trying to incorporate social marketing tools and techniques into improving our services and trying to capture patient experience. I'm talking to Professor Gerard Hastings today about how he can support and advise me on doing that.

Hi Gerard. I just wanted your thoughts and views about how I would go about evaluating a social marketing programme.

Gerard

Oh that's a big question. I think I wouldn't talk about it just in terms of evaluation. I would talk about how you could use research marketing intelligence to guide your decision making. So it's not just a matter of trying something out and seeing whether it worked yes or no. First of all it is about how you do research and the starting point would be to do some developmental formative research to see what needs doing in the first place rather than making assumptions about that. It then, as part of that process, it's going to involve you in thinking very clearly about what sort of objectives your campaign or your intervention or whatever it is you're intending to do is going to achieve and objectives are critical if you're going to decide whether it worked or not. At the end of the day you've got to have a destination to know whether you've arrived there. But you've also got to think through a couple of other things. How realistic are these objectives? There's an inclination sometimes in public health to have very ambitious objectives whereas ... you know, Coke would be happy with a half per cent increase in market share. We set about reducing smoking levels by twenty per cent in five years – so be realistic about them. And that realism also means aligning what you're going to do with what you're going to achieve. So you know if you're running a communication campaign it probably makes sense to have at least some of your objectives communication objectives. And if it's not appropriate to have communication objectives it's probably not communicating that you need. So you're continually trying to marry up what your objectives are with how you're going to deliver that objective

The second characteristic you need to look for in your objectives is that they are somehow measurable – if you want to reduce smoking prevalence for example it's not enough just to say to reduce prevalence you want to say from what to what when. So you've got a very specific measure you can take. So measurable, realistic objectives are very important. You've now done your formative research. You've developed your initiative with clear objectives. You're going to implement it presumably so you then need to make sure you've got some research focused in that makes sure it actually is being implemented. What people might sometimes term "process evaluation". So to take a very simple example: you can intervene in schools by giving fruit to all the children for example as has happened in parts of Britain. You know you need to check that the fruit is being delivered to the schools; that it is being given to the kids; that it is in an edible condition when they get it because there may well be process things that go wrong that explain why it didn't work. So it may not be that the idea was a bad idea it's just that the delivery firm were not very good and they squashed all the apples and all the fruit was bruised before the children got it. So process is very important. And then you get the issue of evaluating the effect. Course you've returned to your objectives what you are trying to achieve and then you have to try and work out whether your intervention had an impact on that knowledge, that perception, that behaviour. And in order to measure that you are going to have to do some sort of control.

Michaela

Absolutely because that's the hard bit isn't it? If you're trying to change somebody's behaviour what we're doing as the health service, our interventions could be very, very difficult to monitor. It's very hard to find out what factors are changing somebody's behaviour

Gerard

Absolutely and classically the only real way of doing that is to have a control group and a test group. So you intervene with a test group. The control group is otherwise identical and you measure before and after. Even then it's challenging but that's classically the only way you can discount other things. Now the big problem with that is it is phenomenally expensive to do. And there's a real danger that [a] the research bit of that process and I've described it as a process, a formative process outcome evaluation, that bit of the process comes to dominate simply because it takes all the budget.

Michaela

It does sound very complex. I mean who do you think are the best people to undertake that kind of evaluation? Would it be the practitioners or would you suggest involving external consultants? Because it does sound as if it could be very time rich and it will take a lot of time and a lot of resources.

Gerard

I think there's a number of different actors who can get involved in this. When you say the practitioners I assume you mean the people who are running the campaign?

Michaela

Absolutely. Yeah

Gerard

I think they have a role to play and should be doing some research. I feel that you need particularly the formative stuff to get your head around the people but there's also clearly an issue here of standing back a bit and being independent of what you're doing and you know Fred evaluating Fred's work is not a good model. Fred is going to be a bit close to what has gone on he's maybe inclined to think it was very good and so you want to step from that. And so there are at least three alternatives after that. There may be other people within your organisation who can engage with and help with research, maybe a division of the health service that has those sorts of skills of one sort or another. There may be commercial operators, market research companies, who can do this and there may be academic institutions. And may be a combination of these is really what's needed. I think what I would guard against though is the danger that you as a practitioner somehow let go entirely of this process. I think it's a really important part of you knowing what you're doing and learning from where you're going.

Michaela

So if we were looking at a budget for example as a guideline how much budget percentage wise would you allocate to evaluation?

Gerard

Oh that's a really – difficult question to answer - between ten and twenty five per cent I would say.

Michaela

Okay. Fair enough –

Gerard

Anything less than ten per cent you should ask serious questions. You know it's a bit like buying a hunting rifle and saving money on the sights

Michaela

Okay. I just think sometimes – that's the part a programme or project that gets tacked on at the end and sometimes that's when we don't have the money. So it's about doing that right at the beginning and planning that right in.

Gerard

Yeah. What is more if you're really short of money save money on your outcome evaluation and not on your formative research

Michaela

Okay

Gerard

That's really where you need to be and I think we actually make a rod for our own back if we continually try to evaluate fairly small, short term interventions on the basis of unrealistic behavioural objectives. We should have these objectives and we should be monitoring them but it should be on a much more gradual process over a ten-year plan, a twenty five-year plan. I think we should be thinking those long term ways and monitoring our progress towards them. But let's not kid ourselves that we can measure every step of the journey accurately.

Michaela

Ok - that's really helpful, thanks very much.

Gerard

Talking about evaluation, it's sometimes useful to think of specific examples. There's a mass media campaign that's being run at the moment and has been for the last five years by the European commission right across Europe so twenty seven countries, twenty two different languages and a combination of media being used, everything from viral marketing to on-line cessation advice and email cessation support. So lots of things going on and trying to evaluate that and whether it's worked is clearly an immense challenge. Part of it has been to do the classic communication and awareness monitors. Have people seen it? Do they engage with it? Do they like it? Do they say it has an influence on them? And that's probably as far as we will ever get with behaviour change. Perhaps the only addition on top of that will be records of how many people have used the stopping smoking help line, the stopping smoking email support and so on and their claimed success rates. So one of the interesting things about it is that doing that over a number of years begins to paint an interesting picture. One off it's not terribly interesting but gradually the brand of that campaign, which is called the help campaign, the brand is beginning to come to life. People are beginning to engage with it and ... but that outcome evaluation is a large-scale survey across all those twenty-seven countries so enormous project, a thousand people in every country each year for the duration of the campaign. So thousands upon thousands of interviews. But what has also been crucial to the success of that campaign is a regular injection of formative research to see what people think of the developing materials, the developing campaign. Is it interesting them? Does it engage with them? Do they understand it? And can you do a message that meets the needs of people from Romania to the Isle of Skye? And the answer is yes you can to some extent and no you can't in other areas. So for example we've had to adjust the campaign for countries that have smoke free public places and countries that don't because messaging just doesn't work in one area that would work in the other.

Michaela

So what about people who will say they're doing something when in fact they're not? So for example if somebody was to ask about how much you drink and we all know what we should be drinking what about people who will just give the answers that they really think you want to hear?

Gerard

Well first of all I think we shouldn't just dismiss that. I think that's quite an interesting reflection of where people are at, the fact that presumably they know they should be drinking less. So that's not completely without value but yes it reminds us that we need to have rigorous research techniques. And we in fact at the Institute of Social Marketing have just done a large survey of adolescents which looked at their drinking behaviour and alcohol consumption the classic problem in this regard in that people are inclined to understate. Also

it's a very complex question you're asking. What did you have to drink last night? You know if you had a half pint of lager followed by a gin and tonic followed by a glass of wine how do you answer the question even if you're trying to. So you need to put together a set of questions that allow people to answer it properly. Before we accuse them of dishonesty lets give them a proper chance to do it. So it is about rigorous techniques. You can go a step further, as they do in tobacco research, and there are actually physical measures you can take so if somebody says they don't smoke you can take Measures or CO2 measures or whatever to check up. But I think I'm inclined to think more broadly about this and say here's something – some element of trust missing here if people feel – under scrutiny and getting a finger wagging if somebody is asking me how much I drink and I lie about it because just as likely if they were talking to their mates they'd be lying but in the opposite direction –

Michaela

The other way yeah.

Gerard

So it tells you something about how they relate to the people asking the question and I suspect if you drill down a bit you'll get to a place where actually it's a measure of the failure of public health to engage people in the grand project as it were, which is that we've lots of advice, information and opportunity now to live lifestyles that are just as enjoyable as any other lifestyle and will be healthier and happier and longer.

Michaela

It just shows you how complex we really are doesn't it?

Gerard

It does – absolutely does – absolutely does.

Michaela

OK, thanks.