



Social marketing

Ethics and social marketing

Fiona

Hello. I'm Fiona Harris from the Open University Business School and I'm talking to Professor of Social Marketing Gerard Hastings about ethics and social marketing.

Gerard, marketing perhaps ironically tends to have a poor public image. People often joke that ethical marketing is an oxymoron. Does social marketing elicit similar negative reactions?

Gerard

It certainly treads in some delicate ethical ground. I think I would argue that marketing is not so much immoral as amoral and it's how it is used that determines its morality. And in the case of social marketing we have to be very alert to it because essentially what we're doing is messing with people's lives. We're interfering in what they do and encouraging them to change what they do so we'd better be sure that we are advising them correctly and saying things that really will make their lives better.

Fiona

How does social marketing balance attempting to change people's behaviour whilst respecting individuals autonomy?

Gerard

I think I would probably start with Jean Paul Sartre here and argue that you know people's individual autonomy is perhaps something we exaggerate in modern capitalist countries. We tend to think that we are all self empowered, making decisions about whether we are going to do this or consume that or not consume that and in reality you we're actually quite constrained by the environment in which we find ourselves. By things like social norms to the extent that we think our behaviour is normal and acceptable. All these will impinge on our supposedly freedom based individual decisions so it's we need to recognise that we are not necessarily as free as all that. And very often all social marketing is doing is re-balancing things. So you know a society that's awash with stimuli to consume alcohol for example needs to be balanced by some indication that this isn't necessarily all that normal a behaviour you know. If you look on a global perspective for example most people don't drink.

Fiona

What about smoking? What about people – smoker's response that they've got a right to smoke if they want to and they don't mind damaging their health?

Gerard

I think – freedom is a very, very shaky basis for a pro tobacco message. Vast majority of smokers start in childhood before they are in a position to judge the full enormity of what they're doing. They then become addicted to nicotine and find it very difficult to stop but you know if you get to the age of twenty one without smoking you will not smoke. Nobody starts – no adults, mature adults, start smoking. Plus you've got this issue of addiction. So you know to what extent is it a free choice to take something that is as – nicotine is more addictive than heroin. If we talk about heroin users as suffering from you know their freedom being impinged by drug treatment facilities for example.

Fiona

Business marketing is frequently criticised when it targets or excludes vulnerable or disadvantaged groups of people. Social marketing often involves working with vulnerable or hard to reach target groups. What measures do social marketers take to ensure that these

groups are not subjected to undue pressure or unfairly excluded in a social marketing campaigns?

Gerard

I think you've raised a very delicate issue and there is a number of different dangers here. One is that you know by targeting particular disadvantaged groups we somehow stigmatise them you now so we put all the drug treatment facilities in one particular community and thereby that community acquires a reputation for being riddled with drugs and so on. On the other hand there is a moral dilemma that if we just broadcast, if we don't target, then what history teaches is that it will be the more empowered members of the community who will pick up on such messages, particularly when the messages are typically being generated by people like them. So most people who are running social marketing campaigns are educated, middle class, white males and low and behold it's the educated, white middle classes who respond most successfully in the last fifty years for example to these sorts of messages. So targeting has its dangers but not targeting has its dangers as well. And I think in some ways your question betrays one of the real dangers here when you talk about hard to reach groups which is a phrase which trips off the tongue very easily but arguably actually we should think of this the other way around. There is no such thing as a hard to reach group. There's just hard to access services you know and a good marketer will not blame his customer for not buying the product. He'll look at the product or she'll look at the product and say well how can I adjust this offering so that it becomes attractive enough for the customer to buy it.

Fiona

One of the economist's Milton Friedman's arguments against corporate social responsibility was that business wasn't qualified to decide what was in society's best interests. Are social markets entitled to determine which behaviours should be permitted or prohibited?

Gerard

I think it's again a very thorny moral issue and I think that – those decisions have to be made with great care and great transparency. I'm not sure social marketers are necessarily the best people to make those decisions either. I think in a democracy that really needs to be some sort of elected representative that sets these priorities and makes the decisions. You know – do we invest public money in campaigns to stop people smoking or to stop people drinking or, as has tended to happen interestingly in the last few decades in Britain, put most of the money into illicit drug use. And whereas in fact most of the harm is done by licit drugs - you know – tobacco and alcohol do far more damage than do the illicit drugs. So why is it that we put so much effort into those and not into the – could it be that there are big companies that have vested interest in people smoking and drinking? So there is clearly a need to make these decisions very carefully and I think it is the most important ethical challenge that social marketers make and the primary first one they face is whose behaviour and why

Fiona

Who does tend to be behind setting the agenda as to which issues should be addressed? Is it government? Is it social marketers? Is it research?

Gerard

It's first and foremost I think it has to be government who has to be doing this because they have most of the budgets and so they would be involved. But whether governments make empowered decisions without influence from another vested interest is a moot point. And you know tobacco companies, alcohol companies, food companies, will notoriously - will try and influence government decision-making. so you know thinking globally the World Health Organisation has tried to address issues of smoking and alcohol use and diet and come under an enormous amount of well documented pressure to try and undermine it you know. When it tried to make statements about the dangers of an over sugared diet for example the American sugar companies were ruthless in trying to cut them down. And that's not – I'm not exposing something new here. That's well documents, well established. So there will be pressures put on them. Social marketers themselves I think tend to be enacting campaigns rather than making decisions about – because they don't tend to be budget holders. They tend to be spending other people's money. But it well behoves them to ask questions about

whether they should be engaging their efforts and skills in a particular area. If you like a well-trained social marketer is somebody who has a powerful palette of skills that they can use to change people's lives, to interfere in people's lives. So it is very important they recognise that they are influences on people's lives and behave ethically and make sure they are dealing with behaviours that really matter. The other sector that I've not touched on and should be mentioned in response to your question is the third sector. And the NGO community and groups like Cancer Research UK for example or Barnardos or any number of NGO's who will lobby government to take action in certain areas and make them think about it and I think that is legitimate. But again, decisions have to be made to balance priorities and decide you know – the danger is with companies they will make the choice not in terms of you know which behaviours would most benefit society. They will make the choice in terms of which behaviours will produce the best PR. And similarly you know if you are an NGO focused on homelessness then you will give that a bigger priority than might – an NGO concerned with drug misuse for example. So government has ultimately to be the arbiter of these.

Fiona

That's really interesting what you say about pressures. One of the reasons ethical issues ... business marketing is because markets often face conflicting demands between trying to satisfy consumers needs on the one hand and their organisation's interests on the other. Are there any other kinds of pressures that social marketers face?

Gerard

Yes I think there are. I think it's more stark in a commercial sector in that you know the pressure to make profits and respond to share holders' needs will always supersede any other pressures you know because if you stop satisfying shareholders you're out of business. So – and we need to really have that tattooed on our hearts - that reality. So when commercial companies get involved in good causes it's always with an eye to that main chance. And that's how it is. And indeed to a large extent that's how it ought to be because corporations are spending other peoples money so they have - rightly have this fiduciary requirement to look after their shareholders. So that's really important. There are however equivalent pressures on social marketers and I think sometimes these can become over bearing as well. And the great example of that in recent time I think would be the introduction of targets – so you have to meet certain targets. And you, as a social marketer, your career, your advancement will depend upon you meeting those targets. And those targets can sometimes become perverse and so you know cessation services have to get so many in – people in to the services for example and you know they will focus on getting people in above and beyond all else. So you know rather than putting effort into looking after people long term once they've got them into the services they just put all the efforts into getting the door going and not necessarily resulting in the best interests of the people that they are set up to help.

Fiona

Do targets always have to be numbers or do they include effectiveness and how on earth would you assess that?

Gerard

You're right. Very often targets are brought down to numbers and I think one of the reasons for that is numbers have this comforting precision but that precision is often spurious because numbers don't mean anything on their own. They represent something else whether that be the number of people who are attending a service or how many people have gone successfully through it or whatever. I think targets don't need to be that crass. I think they can be more sophisticated but you immediately get into as you rightly say issues of measurement. So in the commercial sector again paradoxically one would expect them to be very numbers driven. You know, numbers of bags of cash for example. Increasingly the interest is not in these sorts of crude sales graphs. It's in measuring things like customer satisfaction which is much more difficult you know. You can count the number of people going through a door. It's much more difficult to measure, take a ruler out and measure customer satisfaction. But the fact that it's difficult to measure doesn't mean it's not important and businesses recognise that and so put a lot of effort into it. And personally I think the social marketers could learn a great deal from that idea and you know if they stopped focusing so much on taking people through a prescribed set of steps towards the right

behaviour you know in a very prescriptive sort of way and started to measure things like people's engagement with the idea of changing their behaviour, their feelings of self empowerment and the extent to which they think you know the fundamental public health message that they can do something to make their lives better they buy into that and the ownership of that. In other words picking up on something Derek Wanlass talked about engagement and full engagement of people in the process of health improvement I think the potential is great and ultimately that is what we want to do. We actually - even cessation services I don't think should be focused on the idea of simply getting people to quit smoking. They should be focused on the idea of changing smoking behaviour of course but they should also be thinking about how people do that and how they feel about doing that. Do they end up not smoking and feeling like they've been forced into this by a you know a rather repressive service and a culture which says that you shall not smoke? Or do they come through it thinking "I've conquered this and I'm now a non-smoker and I'm really proud and pleased about that." and do they go even a step further and say this just demonstrates that the things I can do to make my life healthier and happier and longer and start to think about taking exercise and changing their diet and making that healthier and in other words turning them into people who are to a greater extent the authors of their own fate. And I think that's what really underpins the inequalities issues in the UK where you know we've got this appalling situation where you know the poorest people in Britain die a quarter of century before the richest people and that's you know that's just an incredible and appalling statistic. And I think fundamentally, a fundamental part of that is that the people at the bottom of the pile do not feel in a position to – they don't have a sense of agency. They can't determine or even influence tomorrow so they concentrate on today. Whereas you know if you're in a good job, you've got good prospects, you've got a mortgage, all these things make you feel more inclined to get into the saddle and take hold of the reins and rush ahead and feel that you've got some power over it and thereby bring about much better health outcomes across the board. And may be more important than that a sense of achievement and feeling in control. And you're getting into a very difficult area but maybe just that feeling is really what we're all after. rather than actual longevity we just want our lives to feel like they are better. And reverting back to commercial marketers they recognised that long ago. they've put an enormous effort into branding and stroking and "because your worth it" and all that sort of stuff. Social marketers should do the same.

Fiona

Are there any examples in social marketing where you have actually been able to improve people's lives and turn them around?

Gerard

Yeah well I think taking the – you know probably the core public health issue in the UK and across the world indeed – tobacco use. There is no doubt about it if you talk to people who have successfully quit smoking that is an incredibly empowering high achieving moment you know. I have spoken to people who gave up smoking twenty years ago and it's still a major issue that's something they've - badge they wear with great pride. It's you know I wouldn't be exaggerating to say for many people it's the biggest single achievement because it's a personal battle and they've won it and they feel really good about that. So yeah it's not so much an individual campaign as a real palpable sense that people can feel great about their health and about public health and I think what we often fail to do is build on that, see that as a foundation upon which we can really encourage people to address all aspects of their life in an equally empowered way and not continually threaten them with dire consequences if they don't do as they're told but help them to see that there are opportunities for them to make their lives better.

Fiona

Businesses sometimes engage in social marketing themselves. For example some alcohol companies include messages about responsible drinking on their bottles. What's your view about companies engaging in social marketing activities?

Gerard

I think – fine. It can't do any harm provided we recognise that this is not about making people drink more safely or improving public health. It's about managing corporate reputation and it

has to be about that. They are a corporation. Their first and foremost duty is to their shareholders, not to the general public, and therefore you know when as long as those two align – fine - but if it comes to a point where they have to choose between doing the social marketing and paying their dividends to their share holders the dividends will always win out. So in other words the real danger is that we get confused and think this is genuinely some sort of altruistic programme by the company and lower our guards, stop doing publicly funded, genuine if you will, social marketing campaigns. Genuine in the sense it's sole purpose is to benefit the target audience for that social marketing effort and you know think we've got that all covered because a particular alcohol company is running a campaign on something and you know in the long term that could be disastrous.

Fiona

Do you think that regulation by the companies themselves is sufficient or do you think that actually legislation is required?

Gerard

Companies are not going to regulate themselves sufficiently well. No – there has to be – it's not the same thing as running a social marketing company. But if we are looking at how they run their businesses then self regulation has been shown time and again doesn't work any better than you know allowing the fox to take charge of the hen coop. It's – it's just you know this isn't a criticism of any particular company or any particular individual. You know humans are fallible and if you put them in a position where they are policing themselves then you know whether you are doctors, whether you are policemen or whether you are marketing executives - it don't work.

Fiona

It's been nice talking to you. Thank you very much Gerard

Gerard

Pleasure.