

Chapter 16

Social Marketing to Achieve Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

That sustainable practices are necessary for the earth's survival, is well documented, but how to creatively balance the needs of the multiple stakeholders of society, the economy and the earth, is a major challenge. Individuals, businesses and societies require substantial changes to how they behave with regards to the earth's limited resources. Social marketing is the application of marketing principles to behaviour change and thus has the potential to guide efforts to achieve sustainability. This chapter discusses the principles and theories of social marketing and uses them to recommend actions to achieve sustainability. Exchange theory, relationship and network theory, and critical marketing theory provide guidelines to improve the success of social marketing interventions designed to achieve sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

The multiple demands of the earth, the economy and society cannot be sustained forever. There is a dire need for a more sustainable co-existence of these components (Research & Degrowth, 2010; Starke, 2013; UN, 2012). The UN World Commission on Environment and Development (WECD, 1987, p. 43) defines sustainability as “meeting the needs of current generations without limiting the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. Sustainability is however a complicated concept (Engelman, 2013; Waas, Hugé, Verbruggen & Wright, 2011) rife with interpretations and paradoxes (Jabareen, 2008). Elkington (1997) introduced the concept of the triple bottom line of sustainability with three closely interconnected dimensions: economic prosperity, social justice and environmental quality. The ‘triple bottom line’ conceptualisation of sustainability including profit, society and the environment, provides an important guideline for the sustainable behaviours of all members of society (Balderjahn, Buerke, Kirchgeorg, Peyer, Seegebarth & Wiedmann, 2013). Economic sustainability goals aim to achieve a fair

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profit for producers while being affordable to consumers and at the same time meet the needs of society (social sustainability goal) and preserve the natural environment (environmental sustainability goal” (de Barcellos, Krystallis, de Melo Saab, Kügler & Grunert, 2011, p. 392).

The *State of the World* report (2013) indicates multiple benefits if sustainability can be achieved but also acknowledges that a large-scale change in the way we live, is required (Starke, 2013). However, achieving such sustainability is thought to be one of the most complex challenges of our time (Engelman, 2013; Tukker, 2013; UN, 2012; Waas, *et al.*, 2011).

Robinson (2004: 381) proposes that:

Sustainability should not be conceived of as a single concept, or even as a consistent set of concepts. Rather it is more usefully thought of as [an] approach or process of community-based thinking that indicates we need to integrate environmental, social and economic issues in a long-term perspective, while remaining open to fundamental differences about the way that is to be accomplished and even the ultimate purposes involved.

Albeit somewhat vague, Robinson’s viewpoint implies that for sustainability to prevail, creativity and collaboration across multiple sectors and including multiple stakeholders is necessary. One key stakeholder in achieving sustainability, particularly environmental sustainability, is the individual consumer and members of societies. Thus a necessary component of any integrated strategy to achieve sustainability must be finding an appropriate mechanism to persuade society to live sustainably (Starke, 2010, 2012, 2013). This is where social marketing becomes important in this discussion. Social marketing has been defined as the use of commercial marketing principles to achieve *behaviour* change such that society as a whole benefits (Andreasen, 1994; Kotler, Roberto & Lee, 2002 – *italics added*). Social marketing uses a strategic approach to develop long-term strategies which change behaviours deemed to be problematic to society (Eagle, Dahl, Hill, Bird, Spotswood & Tapp, 2013) e.g. overuse of resources, pollution, and over consumption. However, sustainable behaviour change is not easy for social marketers to achieve (Brennan & Binney, 2008; Frame & Newton, 2007).

The aim of this chapter is to expose the reader to social marketing theory and the ways it can assist in creatively achieving sustainability. After reading this chapter, the reader will understand social marketing and how it can assist in achieving sustainability. The reader will also be able to evaluate business and marketing activities and generate creative and innovative ideas for social marketing campaigns to achieve sustainability.

SOCIAL MARKETING

This section introduces social marketing and its core principles. The section also discusses the key theories which provide a foundation to social marketing: exchange theory, relationship and network marketing theory and critical marketing theory.

Kotler and Lee (2011: 26) define social marketing as “a process that uses marketing principles and techniques to promote target-audience behaviours that will benefit society as well as the individual”. Social marketing may therefore be viewed as a branch of marketing which focuses on influencing behaviours such that both the individual and society benefit (Andreasen, 1994; Kotler *et al.*, 2002).

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