



Hoffman

# Do we have a water problem?: The use of social marketing as a problem solver

**S**ince the 1970s, the field of environmental issues and education has been rapidly changing from dependence on top-down marketing methods such as public service announcements (PSAs) to a more sophisticated approach borrowed from commercial marketers termed “social marketing.” Rather than continuing a dictatorial approach in the way that information is conveyed, a new generation of professionals in public health and environmental management are listening to the habits, needs, and desires of direct target audiences and are building programs and campaigns for specific demographics. A focus on people and the way they behave involves much more market research, global

scrutiny, and evaluation to form the cornerstone of what is becoming “the norm” in social marketing.

## ENVIRONMENTAL CAMPAIGNS

Social marketing in the environmental field is concentrating on changing behaviors, attitudes, lifestyles, and ideas. Social behaviors portrayed in marketing and advertising campaigns now seek to benefit the target audience and society in general. No longer do we find campaigns that only benefit the marketer. Social marketers can be credited for use of behavioral change campaigns within diverse socioeconomic cultures in product groups such as health care and medicine, smoking and tobacco use, and water quality and water use management. The pri-

mary focus of social marketing is on the public—educating people to practice good behaviors rather than persuading them to buy what we happen to be selling.

When planning a social marketing campaign, several elements are considered. For example, for the water use management industry, several key elements—the social marketing “Ps”—should be studied while developing a campaign.

**Product.** For intangible ideas like water use restrictions, people must perceive that they have a genuine problem and that the product—in this case of the concept of water-use changes and the practical tips associated with change—offers a good solution. Here we discover public perceptions and determine how important people feel it is to take action.

**Price.** What must the public do in order to obtain the product? The “cost” may require individuals to give up intangibles, such as time or effort, or risk embarrassment and disapproval of their peers, friends, and neighbors. If the benefits are perceived as greater than the cost, then chances are that the adoption of the product (behavior change) is much greater.

**Place.** Place refers to decisions about how the public is reached with information or training. This may include running campaigns in health-care offices or shopping malls, or through mass media or personal demonstrations. Place also determines how to provide the offering



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and quality of the service. Determine the activities and habits of your audience, their experience and satisfaction with the existing delivery system, and pinpoint the most ideal means of message distribution.

**Promotion.** The integrated use of advertising, public and media relations, promotions, personal sales, and entertainment vehicles creates and sustains the demand for the product. PSAs and paid ads, along with methods such as coupons, media events, editorials, home demonstrations, and point-of-purchase displays could also be used to increase awareness. Primary research findings and white papers can be used to generate additional publicity for the program at media events and in news stories.

**Publics.** This term refers to external and internal groups involved in the campaign or program. External publics include the target audience, secondary audiences, policymakers, shareholders, and gatekeepers. Internal publics are those who are involved with approval or implementation of the program.

**Partnership.** Social and health issues are often so complex that one agency may not be able to have an effect by itself. Consider teaming up with other nearby agencies to increase effectiveness. Investigate which organizations have similar goals, and find ways you can work together.

**Policy.** Public programs and peer pressure can motivate individual behaviors. However, individuals may not be in supportive environments that sustain change for the long run. Determine the education and awareness levels, as well as the current policy interpretations, of the specific cultures to which you are marketing. Often internal policy change is needed, and media advocacy programs can be effective in implementing a social marketing program tailored to your specific audiences.

**Purse strings.** Organizations and agencies that develop social marketing programs may operate through funds provided by sources such as taxpayer dollars, governmental grants, and donations. Think about where you will get the money to create your program.

Each element of the marketing mix should be researched, implemented, and evaluated, as the program requires.

### NEGATIVE MESSAGES NOT ALWAYS SUCCESSFUL

Traditionally, many academic and top-down campaigns have used negative messages. For example, the message that wasting water is against the law implies a punitive effect. People don't like to be threatened with the law or through condemning messaging. It can feel as if they are being preached to, and it doesn't drive behavior change. In fact, it may even force an outcome that you did not expect. Often people turn off these messages and never pay attention. Others have been known to rebel and intentionally waste water.

People do not want to be told they are bad. They want to be a part of the social good. Most people want to do the right thing.

However, many water resource managers still utilize top-down communications. Campaigns launched by water management districts, utilities, and local governments typically include formal education programs and distribution of free literature, along with free media exposure, PSAs, Speakers Bureaus, displays at community events, and shopping malls. Although these efforts reach certain publics, these people are usually self-selecting and already prone to do the right thing. The publics who do not receive the message tend to believe that water conservation is not important unless we are in drought or other emergency conditions.

A marketing mix of broad-based communications is necessary to educate, motivate, and change public behavior regarding water conservation and water quality. This is even more important in today's media-rich culture in which the average North American is bombarded with some 3,000 marketing messages daily—many carefully constructed to grab attention and be memorable. Water conservation and water quality messages should do no less.

### THREE POTENTIAL CAMPAIGN THEMES

Generally three broad themes may have application in a social marketing campaign—fear, facts, and fun.

**Fear.** Fear generally has greatest effect during drought and other emergency situations. People who see physical changes in water quality or supply (polluted rivers or drying lakes) react immediately. But fear tends to be a temporary motivator—the situation goes back to normal, and people revert to pre-emergency behaviors. Using fear as a general message usually backfires—what people can't see can't be a real threat.

**Facts.** Facts are always appreciated by targeted audiences, as long as the facts are simple and easy to remember. Most people will comply with behavior-change suggestions as long as they understand—and believe—the reasons given for why changes are necessary. A fact-based campaign may work, but it is important to deliver the messages in memorable ways.

**Fun.** Fun is a social marketer's secret weapon. Breaking through the 3,000 competing marketing messages each day requires lively, energetic, engaging, and often humorous methods to help gain attention and make messages stick. Many technical and scientific water resource managers favor more straightforward, fact-

filled messages. Unfortunately, people decide whether to continue reading, watching, or listening to a message in fewer than three seconds. Humor, energy, and upbeat messages engage audiences long enough to get the message across.

### SOUTHEAST SUPPLY ISSUE SERVES AS EXAMPLE

The following is an example of a social marketing solution recently implemented for a water use management district in the Southeast. The public agency is challenged with ensuring that adequate and affordable supplies of water are available to a growing population. According to district officials, most of the public-use water within the district comes from fresh groundwater. Using too much groundwater could result in wetlands drying out, lake level and spring flow reductions, and water quality problems. The district also determined that by the year 2020, at least 40% of its area of responsibility may not be able to meet its projected water needs through groundwater and would need to turn to more expensive supply sources.

The district decided to produce and execute a water supply and conservation education plan that would change the behavior of its publics. Using professionally produced advertisements and paid media, the district focused its message on water conservation to extend the current water supply, which would reduce or delay the need to develop costly new supply sources and treatment facilities, thereby delaying the need to pass the cost increase on to the public.

The program changed the way people think about water. The multiyear campaign began in 2001 and continues to evolve with a consistent theme and succession of recognizable characters. Using a humorous approach, the campaign helped people think about their water use behaviors differently.

Members of the public were taught that they are a part of the solution, because the campaign used positive, educational, and motivational concepts.

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By the third year of the campaign, a sense of social responsibility was instilled in the public. Through an ongoing program of phone surveys, evaluations, and focus groups, people began to note that small changes are what make a difference. They didn't have to dramatically change their lifestyles and believed that if we all do a little, it will make a big difference, and we can save a substantial amount of water.

From 2002 through 2004, surveys demonstrated that 50% of the public recalled the advertisements, and 17% admitted to changing their water-use behaviors. That means that approximately 700,000 people within the district improved their water-use practices as a result of this campaign. For campaign year 2005, 81% of the public remembered the ads, and public awareness of the campaign message increased significantly from 66 to 83% from previous surveys. Survey results indicate the message is being heard and behaviors are changing.

### SOCIAL MARKETING CAN CHANGE BEHAVIOR

The campaign mentioned earlier is just one example of a water management district that has great vision and a progressive board and staff. Behavior modification through social marketing can take some time, and long-term messaging is one of just a few ways to make new behaviors socially acceptable. It can take years, and policymakers may have to accept that. Many people feel an entitlement and believe they deserve to consume any and all resources regardless of their socioeconomic status. It's difficult to make people realize that water conservation is important. A well-planned and -orchestrated, broad-based media communications campaign is the best way to hasten behavioral change and is a cost-efficient way to reach the broadest audience.

The success of any social marketing plan in any industry is a matter of educating the public about needs and solutions in a way that conveys ownership. The heart of social marketing is using traditional advertising and marketing strategies to bring lessons to the public. The lessons must communicate the notion that we will all benefit if we all participate in a positive behavior change.

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