Rethinking the boundaries of social marketing: Activism or advertising?

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ABSTRACT

In some areas of public health concern, corporate marketing activities may negate social marketing messages targeting individuals. Traditional social marketing campaigns may be ineffective when commercial marketing activities create an environment that encourages and maintains unhealthy behaviors. This article explores the role of social marketing in these instances.

Social marketing is the design, implementation, and control of programs seeking to increase the acceptability of a social idea or practice in a target group (Bloom and Novelli, 1981). Social marketing tactics persuade individuals to alter their individual behavior in order to improve their own health and welfare (Andreasen, 1995; Hastings, 2007). For example, social marketing researchers examine reducing obesity (Gorn and Goldberg, 1982; Swinburn, Gill, and Kumanyika, 2005), reducing tobacco abuse (Wolburg, 2006; Kilbourne, 1991), reducing alcohol abuse (Wechsler et al., 2003), protecting against skin cancer (Dobbinson et al., 2008), and reducing unsafe sexual behaviors (Price, 2001).

Some social marketing research aims at understanding the variables that influence the persuasiveness of social marketing communications. For example, Reichert et al. (2001) examine the effects of social marketing advertisements using sexual appeals. They found that ads using sexual appeals were more effective in obtaining attention and evoking more favorable audience responses toward the message.

While increasing knowledge about the effectiveness of social marketing campaigns is important, the focus on improving social marketing effectiveness by improving the messaging may be too narrow. Social marketing campaigns typically work to alter an individual's perceptions and attitudes (Kotler and Lee, 2007). The targets of social marketing messages often aim at internal behavioral influences on the individual (Kotler, 2005). While this may be effective in influencing behavioral change in some individuals, many other individuals may not be sufficiently influenced by a social marketing campaign to change their behavior. Furthermore, individuals live in a complex environment of multiple internal and external influences on their behavior. If a behavioral influence is of sufficient magnitude, if the influence persists for a long period of time, or if the influence is ubiquitous in an individual's environment, then the effectiveness of a short-lived social marketing campaign may be negated (Wymer, 2007).

When public health is worsened by negative influences that are ever-present in the daily lives of individuals, what should the social marketer do? If the popular culture or the ubiquitous brand advertising is reinforcing unhealthful norms, should the social marketer persist in focusing on developing messages in hopes of changing the behaviors of some individuals? What if unhealthful influences have essentially inoculated the majority of the population from persuasion from social marketing messages? The central thesis of this article is that, under some circumstances, social marketers need to remove the negative environmental influences if public health improvement is the objective. The declining public health caused by the increase in the rate of obesity will be used to build the case for this thesis.

1. The obesity problem

Despite the best efforts of physicians (O'Neil and Wadden, 2005) and a multi-billion dollar weight loss industry (Goodstein, 2005), the obesity pandemic persists (DeNoon, 2006). For example, according to the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, in the past three decades the number of obese and overweight children increased 300% (Lembert, 2005).

Despite the efforts of social marketers (Royne and Levy, 2008), the obesity problem worsens (Popkin, 2008). An estimated 300,000

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Americans die each year from obesity (Maddock, 2004). In America, the majority of adults, regardless of age, incomes, educational levels, and census categories are overweight (Nestle, 2003).

Multiple forces encourage obesity (NIDDK, 2006). In general, occupations and lifestyles are less physically active (Hu, 2008). People are working hours more hours each week (Rhode Island Department of Health, 2008). Individuals experience more job stress (Schwartz, 2007). Despite these contributors to the obesity public health crises, however, the largest contributor to obesity is related to industry marketing activities: the increased availability of junk food; increased portion sizes; food advertising; fast-food promotion; and the low cost of high fat, high calorie foods (Grier and Kumanyika, 2008). The scientific community now recognizes the marketing of unhealthy foods as a major cause of obesity (Quigley and Watts, 2005; Wootan, 2006; World Health Organization, 2003).

1.1. Food industry marketing

The food industry includes the restaurant, beverage, confectionery, and processed food industries. The food industry is among the top advertisers in the U.S. media market (Story, Neumark-Sztainer, and French, 2002). For example, in 2004, U.S. food, beverage, candy, and restaurant companies spent $11.64 billion, compared to $9.99 million from the government encouraging people to eat better (Consumers Union, 2005).

Brand marketing is forceful in the fast food restaurant industry. Advertising is the biggest expense of the fast food restaurant industry (Bedard, 2008). American children are exposed to approximately 40,000 food advertisements per year, 72% of which are for candy, cereal, and fast food (Mellow et al., 2006).

2. Influence of the food industry on obesity

Prior research shows that advertising influences food preferences, food purchases, consumption behavior, and brand and category sales (Caraher and Landon, 2007). Adolescents experience a high level of exposure to mass media, which is equal in importance to other socialization agents, like parents, in their lives (Story et al., 2002).

Industry proponents argue that advertising does not influence consumer choice (Hoek and Gendall, 2006). However, if they really believe such a proposition, how could they justify the large sums they invest in advertising (Story and French, 2004)? Advertising actually has a major role in reinforcing and normalizing behavior (Hoek and Gendall, 2006). After reviewing the evidence, Royne and Levy (2008) conclude that the food industry's marketing is undermining public health.

Food industry marketing appears to have a substantial influence on obesity. Research using children found that children choose the brands they have seen in advertisements (Story and French, 2004). The food industry spends billions each year to reach children and youth. Advertising increases food purchase requests by children to parents, and influences their product and brand preferences (Institute of Medicine, 2004). Advertising may also influence adults although not to the same extent as children.

2.1. Ubiquity of food industry promotion in the U.S.

Industry promotion of unhealthy foods appears so regularly in the media environment that fast food restaurant advertising may foster the impression that these foods are a normal diet (Brink, 2005; Hoek, 2005). A lifetime of exposure to industry marketing messages produces cultural and lifestyle changes (Story et al., 2002).

The U.S. food system is the second largest advertiser in the American economy, second only to the automobile industry (Story and French, 2004). Food is the most frequently advertised product category on U.S. children's television and food ads account for over 50% of all ads targeting children (Story and French, 2004). Children spend an average of 5.5 h per day using various media and are exposed to an average of one food commercial every 5 min—40,000 television commercials annually (Weiting, 2008). Food marketers reach children primarily through television, but also through all available media such as websites.

In the U.S., there is a prevalence of restaurants. A variety of fast food restaurants are readily available to virtually all Americans (Maddock, 2004). From 1972 to 1997, the number of U.S. fast food restaurants increased from 75,000 to 200,000 (Jekanowski, 1999).

Americans spend about half of their total food purchases for food in restaurants of various types. Most of the remainder of the food budget is spent at grocery stores. The food industry has learned that greater profits can be earned from selling processed branded food stuffs than selling commodity whole foods. In the typical U.S. grocery store over 80% of food products are branded (Story and French, 2004). Although food processing is profitable, it is not healthful. Food processing results in tasty, affordable foods that are often high in calories, sugar, fat, and sodium and low in nutrition (Arnot, 1998; Wikipedia, 2007).

3. Social marketing and obesity

The typical social marking approach is to develop a short-lived mass advertising campaign to encourage individuals to eat more fruits and vegetables or to exercise more. As discussed earlier, however, the obesity rates continue to rise, proving the social marketing campaigns to be ineffectual. A multi-billion dollar weight loss industry continues to grow as does the average citizen's waistline. Neither social marketing messages nor the weight loss industry's efforts appear to provide a solution to the obesity epidemic. While dealing with public health problems like obesity, in which industry creates a context which supports the public health problem, social marketers need to rethink their approach.

What can social marketers do to change individual behavior considering the influence of the food industry? Perhaps a paradigm shift is needed to develop an innovative solution. Possible choices for social marketing strategies are: (1) educate consumers about the negative influence of food industry marketing, (2) develop a social movement of consumers against food industry marketing, or (3) convince the government to regulate the food industry. These possible solutions are not exhaustive.

Social marketers unwilling to expand the boundaries of social marketing may view the three posited strategies as not social marketing. However, social marketers willing to expand the domain of social marketing allow themselves the creative freedom to develop more effective strategies to improve public health and solve social problems.

3.1. Regulating food industry marketing

Society accepts that advertising alcohol and tobacco to children is not allowed. However, regulating extensive marketing of unhealthy food is unacceptable to Varcoe (2007). Some members of society have been advocating for regulation. Grier and Kumanyika (2008) recommend creating regulations on advertising, subsidizing healthful foods, changing corporate practices, and taxes on unhealthful food. Hoek (2005) recommends that policy makers work towards creating an environment that supports healthier food choices. Use policy to decrease visibility of less healthy foods, making these foods more expensive and more difficult to access. These changes will be more effective than simply educating consumers about healthy eating.

4. Food industry response

A profitable and generally unregulated food industry will respond to social marketing efforts by launching a vigorous defense. Effective