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Brand alliance and event management for social causes: Evidence from New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses findings from research on the effectiveness of a New Zealand health promotion program to make two arguments. The first is that, in appropriate cases such as this program, event management can play a key role in a social marketing health promotion campaign. In showing how event management added value to achieving that particular program's goals, it argues that event management could often be a valid and effective part of the mix for other campaigns promoting social causes. The second highlights important issues that can arise in relationships between non-profit organizations and the commercial sponsors of their events. It contends that organisers of campaigns for social causes need to be alert to the risks in brand alliances between such organizations and need to consider not only the appropriateness of the fit but also the need for an appropriate balance between the sponsor's commercial interests and the non-profit organization's goal.

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1. Introduction

Event management is not totally absent in the social marketing literature but appears as a marginal feature (Donovan & Henley, 2010; Hastings, 2007; Kotler & Lee, 2008). This is typical in that the social marketing literature fails to draw from the practice and literature of public relations on event management as a major tool for delivering persuasive messages and for building relationships with an organization's constituents (Hallahan, 2001; Hearit, 2005; Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, & Toth, 2009). This neglect can be traced to the historical roots of social marketing as a field that emerged from marketing concepts and tools without reference to relevant public relations practices and theories (McKie & Toledano, 2008).

This paper uses a recent New Zealand research project evaluating an event to demonstrate the effectiveness of events for health promotion campaigns. This involved a survey, which was conducted in February 2012 to evaluate the impact of the 2012 *Get it on!* Big Gay Out event. The New Zealand AIDS Foundation (NZAF) has conducted the event since 2004 and it became a major component of the NZAF's *Get It On!* social marketing program in 2009. The findings demonstrate the success of the event in delivering persuasive messages about safe sex to its specific public – men in the LGBT community – and its effectiveness in empowering, engaging and enhancing this community's commitment to healthy sexual behavior.

The 2012 *Get it On!* Big Gay Out helped to promote a “condom culture” within the gay and bisexual community by normalising condoms in sexual and non-sexual situations. The results also indicated that it had increased attendees' commitment to safe sex in the future. Some other findings, however, highlight, at least from the perspective of the non-profit organization,

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possible negative implications in partnering with commercial sponsors. In fact, according to the research and despite their more substantial contribution to the event, the NZAF brand recognition was lower than that of the event sponsor, condom manufacturer Durex. In the light of these findings, the article discusses the significance of brand alliance to the goals of the health promotion program.

2. The New Zealand AIDS Foundation (NZAF) event

Founded in 1985, the NZAF is New Zealand's national HIV prevention and healthcare non-profit organization. Its core mission is "To prevent the transmission of HIV and provide support for people living with HIV, their whanau and families" (NZAF, 2011). It is funded mainly by the NZ Ministry of Health (about 88% of its income) and grants and donations from private donors and public organizations. According to the NZAF 2011 annual report, a significant part of its expenses (about \$1.2 million out of almost \$5 million) is spent on HIV prevention (e.g., through communication and events).

The *Get it on!* program was developed and supported by the NZAF to build a condom culture in New Zealand. Its communication messages try to make condom use and safe sex the norm for gay and bisexual men. *Get it On!* is a multifaceted program. For example, it delivers its behavior-change messaging to specific constituents via a number of different channels including its separately-branded *Get it On!* website, social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Grindr; and at bars and nightclubs; as well as events targeting the gay and bisexual community. *Get it On!* messaging is also advertised on billboards, bus stops, and posters (NZAF, 2011).

3. Literature review

3.1. Public relations and social marketing

Since its introduction by marketing scholars Kotler and Zaltman (1971), social marketing as an academic discipline has consistently ignored relevant and useful public relations theories and concepts while focusing on advertising as major tool for delivering messages (McKie & Toledano, 2008). Social marketing evolved from the discipline of marketing and focused on the use of marketing concepts and techniques to promote social causes and to counter anti-social behavior. It differs from commercial marketing by its emphasis on achieving social change and enhancing the wellbeing, health, and safety of the community rather than increasing sales, profits and value for shareholders. Social marketers promote such things as health, environmental protection, animal welfare, human rights, freedom and other common good issues.

Inspired by commercial marketing, health education, and health communication theory, social marketing still lacks a discipline-specific theory framework (Andreasen, 2006, p. 217). Public relations theory and practice gained knowledge and experience that is relevant and might become beneficial for social marketing campaigns. However, in a process of "re-inventing the wheel," social marketing literature ignores it and instead it is using terms such as "media advocacy" (Donovan & Henley, 2010, p. 74) and "influencing media behavior" (Andreasen, 2006, p. 199) to describe what public relations calls "media relations." The terms "upstream movement" (Andreasen, 2006, p. 117) or "political advocacy" (Donovan & Henley, 2010, p. 72) have been used recently to describe the public relations well known and researched function of "lobbying."

The different terminology describes similar professional tools. In reality the two relatively young disciplines overlap: social marketing programs involve public relations practices and many public relations practitioners provide services to social marketing programs. Both try to build relationships with specific stakeholders based on persuasive communication, understanding and trust. However, the academic disciplines have ignored each other and it was after 2000 before public relations textbooks started to refer to social marketing as a relevant field. Coombs and Holladay (2010) were the first to devote a chapter in a book to social marketing arguing:

Public relations is consistent with the marketing mix. Marketing emphasizes consumers while public relations considers consumers one of many constituents. Hence, public relations has long been adapting the marketing mix to other constituents, such as those in need for pro-social messages. . . . public relations is more than promotion; it shares a mindset and methodologies with marketing, and by extension, social marketing. (pp. 153–154)

The reservation social marketing scholars have about public relations might be explained by the controversial reputation and perceived unethical image of the profession. Their rare comments on public relations tend to see it as an ineffective effort to put a gloss on messages and to promote the organization rather than to solve social issues (Hastings, 2007, p. 116; Andreasen, 2006, p. 46). Social marketing scholars' comments about public relations effectiveness are rare and short: Donovan and Henley (2010) related to it in few paragraphs under "Publicity" (p. 333) and Kotler and Lee (2008) admitted: "Some believe this is the more underutilized channel, and yet a well thought-out program coordinated with other communication mix elements can be extremely effective" (p. 300).

Some identify the contribution of public relations as limited to the stage of "raising awareness" about social problems and sometimes influencing attitudes (Donovan and Henley, 2010, p. 334). Social marketing literature does not identify public relations as significant in attempts to influence behavior change. That change is the bottom line for social marketing.

The reservations of social marketing academics about public relations are partly explained by the latter's organization-centered approach. In many cases social marketing has to compete with messages delivered by public relations practitioners in the business sector. These frequently promote consumerism and the consumption of alcohol or tobacco, fat and sugary

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