VIEWPOINT

The diaspora has already begun

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Abstract
Purpose – In MIP, Vol. 25 No. 1, Mike Saren argued that academic marketers need to move beyond our “traditional managerial and business confines”. This paper aims to suggest that the discipline is already on the move in that direction, and that social marketing is in the vanguard.

Design/methodology/approach – Commissioned as a viewpoint, with permission to “think aloud”.
Findings – The paper starts by restating the simple premise that marketing’s core business is behaviour change. Marketers are highly skilled at understanding people and persuading them to do things, mostly, but not only to buy and consume products and services. Furthermore, one increasingly influences behaviour at the strategic level, addressing stakeholders as well as customers, and recognising the benefits of turning transactions into long-term relationships. Social marketers are demonstrating that these insights have obvious and invaluable applications far beyond the marketplace.

Practical implications – As researchers, teachers and practitioners, one should recognise the opportunities presented by social marketing, and act on them as appropriate.

Originality/value – A persuasive argument for an authoritative source.

Keywords Social marketing, Critical marketing, Behaviour

Paper type Viewpoint

Marketing power
Our capacity to influence behaviour brings us enormous power. For the most part, however, as Saren (2006) points out, we exercise this power in a surprisingly self-limiting fashion. We simply get people to buy things, from baked beans to financial services.

Now this is no small feat. It underpins the success of businesses large and small, delivering wealth, generating taxes and thereby financing every form of social welfare. It also has – as Saren reminds us – a profound impact on our culture, lifestyles and even identities. However, shopping is just a small fragment of human behaviour, and Saren’s observations only serve to underline both marketing’s power and its capacity for much wider influence. The high street may be our home land – and is certainly in our comfort zone – but beyond it lies a land of opportunity.

Moving out of the market place
The smooth running of any democratic society depends on people living their lives in a way that serves both individual and collective needs. The best and worst aspects of life, from charitable giving and health care to drink driving and antisocial teens, are all, at base, a function of human behaviour. We marketers have worked out that the key driver of this behaviour is mutually beneficial exchange (or the lack of it), and have been applying the lesson since time immemorial – well before anyone thought to call the activity “marketing”. Layard (2005, p. 98), for instance, traces this thinking
back to the origins of our species, arguing that cooperation and mutually beneficial exchange were keys to our success on the African savannah:

If human beings had not been able to cooperate in this way they would probably not have survived the rigours of the savannah – or subsequently of regions much colder. At best our lives would have been, as Thomas Hobbes put it, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. We survived because our genes gave us the ability to cooperate.

He goes on to point out that “the result of this cooperation is not a zero sum game; it is a win-win activity”. This, as Saren again reminds us, is the bedrock of academic and applied marketing. Every marketing idea, from McCarthy’s militaristic tool box to Grönroos’s touchy-feely relationships, flows from it. With such broad and ancient origins, a breakout from the high street corral is not just possible, but inevitable.

Kotler and Zaltman (1971, p. 5) set up an escape committee more than three decades ago, when they coined the term “social marketing” and embedded the basic principle that marketing concepts such as “product planning, pricing, communication, distribution, and marketing research” can be used to influence behaviour patterns beyond those directly tied to consumption. Other luminaries took up the call. Andreasen (1994, p. 110) confirmed the new discipline’s premise as “the adaptation of commercial marketing technologies to programs designed to influence (the) voluntary behaviour . . .” and Lefebvre (1992) invoked the familiar win-win mantra.

Furthermore, developments in public health show that this bid for freedom is not only desirable, but also a matter of life and death. We are now entering an era when chronic, lifestyle related illnesses are a greater risk to life and limb than the more familiar communicable killers of yesteryear. Over a decade ago, a landmark paper in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (McGinnis and Foege, 1993) concluded that more than half of all premature deaths were, at that time, attributable to lifestyle diseases such as smoking-related cancer and alcohol-driven cirrhosis. Since, then the problems of obesity have become much more apparent, with a combination of poor diet and inactivity bringing an explosion in type two diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease. Experts are now raising the real possibility that life expectancy in the USA might actually start to dip as a result (Oshansky et al., 2005), the first such fall since the Wild West was colonised and towns stopped putting up readjusted population figures on a daily basis.

In this climate, insights into how behaviour can be influenced are at a premium; our very lives depend on them.

**Proven effectiveness**

Marketing’s progress into the big wide world beyond the high street is bolstered by a burgeoning evidence base showing that it can perfectly well change not only our consumption patterns, but also our social and health behaviour.

Starting first with the commercial sector, research reviews have established that alcohol, tobacco and food marketing all have a significant impact on our drinking (Hastings *et al.*, 2005), smoking (Lovato *et al.*, 2003) and eating behaviour (Hastings *et al.*, 2003; McGinnis *et al.*, 2006). Remember that these are not just forms of consumer behaviour but important health behaviours. Tobacco use, for instance, is the single biggest threat to public health we face: by 2030 up to 10 million people are likely to be killed by tobacco every year unless we can encourage significant numbers of smokers to quit or youngsters not to start (Guindon and Boisclair, 2003).
Social marketing can emulate this success. Thus, a recent systematic review of social marketing initiatives designed to improve nutrition showed that, out of 25 interventions, no fewer than 21 had a significant effect on at least one form of dietary behaviour (McDermott et al., 2005). Similar reviews have now been commissioned by the UK Government, and have shown that social marketing ideas and techniques can successfully modify patterns of exercise, drinking, smoking and drug use (www.nsms.org.uk).

It comes as no surprise, then, that a recent White Paper (UK Government discussion paper) talks of the “power of social marketing” and of “marketing tools applied to social good” being “used to build public awareness and change behaviour” (Department of Health, 2004, p. 21). This has led to the formation of the National Social Marketing Centre (www.nsms.org.uk), a collaboration between the Department of Health and the National Consumer Council, which is leading a national review of social marketing and developing the first National Social Marketing Strategy for Health in England. Other Ministries are taking an increasing interest in social marketing, and the Centre is actively proselytising its marketing insights across Government. Similarly, the Scottish Executive recently commissioned an investigation into how social marketing might be used to guide health improvement; the resulting report is about to be published (Stead et al., 2007). Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the USA all have, or are developing, social marketing facilities at a high level within their health and social services.

So marketers have something of proven effectiveness that society desperately needs and is busily accessing. No marketer worthy of the name could neglect such an opportunity.

**Market growth**

Commercial agencies and consultancies claiming social marketing expertise are springing up. Government has always been a big spender on advertising (in the UK, for instance, it is consistently in the top three); now it is making a natural progression to marketing budgets, and our commercial cousins are wasting no time in exploiting the resulting opportunity.

The Chartered Institute of Marketing is also on the case. Even as I write, it is fundamentally rethinking its 30-year-old definition of marketing to reflect the broadening reality. Similarly the Marketing and Sales Standards Setting Body (www.msssb.org), set up by the UK Government’s Department of Education and Skills, is focused on setting national standards for social marketing.

**Academic opportunities**

And we academics are in there as well.

There is a powerful demand among our own customers for social marketing learning. The idea that skills gained to push fast moving consumer goods, or facilitate the business-to-business sector, can also be used to address pressing social problems, such as HIV/AIDS or criminal justice policy, is extremely appealing to them. The related discipline of “critical marketing” which challenges the traditional unquestioning approach to the teaching of business, is also growing (The Gang of Six, 2007).

This is familiar territory for social marketers. Lazer and Kelly (1973) had already pointed out 33 years ago that:

... social marketing is concerned with the application of marketing knowledge, concepts, and techniques to enhance social as well as economic ends. It is also concerned with analysis of the social consequence of marketing policies, decisions and activities.
They take us back to the origins, not just of social marketing, but of the marketing discipline itself. An extensive review of the field in the *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* (Wilkie and Moore, 2003) points out that what the authors call “marketing and society” has been a key part of our work since it first emerged as a distinct area of academic study at the turn of the twentieth century. They go on to note that, well before the First World War, marketers were not limiting themselves to studying managerial issues, but were addressing much wider social questions such as whether advertising is desirable or certain industries should exist at all. They were interested in how the relationship between consumers, marketers and government could “facilitate the maximal operations of the system for the benefit of the host society” (p. 118).

This places us firmly in the “critical” arena, and led Goldberg (1995) to issue his challenge to social marketers, to address societal issues with the aim of “altering the institutions that form the social system” calling for a social agenda and action: “for critical social scientists, the process of generating knowledge cannot be separated from the political action that flows from that knowledge”.

Thomas (1999) picks up the tale, emphasising that the status quo is simply not an option. The free market, our traditional stomping ground, is in his words an “unleashed monster” that, if left unimpeded, drives inequality and exclusion as well as wealth creation. He argues that embracing the capacity of marketing to operate outside the cockpit of capitalism, to build cooperation and trust, to develop what he terms a form of “social capitalism” will be vital for global survival.

I have a more modest claim to make: embracing social marketing, with its twin agendas of constructive applications and critical analysis, is an intelligent response to growing student demand.

We are gearing up to meet this need. In the UK, social marketing electives are already on the curriculum in a number of business schools, and postgraduates increasingly want to write social marketing dissertations. Looking to the future, the Open University is planning a raft of courses, from an MPA degree (Master of Public Administration) to a stand-alone online continuing professional development programme, Stirling University has an MSc in Social Marketing under development, and Cardiff University has integrated Social Marketing into the teaching of its MSc in Strategic Marketing. The publisher Elsevier has also recognised the opportunity, and will shortly publish an international text in the field (Hastings, 2007).

Social marketing also feeds our other core academic business: it presents enormous research opportunities. The Institute for Social Marketing (www.ism.stir.ac.uk), a collaboration between Stirling University and the Open University, has received millions of pounds of funding from the research councils and charities, government and international NGOs, to assess the applicability of marketing to areas as diverse as sentencing policy, sexual health and blinding trachoma. It is also undertaking “critical” marketing research, shedding light on the less acceptable ramifications of our discipline and informing the debate about how and when these need to be curtailed. At Cardiff University, social marketing forms a core theme within the research agenda of the BRASS Research Centre (www.brass.cf.ac.uk).

This research activity is not simply satisfying our ivory tower agenda of high-quality publication and external funding, but is having a profound influence on the real world. For example, our government-funded systematic review of research on the effects of food promotion to children (Hastings *et al.*, 2003), which is currently
being updated and globalised for the World Health Organization, underpinned the UK broadcasting regulator’s recent proposal to ban the advertising of energy dense foods such as burgers and fried chicken:

... in and around all children’s programming and on dedicated children’s channels as well as in youth-oriented and adult programmes which attract a significantly higher than average proportion of viewers under the age of 16 (Ofcom, 2006).

We have picked up and addressed Goldberg’s challenge.

And again the market is growing. The University of Wollongong in Australia has now established a sister research centre and is planning its own master’s degree in Social Marketing. Marketing academics elsewhere in Australia, as well as from Canada, New Zealand and the USA, are using social marketing to research problems as diverse as racism and doping in sport; the new Elsevier textbook will include no fewer than eighteen such international case studies.

Seize the day

Saren is absolutely right to decry our reluctance to move beyond the market place. But the times they are a changing; the diaspora has already begun.

Social marketing is demonstrating that the badlands beyond the high street are nothing of the kind. Our skills and ideas are welcome there. We are loved there. Not for our beauty or kindness, but for the oldest reason of all: we have something to offer that is greatly valued. Furthermore, if we can match this offering with a genuinely critical analysis of our discipline, the opportunities are awe inspiring. We can help solve two of society’s most pressing problems: how to encourage socially desirable behaviour in both the civil and business sectors. We have the power to make such phenomena as lifestyle diseases and corporate manipulation things of the past.

Not bad for a bunch of counter jumpers.

References


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