

How acceptable is social marketing for more healthful eating? Selected findings from an expert interview study

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Summary

The social marketing approach – that is to say applying marketing concepts and methods for social purposes – is not yet customary in promoting a balanced diet. Key success factors for communicating health-related information were identified in a case study exploring successful commercial food marketing. In a subsequent Delphi expert survey, it was discussed which resources and skills are needed to successfully implement these factors in public campaigns. Most experts advocated their use, but suggested a number of conditions for their responsible use. They discussed public authorities' strengths and weaknesses regarding resources and skills and outlined how public authorities can acquire or improve the competences needed.

Keywords: social marketing, success factors, experts, transferability

Citation:

Aschemann-Witzel J, Perez-Cueto FJA, Niedzwiedzka B, Verbeke W, Bech-Larsen T (2013) How acceptable is social marketing for more healthful eating? Selected findings from an expert interview study. *Ernaehrungs Umschau international* 60(11): 188–193

This article is available online:
DOI 10.4455/eu.2013.037

Social marketing is defined as applying a marketing approach to a social cause. Regarding public activities for promoting more healthful eating, acceptance and successful implementation are still lacking. In a series of European-wide expert interviews, the conditions for popularizing social marketing in healthy eating campaigns and policies were discussed. Three questions and their answers are discussed.

Background and approach

Public authorities on international, EU and national level are implementing strategies and policies to promote more healthful eating and

an overall healthy lifestyle including sufficient exercise [1]. A broad list of measures can be used, ranging from classic information campaigns, educational activities to a change in food choice and eating environments (so-called "choice architecture"). The choice of foods can be influenced by voluntary agreements with the food sector, which might commit to advertising restrictions or reformulation, or legal action such as banning substances, prohibiting certain forms of advertising or marketing, or taxing unhealthy ingredients [2]. Which measures will be most effective in which case is often difficult to assess. On top of that, the discussion about the right choice of measures is influenced by different political directions, self-interest and diverging opinions about the responsibility for the problem as well as the solution. Therefore, scientific analyses of the advantages and disadvantages as well as the effectiveness of measures can help advance the debate in a constructive manner.

In the scope of an EU-funded research project called EATWELL [3], a survey of the measures in use and the rate of application was conducted. This was followed by an assessment of measure effectiveness in order to arrive at conclusions con-

cerning the cost-benefit-relation of the various measures [4]. So far, information campaigns remain the dominant measure used [5], elements of social marketing are still scarce [5, 6]. We therefore propose that ideas from commercial food marketing be gathered at this point in time, based on the idea of social marketing that the marketing approach can also be applied to social, non-commercial causes. A case study on successful food and beverage marketing, especially focusing on health-related aspects in product and communication, was conducted. The success factor analysis of these cases led to the development of a model [7, 8]. This model of success factors in various stages of campaign development can be used to guide the development of social marketing campaigns for more healthful eating.

In a further step, expert interviews were employed to explore to which extent they are currently used, and under which conditions the success factors observed in commercial campaigns can be transferred to public campaigns, as reported in ASCHEMANN-WITZEL et al. 2012 [9]. In the following, we will provide a definition of social marketing, describe the methodology of the expert survey, and then focus and elaborate on three questions and the respective expert answers:

1. Under which conditions is social marketing "ethical"?

2. Which resources and competences do public authorities possess respective lack, in order to conduct social marketing campaigns?
3. How can public authorities gain these resources and competences?

Definition and methodology of social marketing

The social marketing topic has been covered in several previous issues of *Ernährungs Umschau* (see [10–12]), a more comprehensive definition, however, has not been presented. According to ANDREASEN, social marketing is [13] defined as follows:

"...the application of commercial marketing technologies to the analysis, planning, execution and evaluation of programs designed to influence the voluntary behaviour of target audiences in order to improve their personal welfare and that of society"

This definition has later been outlined as a number of characteristics that should be inherent to a social marketing campaign [14]:

1. *voluntary behaviour change as a goal*
2. *application of segmentation and targeting*
3. *consumer research and pre-tests*
4. *acknowledgement and analysis of the competition*
5. *offer of tangible or intangible exchange*

6. *use of various marketing mix elements (product, place, promotion, price)*

According to these characteristics, campaigns are social marketing campaigns when they have voluntary behaviour change as a goal, possibly coupled with a related attitude change (1). In preparing a social marketing campaign, the target group should be clearly delimited (2) and the target group's motives, attitudes and behaviours analysed (3). This analysis should identify which other needs and wants the social marketing campaign aim is in competition with (4), for example, the need to eat healthful but also the wish to save time on cooking to have time for other purposes, or to please family members by fulfilling their food wishes. These findings should establish which behaviour change benefits to accentuate in the campaign, or which incentives to provide to favourably change consumers' mental cost-benefit analysis towards the campaigns aim (5). The campaign itself should be more than information provision (6) making good use of the other dimensions of the "4 Ps" (promotion, price, product, place); for example, by differentiating between "products" that the campaign delivers, transport these via different "distribution channels" and offer at different "prices".

Social marketing should especially differ from information campaigns in this last characteristic of using the

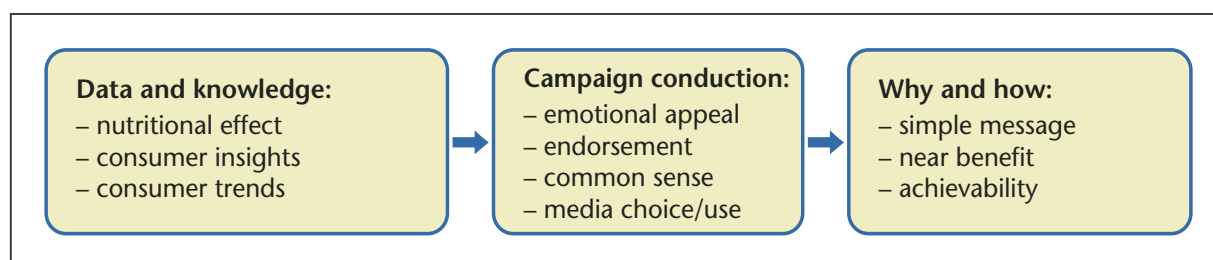


Fig. 1: Model of success factors in commercial food and beverage marketing [own illustration]

marketing mix. However, well-thought out information campaigns nowadays are more targeted, exploit findings from behavioural science and acknowledge that behaviour change needs incentives – thus, are developing towards social marketing.

Methods

◆ Figure 1 shows the model of success factors, which was developed in a previous stage of the project based on food and beverage marketing case studies [7, 8]. A closer look reveals that the characteristics of social marketing campaigns listed above also underlie the factors in the model: Utilizing “data and knowledge” requires market research on the target group, which then forms the basis for the conduction phase of the campaign and the use of the right marketing mix. The market research, however, also delivers the knowledge needed to understand the “why and how” of delivering the message to the target group – which competition needs to be outrun, which incentives are adequate to change the cost-benefit in favour of the campaign’s goals?

We conducted a so-called Delphi expert survey in order to explore the transferability of the success factors to public policy, especially the challenges and barriers of doing so. The expert survey method allows tackling complex issues [15]. The Delphi expert survey is a variant of an expert survey which is characterized by more than one round of interviews; the second and subsequent interview take departure in the findings of the previous rounds [15]. This approach allows a certain interaction between the experts, and is particularly suitable if the topic is characterized by divergent views which call for discussion, if possible arriving at a consensus [16]. Careful

selection of interviewees should ensure that single views or extreme opinions do not receive more weight than is fair.

The Eatwell project partners assisted in contacting experts working in public policy, as academics or in private business (advertising and communication agencies) in the various regions. 60 potential interviewees were contacted, all of them with professional experience in the domain of food and healthful eating, at best from both sides – private and public. Furthermore, they were selected to cover different regions as well as disciplines. 31 experts agreed to take part in the two-round survey. The questionnaire was sent to them via email, accompanied with a link to a video. The video explained the success factors that had resulted from the case studies along with examples focusing on 1) trends, 2) emotions, 3) endorsement, 4) common sense, 5) media use and 6), the “why and how”.

In the first survey round, six questions were asked. These aimed at exploring:

1. to what extent the factors presented are already used in today’s public activities or
2. to what extent they should be used in future,.
3. which ethical issues arise from the application of the factors,
4. which differences can be expected with regard to different target groups,
5. which resources and competences public policy makers and authorities possess or should have in the future, and
6. how these resources and competences can be acquired.

These questions were posed in order to enable an analysis of public au-

thorities’ strengths and weaknesses with regard to conducting social marketing campaigns as well as conclude on the “to do” that will enable successful future campaigns. The answers to these six questions and certain other aspects of interest were commented on and discussed in the second round of the Delphi survey. In the analysis of the interviews, we looked for similarities and differences in the answers and structured and listed the arguments that the experts used to elaborate on their view.

A detailed description of the method and findings can be found in ASCHEMANN-WITZEL et al. [9]. In this article, three of the questions are selected for further elaboration. These three questions are regarded as especially relevant for the further development of social marketing in the domain of more healthful eating.

Results

Question 1: Under which conditions is social marketing “ethical”?

After having watched the film, the experts were asked about the “ethics” of using the factors shown when it comes to public information and social marketing campaigns. We did not provide any definition of ethics given that we primarily wanted to trigger thoughts and discussion about what might be an acceptable approach or what would not.

The answers resulted in quite different understandings of ethics in this respect. On the one hand, it was argued that the question is irrelevant as long as only scientific facts are communicated, and the position was taken that any use of “consumer psychology” is unethical since it entails an element of persuasion and manipulation.

Underlying these statements is the question of whether it is acceptable

that public activities try to influence citizens' behaviour, or whether they should simply provide information on which citizens can base their informed decision in favour of behaviour change. However, following the definition, influencing behaviour is exactly the goal of social marketing. In political discussions, this might be phrased as the question to which extent governments should be "nanny states" or not. Furthermore, the statements described here also highlight the extent of scepticism towards marketing and its measures, which is quite often perceived to be nothing but manipulation.

On the other hand, a large share of the experts had a very practical view on the issue: they argued in the sense of "the end justifies the means". Their answers not only showed that they believed traditional marketing to be ethical for public authorities to use, they even appeared to think it acceptable that public authorities stretch things further than commercial organisations would be allowed to, given their superior goal.

Crucial, however, for most experts was the actual implementation of the measures. They mentioned a number of issues that should be taken into account in order to ensure an acceptable, ethical use of the factors by public policy makers or authorities:

- sender and message goal must be transparent to all receivers,
- facts portrayed and used must be correct and truthful,
- factors that lend themselves to manipulation (e. g. appeals to emotions) should be used responsibly,
- no target group in need should be excluded from the message or campaign,
- aversion to the measures should be avoided (e. g. if it appears too similar to commercial marketing,

some target groups might refuse to listen),

- furthermore, any negative counter-effect should be considered beforehand and avoided (e. g. if the campaign targeting one public goal is detrimental to another public goal),
- lastly, when appealing to common sense, defining common values should be avoided if it is likely that they are not shared by the whole target group (e. g. due to religion) in order to avoid exclusion of any citizen.

Question 2: Which resources and competences do public authorities need to conduct social marketing campaigns?

Further into the expert interview, we asked which resources and competences public authorities possess that might be of value when developing and conducting social marketing campaigns, and which they still lack. This corresponds to weaknesses and strengths. Regarding strengths, the experts explained that public authorities have:

- easy access to statistics and research on citizens, which can be used as a basis for target group research,
- superior credibility compared to commercial organisations, and a
- better sense of the "common good".

However, it was also underlined that – more often than not, statistics and research at hand is not fully exploited,

- policy makers lack incentives to conduct target group research,
- strategic decisions in public information or social marketing campaigns are not based on evidence but led by other interests or simply gut-feeling,

- decision makers know too little about the current needs and trends among citizens,
- at times too many decision-makers are involved in the layout of a campaign and coordination between public entities is lacking.

In the second round, these weaknesses were elaborated on. Experts explained that heterogeneous approaches, depending on the disciplines prevailing in various ministries, make it difficult to coordinate efforts. Also, political views might influence decisions against better judgement; in fact interest in transparency gained by improved evaluation efforts might not be desirable.

Question 3: How can public authorities acquire the resources and competences needed to conduct social marketing campaigns?

Finally, experts were asked to elaborate on how to overcome weaknesses. Various routes to acquiring resources and competences were suggested:

- Tasks in development and execution of social marketing campaigns should be "outsourced" to respective professional advertising and communication agencies or specialised non-governmental organisations.
- Increased funding is needed for public authorities to develop their own internal staff with the right know-how, or:
- further and intensified cooperation with other stakeholders in the field should be aimed at to enable synergetic use of their competences, especially through so-called public-private partnerships.

Experts outlined that they thought the private sector should help cover the costs of social marketing for

healthier eating or provide their know-how in conducting the latter. Public policy makers should take courses in social marketing, and internal decision-making processes should be improved. Whether a bottom up decision-making process was preferable or whether a top down one might be more effective was inconclusive, however.

In the second round, several experts dampened the high expectations that had been expressed in the first round towards public-private partnerships. They remarked that the diverging trade-offs of commercial partners in these partnerships often restrict their commitment. Furthermore, it was mentioned that perhaps professional advertising and communication agencies have not gained adequate experience yet in the emerging field of social marketing to adapt to the different kind of goals and clients that they need to deal with. Establishing long-term partnerships with agencies might therefore be a good choice.

Conclusions

The expert survey showed that in principal key success factors from commercial food and beverage marketing can be applied to social marketing for healthier eating. Experts expressed ethical concerns and scepticism; however, they suggested a number of guidelines for acceptable use of marketing approaches in public policy making. The suggestions are in line with general requirements as regards ethics in advertising [17]. The literature provides a source of guiding principles applicable to social marketing for more healthful eating, thus helping to meet policy makers' concerns and scepticism.

Interestingly, though, a large share of experts thought the superior end justifies the means, thus suggesting

stretching the boundaries of acceptable approaches for commercial marketing. Given that the so-called fear appeal is used to a greater extent in public campaigns and social marketing (see for example campaigns relating to HIV, smoking, traffic safety), this opinion seems to be rather widespread.

The expert survey reveals a number of strengths and weaknesses of public authorities. The strengths of access to data and research should be used to a greater extent for consumer and target group research, so that campaigns can be based on well-founded insight on thoughts and behaviours of the target group. The higher credibility of public authorities can be used to their advantage – for example by positioning the public entity as a “public health brand”, a term coined by EVANS and HASTINGS [20].

An apparent weakness is revealed in terms of inefficient decision-making structures and coordination. Public policy makers should tackle this shortcoming, especially given that long-term and large-scale campaigns have a higher potential for success [4] but must follow a consistent strategy. The experts in the survey call for more professionalization either by outsourcing the task to professional agencies, by building up in-house competences, or cooperating with other stakeholders and especially the private food sector.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest according to the guidelines of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors.

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DOI: 10.4455/eu.2013.037