A SERVICES APPROACH TO SOCIAL MARKETING

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ABSTRACT

Governments and not-for-profit organisations are increasingly adopting a social marketing approach as a means of facilitating voluntary behaviour change to improve social and individual welfare. However, a fundamental question to ask is: “What is the overriding purpose of social marketing?” Although early definitions of social marketing emphasise the use of marketing approaches to promote social ideas (Kotler and Zaltman, 1971) or change the behaviour of individuals for their own or societal benefit (Andreasen, 1994), Wood (2012, p100) argues its primary function is: “the cost-effective provision of non-profit services to help and support people”. These social services are usually delivered by public and voluntary organisations, and should be developed and implemented on the basis of insight and “customer” engagement. Lefebvre (2012) notes the move to a customer, rather than producer, perspective and the rise of a “service-dominant logic” (Merz et al., 2009; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). According to this perspective service, skills and knowledge, rather than products, constitute the fundamental unit of exchange.

The recent conceptualisation of transformational service research indicates that services marketers agree that service marketing can positively influence well-being and quality of life (Rosenbaum et al, 2011). A service focus would help social marketers move away from product-oriented models to more relevant theories and models from services, non-profit and organisational marketing. Services’ marketing offers theories that not only address individual responses but also incorporate structural and environmental factors and is aligned with the upstream approach to social marketing. While many scholars have identified the need for an upstream rather than downstream approach to social marketing (Gordon, 2011; Hoek and Jones, 2011) few have conceptualised how this might be done. We suggest that service marketing offers relevant frameworks.

At the heart of service marketing lies the notion of value exchange. Zainuddin, Russell-Bennett and Previte (2013) argue that there is a growing acknowledgement in social marketing that customers can create service value by cooperating with service personnel (see also Ouschan *et al.*, 2006) however there has been little research that explains how. The notion of experiential value draws on the value-in-use perspective and moves beyond the study of utility derived from customer engagement with service processes (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). It is further argued that many social marketing services assume that technical and clinical factors are the key drivers of customer behaviour; for example the provision of a technically reliable health screen will ensure consumers repatronage. This over-emphasis on technical expertise has resulted in service strategy and resource allocation focussed on technical service aspects rather than a balanced approach that also incorporates the interaction with staff and service atmospherics (Berry and Bendapudi, 2007). So, interactions between customers and service delivery staff are crucial to perceptions of value and satisfaction and play an influential role in decisions to maintain a behaviour change; for example, to be screened on a regular basis. This supports arguments put forward by Fowlie and Wood (2011) that emotionally supportive relationships are essential for effective social marketing interventions and the development of customer-driven services. In this paper, we outline key services marketing theories relevant to social and demonstrate their applicability through case studies from social marketing researchers and practitioners.

To achieve the aim of social marketing in improving people's lives through better services and reduced social inequalities, we need to equip practitioners with the tool and theories to deliver cost-effective, client-centred services. Therefore, the challenge for scholars is to soften the disciplinary boundaries between services and social marketing; to integrate ‘service thinking’ into social marketing models. Services marketing theories are the building blocks for any social marketing program that uses services as the key social product.