Social Marketing: Its Definition and Domain

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*The author argues that social marketing has been defined improperly in much of the
literature. A revised definition is proposed and the domain of social marketing defined. He
concludes with suggestions for implications for future growth of the discipline.*

It is clear that the term *social marketing* is now a well-established part of the marketing vocabulary in universities, government agencies, private nonprofit organizations, and private for-profit firms. There are now social marketing textbooks (Kotler and Roberto 1989; Manoff 1975), readings books (Fine 1990), chapters within mainstream texts (Kotler and Andreasen 1991) and a Harvard teaching note (Rangun and Karim 1991). There have been reviews of the accomplishments of social marketing (Fox and Kotler 1980; Malafarina and Loken 1993) and calls to researchers to become more deeply involved in studies of social marketing to advance the science of marketing (Andreasen 1993). Major international and domestic behavior change programs now routinely have social marketing components (Debus 1987; Ramah 1992; Smith 1989). People with titles like Manager of Social Marketing now can be found in private consulting organizations.

Why Definitions Matter

There have been critics of the expansion of marketing beyond its traditional private sector origins from the beginning (cf. Bartels 1974; Luck 1974). However, today, a great many scholars and practitioners now see social marketing as a viable subject of research, teaching, and practice. They see the field as growing and expanding and thereby increasing the relevance of marketing education and scholarship to the problems of the broader society. It also has been argued that involvement in these new areas has had an important reciprocal effect on marketing scholarship. I note one example of the latter in my 1992 Association for Consumer Research Presidential Address on social marketing (Andreasen 1993, p. 1):

> The rise of exchange theory, I believe, was given a major stimulus by marketing scholars trying to expand the concept of 'consumer behavior' and 'marketing' to encompass something as nontraditional as going to college, wearing seat belts, or giving blood. For example, promoting blood donations seemed to be an opportunity for 'marketing,' yet there were no products or services offered and no monetary payment made by the consumer. In fact, the consumer often *voluntarily* suffered when making the 'purchase.' Traditional unidirectional views of consumer behavior could not encompass such a strange case. We *needed* a

new paradigm. The old way, like earth-centered astronomy before Copernicus, was simply not elastic enough to contain these new transactions. Thus, we slowly embraced exchange theory.

However, despite the rapid growth of interest in social marketing (or perhaps because of it), there is still considerable disagreement about what social marketing is and how it differs from similar fields like communications and behavior mobilization. This disagreement is not uncommon for a new discipline. Debates about definition and domain in other fields are quite common within university walls. Careful definition of any field is important to the advancement of scholarship and the training of future researchers. However, in the present case, the issue has an additional, important implication.

Many believe that social marketing can have a major impact on society's myriad social problems. However, this impact can be seriously compromised if the technology is applied incorrectly or to areas in which it is not appropriate. If practitioners misuse the concept, its effectiveness may be limited. If researchers and scholars assess its performance in areas for which it *should not* be responsible, social marketing may be blamed for failures for which it should not be held accountable.

It is time, therefore, to introduce precision into the dialogue by establishing a clear consensus on what social marketing is and is not and what its "legitimate" domains are and are not. These definitions and distinctions have important implications for present and future practical applications, academic discussions, and field research. The central premise of the article is that social marketing stands a significant chance of failure if existing issues of definition and domain are not adequately resolved.

The Emergence of Social Marketing[1]

Although in the 1960s, marketing scholars wrote and carried out research on topics that today would be considered social marketing (e.g., Simon 1968), the origins of the term *social marketing* can be traced to Kotler and Zaltman's classic 1971 article in the *Journal of Marketing* titled "Social Marketing: An Approach to Planned Social Change" (Kotler and Zaltman 1971). As Elliott (1991) points out, the emergence of social marketing at just that moment in time was a logical outgrowth of the attempt of the Northwestern School to broaden the discipline of marketing (cf. Kotler and Levy 1969). Elliott suggests that this development re-

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[1]This section draws significantly from Elliott (1991).

flected both significant increases in the pressures within the marketing discipline to be more socially relevant and the emergence of technologies in other disciplines that could be applied to social change. The latter was represented in the work of Rogers (1962), Weibe (1951/52), and others.

Brown (1986) concurs in this assessment, arguing that social marketing is a natural outgrowth of several developments in and out of marketing, including the following:

1. Increased needs of nonbusiness organizations for marketing services,
2. Attacks on marketing's negative impact on society,
3. The emergence of exchange theory,
4. The coalescence of social marketing oriented theory, and
5. The decline of consensus-oriented perceptions of social reality.

In the years that followed the Kotler-Zaltman (1971) article, the growth of social marketing continued to be fueled by both supply and demand pressures within the field of academic marketing. Marketing scholars found more opportunities to work with nonprofit and government organizations to apply marketing skills to social change programs. This demand already was being met partially by rival academic disciplines including "social advertising" (Davison 1959; Hyman and Sheatsley 1947; Merton, Fiske, and Curtis 1946) and public relations (e.g., Bernays 1952), but government and nonprofit practitioners sensed that marketing had a broader role to play.

It was during this period that marketing was being infiltrated by a growing number of young marketing scholars who were energized by the general social unrest and campus turmoil of the late 1960s and wanted to become more "socially relevant." My own early involvement in social marketing reflects this phenomenon (Andreasen 1993, p. 1):

> I was an academic product of the social revolution of the late sixties and early seventies and frustrated with what I was doing. My friends in Sociology and Political Science were worrying about issues like poverty, the Viet Nam war, and military recruiting on campus, and so on, while I was busy teaching my students how to market Chevrolets and Clairol Shampoo.... My 1975 encounter with [social marketing] opened my eyes to the potential for marketing to work *positively* for the good of society beyond merely (to use a classroom cliché of the time) 'delivering a better standard of living.'

Despite a growing interest in the topic by marketing scholars in the 1970s, the first major book on the subject was published in 1975 by a social marketing *practitioner*, Richard Manoff. In his pioneering volume, Manoff set forth several principles he had derived from his years of work on social change projects in the areas of food and nutrition and family planning in developing countries. Academics were slow to respond. It was six years before Manoff's contribution was followed by the first book by an academician on the topic, Seymour Fine's *The Marketing of Ideas and Social Issues* (1981). It was eight more years before Kotler and Roberto's book *Social Marketing: Strategies for Changing Public Behavior* was published, and one more year before we saw the first readings book on *Social Marketing: Promoting the Causes of Public and Nonprofit Organizations* (Fine 1990). The latter and other books in preparation (e.g.,

Andreasen, forthcoming) suggest that interest in the topic is accelerating.

There is now a modest body of social marketing research produced in the 1980s and early 1990s that is beginning to find its way into the marketing and social science literature. The present section of the *Journal of Marketing and Public Policy* is one such example. In a recent review, Malafarina and Loken (1993) catalogue 76 empirical articles that already have appeared in the five leading marketing publications since 1980. Their review documents the scope of work in this area. But it also makes another important contribution by showing that early concerns expressed by Bloom and Novelli (1981) about the difficulties of doing research in this new area "were not borne out to the degree anticipated" (Malafarina and Loken 1993, p. 403). This bodes well for even greater growth of the field in future.

This makes even stronger the need for clear guideposts.

Defining Social Marketing

The very first formal definition of social marketing was that offered by Kotler and Zaltman in 1971 (p. 5):

> Social marketing is the design, implementation and control of programs calculated to influence the acceptability of social ideas and involving considerations of product planning, pricing, communication, distribution, and marketing research.

This definition proved problematic in several ways. First, the choice of the term *social marketing* was itself a source of early confusion. As Rangun and Karim (1991) note, this term tended to lead individuals to confuse social marketing with *societal* marketing. Rangun and Karim (1991, p. 3) argue that social marketing "involves: (a) changing attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of individuals or organizations for a social benefit, and (b) the social change is the primary (rather than secondary) purpose of the campaign." In their view, societal marketing deals with regulatory issues and other efforts to protect consumers from what Hirschman terms the "dark side of the marketplace" (Hirschman 1992; cf. Magnuson and Carper 1965) and does not necessarily involve influencing target consumers in any way. Therefore, it is clearly distinguishable from social marketing.

A second problem in early discussions of social marketing was confusion over whether its practice was limited to public and nonprofit marketers. It can be argued that private sector firms engage in "social marketing," for example, when the insurance industry encourages seat belt usage or the beer industry promotes "responsible drinking." Again, Rangun and Karim (1991) would argue that such efforts should not fall within the domain of social marketing because social change is a secondary purpose of the campaign from the private sector firm's standpoint.

A third problem with this first definition is that it limits its objective to influencing "the acceptability of social ideas." Some authors, most prominently Seymour Fine, support such a restrictive definition. Fine (1991, p. xiv) defines social marketing "at its simplest [as] ... the application of marketing methods to the dissemination of ideas—socially beneficial ideas like cancer research, energy conservation, and carpooling."

Most scholars and researchers, however, believe that social marketing involves much more than ideas—specifically, attitudes and behavior. This broadened review is reflected in Kotler and Roberto's (1989) social marketing text. Here, the authors equate social marketing with a social change campaign, which they define as "an organized effort conducted by one group (the change agent), which intends to persuade others (the target adopters) to accept, modify, or abandon certain ideas, attitudes, practices, and behaviors" (p. 6). They indicate that a social marketing campaign can include the "mere" provision of information on important issues or, in some cases, just change values and beliefs.

Although an improvement, Kotler and Roberto's (1989) expanded definition still leaves unanswered some other important questions about social marketing's legitimate domain. For example:

1. Is social marketing really any different from other technologies, such as "health education" or "health promotion," with which it shares many common features (cf. Glanz, Lewis, and Rimer 1990)?
2. Is any technique "fair game" to be called social marketing if it helps to achieve social marketing objectives? For example, is the imposition of a government regulation such as a ban on smoking in public buildings a legitimate social marketing strategy?
3. Is it appropriate to use attempts to include ideas and attitudes as legitimate objectives of social marketing programs?
4. Should the domain of social marketing be limited, as many government agency directors would have it, only to programs that market products, such as condoms and birth control pills or oral rehydration solutions, or services, such as immunizations and vasectomies?

A Proposed Definition

In my view, what is needed is a definition of social marketing that would (1) keep practicing social marketers focused on the outcomes they are best suited to influence, (2) keep the discipline of social marketing distinguishable from its academic "competitors," and (3) keep social marketing programs out of areas in which their likelihood of failure is high. With these objectives in mind, I propose the following definition:

> Social marketing is the adaptation of commercial marketing technologies to programs designed to influence the voluntary behavior of target audiences to improve their personal welfare and that of the society of which they are a part.

Key elements of this definition merit further elaboration.

Social Marketing Is an Adaptation of Commercial Marketing Technologies

Implicit in most definitions of social marketing is that we borrow our technology from the private sector. However, other authors appear to forget that the bottom line of all private sector marketing is *the production of sales*. To achieve their sales objectives, private sector marketers engage in a great many activities that are designed to change beliefs, attitudes, and values. But their only reason for doing this is that they expect such changes to lead to increased sales.[2]

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[2]As with social marketing, sometimes private sector marketers conduct campaigns that are designed to prevent change, e.g., switching to a newly introduced brand.

Sales are examples of consumer behavior, and it is my contention that, if we are borrowing commercial technology, we should hold social marketing to the same objectives; that is, social marketing should be designed to have as its "bottom line" *influencing behavior*.

Social Marketing Is Applied to Programs

Social advertising is synonymous with campaigns. Campaigns have a fixed termination point. Programs, by contrast, may last decades and contain several campaigns within them. Thus, the American Cancer Society has a long-run social marketing program to reduce the incidence of smoking, within which they have annual campaigns, such as each year's Great American Smokeout. An important strength of social marketing is that it takes a programmatic rather than campaign view of its mission.

Social marketing is not synonymous with organizations. Many organizations that are primarily social marketers also carry on activities that are not social marketing. Thus, in the 1970s, contraceptive social marketing programs in Colombia, Thailand, and Pakistan experimented with various sales programs that were strictly commercial but would enhance the limited revenues they were deriving from social marketing contraceptive sales (Andreasen 1988). Although supportive of the overall mission of the organization, such programs would not be considered social marketing.

Social Marketing Focuses on Behavior as its Bottom Line

The "bottom line" of social marketing is behavior change. A major shortcoming of a wide range of social marketing programs that I have observed in the field is that, though their managers consider themselves at least in part social marketers, they fail to keep their eye on the bottom line. They think that all they must do is provide information (ideas) or change beliefs. Sometimes they think this way because they were trained in other disciplines and tend to equate marketing with advertising. So they think their goal is to "get the word out" or to "change attitudes" without asking whether either of these activities is likely to lead to the desired behavior. They seem to assume that this will happen in some mystical "long run."

Ironically, in my view, a factor contributing to this confusion is the original definition of social marketing proposed by Kotler and Zaltman in 1971, a definition that is routinely (often uncritically) repeated by others (e.g., Malafarina and Loken 1993). This overly broad definition only encourages practicing social marketers to think that all they have to do is change attitudes and ideas to be successful. It keeps them from asking the question every first-rate private sector marketer asks: Does the communication of an idea or the changing of an attitude really influence behavior? This neglect of the bottom line can lead to enormous waste of inevitably scarce resources. In my judgment, it is sinful for marketing scholars to neglect their true private sector "heritage" and contribute—even indirectly—to such waste in areas that are so crucial to the welfare of society.

The sole emphasis on behavior as social marketing's bottom line also helps keep the field distinct from other disciplines. As I have noted elsewhere (Andreasen 1993, p. 2):

Too many in social marketing confuse marketing with communication. While marketers communicate information, we are not in the *education* business. While we attempt to convince people of the rightness of certain beliefs, we are also not in the *propaganda* business. Many of the health programs I have observed or worked with around the world are, in fact, largely education and propaganda programs.... Education and propaganda are only *useful* to marketers if they *lead to behavior change.*

The emphasis on behavior also forces social marketers to adopt what I would argue is commercial marketing's second major contribution, its fanatical emphasis on the customer. What I believe distinguishes the best professional social marketers from a great many others I have encountered in social marketing programs is their "natural" tendency to ask constantly, "How will this (strategy, tactic) affect consumers?" This customer focus leads them to begin every social marketing program with formative research designed to understand target audiences fully before the development of expensive programs. It encourages them to test key strategies and tactics against real consumers and monitor behavior as programs unfold to make sure that they are on track.

The behavioral emphasis also ensures that marketers have the appropriate evaluation criteria for everything they do. Those without a "behavioral bottom line" are more inclined to evaluate program success in nonbehavioral terms such as number of messages distributed, beliefs changed, images improved, or lectures given. They tend to measure success by what can be measured rather than tackle the harder problem of figuring out what should be measured and then attempting to do so. It is a tendency reinforced by well-meaning consultants who forget (or never learned) that social marketing is really all about influencing behavior.

This focus on behavior has a fourth advantage. It keeps social marketing from being given responsibility for objectives in areas in which I do not believe it has any particular differential advantage—education and propaganda. Consider the challenge of persuading a woman who has little understanding of conception—let alone the prevention of conception—to undertake family planning. A moment's reflection suggests that there are several steps involved in taking a woman from the stage at which she does not understand how babies are made all the way to the point at which she is correctly and continually practicing family planning. These steps can be grouped into five broad categories: basic education, value change, attitude change, motivation to act, and training and reinforcement.

In my opinion, social marketers should not be tasked with the burden of carrying out either basic education or value change if these present massive challenges. First, such undertakings can be very long term, and marketers are best at producing "sales" in the relatively short run. Second, as argued previously, these tasks are more properly the domain of educators and propagandists. The latter know how to inform entire populations about new ideas or practices, for example, through textbooks or the school system. And they know how to bring about major value changes through speeches and pronouncements by government, religious, and civic leaders. Social marketers should be brought in to "do their thing" when these other specialists have achieved a considerable amount of success. My fear is that, if social marketers are called in to achieve behavior change

objectives where massive changes in knowledge and values have not already been achieved, they will misapply their valuable skills, waste scarce resources, and show very limited success, at least in the short term. I fear that such failures will not only discourage them and their sponsors, it also will give a black eye to this fledgling discipline.

Let me be clear: I am not arguing that social marketing should never attempt to educate or change values as part of a behavior change program. Such components are essential to most of the social marketing programs with which I am familiar. I am arguing only that social marketing should not be the technology of choice if dramatically large segments of the target population are still ignorant of the behavior and/or opposed to it on the grounds that it offends central community values.

Social Marketing Programs Influence Behavior—They Do Not Always Change It

Social marketing campaigns need not involve behavior change. Definitions such as Kotler and Roberto's (1971) that speak of social marketing goals as necessitating that consumers "adopt, modify, or abandon" something ignores the fact that some social marketing programs are designed to discourage behavior. For example, campaigns to prevent children from using drugs (e.g., the "Just Say No" campaign in the United States) are clearly intended to discourage change.

Social Marketing Seeks to Influence Voluntary Behavior

In the private sector, marketers seek to influence voluntary consumer spending and choice and stop short of outright coercion. (Coercion sometimes is employed in relationships with distributors, though it is often characterized as a tactic of last resort.) Marketers can attempt to influence behavior through behavioral shaping or reinforcement strategies but, ultimately, consumers do have the choice not to buy. Thus, we should be clear that marketer's basic talents lie in influencing voluntary behavior, and these are the talents they bring to social marketing.

Experience has shown that coercion can be very effective in achieving social behavior goals, for example, inducing consumers to wear seat belts or stop smoking. It should be clear, however, that these are not parts of social marketing campaigns. In some cases, they can be substitutes for social marketing (e.g., when the latter has not been effective) or combined with social marketing efforts. Indeed, a social marketer may wish to argue that legal solutions would be more effective than social marketing to achieve particular behavioral goals and, at this point, step out of the program.[3]

Social Marketing Seeks to Benefit Target Consumers and/or the Society as a Whole, Not the Marketer

Social marketing programs benefit either individuals or society. In some programs, the primary beneficiary is the target consumer or his or her family. This would be the case

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[3] I have argued that social marketing technology can be applied to getting laws passed because there one again is dealing with influencing the voluntary behavior of legislators.

in programs designed to promote breast self-examination, dieting, or the immunization of children. Other programs target the society at large as the major beneficiary, as in efforts to increase consumer recycling or induce homebuilders to plant more trees. Finally, some programs have joint beneficiaries. The latter would include efforts to get drivers to obey the 55 miles per hour speed limit, which would help save the lives of drivers and their passengers, reduce society's health care costs, free its law enforcement officers for other tasks, and reduce the country's dependence on foreign oil.

Note that the definition of social marketing omits cases in which the beneficiary is the social marketing organization. This is a major distinction between private sector and social marketing and, as Rangun and Karim (1991) argue, it prevents us from including efforts of private sector organizations to achieve social ends, as in the insurance industry's seat belt campaign. Also note that the proposed definition would not include such nonprofit marketing activities as fundraising and political campaigning, in which the major objective is to benefit the marketer.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the definition is silent about who is to define well-being. The definition of social marketing only requires that the social marketer not undertake programs to benefit him- or herself; that he or she must believe that the program will improve long run individual or societal well-being. This is a point I return to subsequently.

Social Marketing Criteria

Implicit in the definition of social marketing outlined here are the following criteria. To be labeled social marketing, a program must

- apply commercial marketing technology,
- have as its bottom line the influencing of voluntary behavior, and
- primarily seek to benefit individuals/families or the broader society and not the marketing organization itself.

These characteristics, however, comprise necessary but not sufficient criteria for labeling a program as social marketing. A great many approaches to influencing behavior that carry other labels like health communication meet the last two criteria. So the truly distinguishing trait for social marketing is that it applies marketing technology. What, then, are the defining characteristics of such a technology? This is a topic that heretofore has not been addressed systematically (although cf. Hunt 1991). In my own efforts to use social marketing to influence voluntary behaviors, I have developed a modest set of characteristics that distinguish the very best social marketing:

1. Program managers understand the target audience's needs, wants, perceptions, and present behavior patterns before acting, in many cases through the use of specific formative research. Managers do not make assumptions about these characteristics.

2. Program managers segment target markets wherever politically feasible and devise budgets and strategies that are specifically adapted to the characteristics of each defined segment.

3. Whenever economically feasible, all major elements of program strategy and tactics are pretested with members of the target audience.

4. Program managers conceive of the decision process by which target consumers come to undertake a target behavior as comprising the following steps:
   a. Acquire the necessary knowledge to be aware of the option;
   b. Embrace the values that permit the behavior to be considered for adoption;
   c. Perceive the behavior as potentially relevant to their own circumstances, those of a member of their family or those of the broader society;
   d. Conclude that the positive consequences of the behavior exceed the negative consequences to a degree that is superior to realistic alternatives;
   e. Believe that they have the ability to carry out the action; and
   f. Believe that others who are important to them support their action.

5. The program explicitly recognizes that it faces direct or indirect competition for the target consumer's behavioral choices.

6. Strategies designed to effect behavioral change always comprise all four elements of the marketing mix (the four Ps):
   a. Design of a *product* (i.e., the behavior to be promoted) that is fully responsive to the target consumers' needs and wants, in other words, that is easy and satisfying;
   b. Making the *place* at which the behavior can be carried out convenient and accessible;
   c. Minimizing to the extent possible the economic, social and psychological *price* of the behavior; and
   d. Seeking to *promote* the behavior with messages through personal or impersonal media appropriate to the target audience's lifestyle patterns and preferences.

The need to have a full complement of marketing mix elements is very often one of the key traits on which programs fail to be true marketing programs. Too many practitioners are really doing social advertising and think it is social marketing. This misapplication of the term has caused some of our very best practitioners to despair. Recently, Bill Smith of the Academy for Educational Development (Smith 1993, p. 2, 5) said:

I think the future of Social Marketing is in doubt. I believe that unless we do something now, it will either pass away as just another fad of the 80's, or worse yet, be institutionalized as a new bureaucratic routine of the 90's. In both cases it may die, or become fossilized, without ever having been understood. The problem with social marketing today is clear. There is often little or no marketing.... Social Marketing was taken over by social advertising early in its history. Whenever I mention the Four Ps (Product, Place, Price, and Promotion) these days you can see the audience glaze over, sit back and say 'where has this guy been—the Four Ps—we're way beyond the Four Ps.' We have come to believe that the Four Ps are boring, because we are only truly doing anything about the fourth P—promotion.

Smith's solution (p. 8) is to "go back to basics—to stop stressing awareness, acceptance and knowledge before we figure out what new services people need, what benefits they want, and what barriers we can make easier to over-

come. Marketing is about programs, it's not about posters."

Clearly, practitioners of social marketing find that good definitions, like good theories, have very practical implications. It is important that the field come to a clear agreement about what social marketing comprises and how it differs from its rivals. A clear, accepted definition will ensure that social marketing is applied where it is appropriate and withheld where it is not. And it will ensure that those carrying out social marketing are not misapplying its basic tenets. Only under these circumstances will social marketing have a fair chance to fulfill the great potential many of us believe that it has for doing "social good."

An Ethical Concern

Social marketing is supposed to be applied to achieving social good (cf. Murphy and Bloom 1990). But social marketing is in one sense merely a technology to be employed by those who wish to achieve social good. As such, it can be used by anyone who claims (or believes) that it is being used for such an end. The determination of what is social good is entirely in the hands of the would-be social marketer. This means that, inevitably, social marketing technologies will be applied by partisans promoting their own particular visions of social welfare, which can differ significantly from those held be the general society.

Thus, social marketing could be used by the Ku Klux Klan, the German National Socialist (Nazi) Party, Mother Teresa, and both pro-life and pro-choice forces. This possibility raises a critical ethical issue: How do we ensure that this exciting new technology is used for "good" ends? Those of us who wish to promote the use of social marketing are faced with two challenges. First, we must ensure that the characteristics of good social marketing enunciated previously are adhered to—that is, that we teach and advise others in the very best social marketing practice. Second, we must make personal ethical judgments about the kinds of organizations and individuals to whom we offer our social marketing services.

Leo Szilard was instrumental to the development of atomic bomb technology. However, at the end of his career, he also spent much of his time lobbying to ensure that his legacy was put to peaceful usage. There is a lesson here for those of us who wish to be "social marketing experts." We must devote our energies to building the best technology that we can. But we also owe it to ourselves and our communities to see that it is used for what a broad consensus of society agrees is its own social good.

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