Community-Based Social Marketing (CBSM): Extension’s New Approach to Promoting Environmental Behavior Change

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Combining social marketing with a community-based approach (known as CBSM) is frequently used to promote environmental behavior change. As agents of change, Extension agents should find CBSM to be very applicable to their programs. The goal of this EDIS factsheet is to explain some of the basic definitions and concepts of CBSM and provide Extension agents with additional choices for designing, implementing, and evaluating their programs with the public.

Introduction

Community-based social marketing (CBSM) is an effective behavior change approach that combines community-based participatory research (usually known as CBPR) with the methods and principles of social marketing. Social marketing is the use of common commercial techniques to promote changes in behavior for a societal benefit, such as campaigns to encourage using seatbelts, recycling, or vaccinating children, or campaigns to discourage tobacco use. In social marketing, the targeted behavior change must be something that benefits society, such as safety, health, or environmental conservation. For a campaign to be considered successful, a significant percentage of the public must adopt the new behavior. The general public must agree with the social benefits of certain behaviors, and members of the public often need to collaborate with social marketing practitioners to encourage large numbers of citizens to adopt the desired behaviors. Social marketers try to make the adoption process simple, inexpensive, and beneficial to the public. Social marketers do not actually change behavior; that is up to the individuals. Rather, they seek to make behavior change easy and desirable.

Social marketers learn the best methods to make behavior change appealing by researching their target audiences. Like commercial marketers, Extension agents must also rely on the constant collection of data from individuals and communities to uncover audience segments and describe their needs and wants. Research is also important for making decisions about strategies, choosing effective messages, and measuring outcomes. While agents may not always have the resources and experience to collect quantitative data, they can use qualitative research methods and work with specialists. Agents using a community-based approach can also collect data collaboratively with their target audiences and share in the costs, time investment, and analysis of results.

When social marketing campaigns are developed at the community level, the target audience is actively engaged in collecting and analyzing data, designing the most appropriate interventions, and partnering in dissemination of messages and specific behaviors. After a trial intervention, CBSM programs must be evaluated for their impact on behavior change before they can be disseminated to a wider...
audience. This provides Extension agents an opportunity to pilot test CBSM campaigns at the county level and, if needed, modify them before promoting them statewide. The county level is also ideal for agents to collaborate and conduct social marketing research with targeted groups of citizens, and together the agent and the community become educated about the needs, barriers, and desires of their fellow citizens.

**Elements of Community-Based Social Marketing**

**Target Audience**

Understanding the concept of a target audience or market segment can help Extension agents focus on their constituents’ needs and wants. In order to identify and describe a target audience, a social marketer must collect data not only about their knowledge, but also about their attitudes and behaviors.

Marketers know that the marketplace is a rich collage of diverse populations, each having a distinct set of wants and needs. They know that what appeals to one individual may not appeal to another. Marketers divide the market into similar groups (market segments), measure the relative potential of a segment to meet organizational and marketing objectives, and then choose one or more segments (target markets) for concentrating their efforts and resources. (Kotler, Roberto, & Lee, 2002, p. 7)

There are numerous studies about the behavior of homeowners with regard to landscaping practices. For example, it is relatively easy to segment them into those who do their own landscaping versus those who hire a contractor, and those who live in a neighborhood with a homeowners’ association (HOA) versus those who do not. This simple dichotomy of describing homeowners based on their neighborhoods and their practices shows that these groups of people may have very different needs and wants when it comes to landscaping.

**The Four Ps of Social Marketing: Product, Price, Place, and Promotion**

The traditional Extension model often assumes that a lack of information or skills constitutes the most important barriers that their clients face. Agents provide this knowledge with the expectation that behavior change will follow. Research conducted with homeowners regarding their landscape practices, for example, shows that there are numerous barriers to change. Research shows that homeowners lack knowledge about environmentally sustainable practices such as water conservation or best practices for fertilizer application. However, research also shows that homeowners lack the time and interest in learning new techniques or working in their yards, which is why many hire landscapers to do it for them.

The concept of product is the first of the “Four Ps” that every successful social marketing campaign should utilize. If agents focus on simple behaviors as a product and consider them like goods in a store, they might conclude that behavioral recommendations have little value if they are not accepted (both adopted and maintained). If the public does not adopt these recommended behaviors, Extension agents must reassess how to revise the product to make it desirable. The focus should be on what the customer wants, not on what Extension wants to provide.

As with any product, there are costs involved, and these are considered the price of adoption. Social marketers want to lower these costs and make adoption easy, fun, and desirable. This focus on lowering barriers to change makes the social marketing approach different from the Extension model of providing answers to problems. If agents want homeowners to adopt new behaviors, they have to consider the price of change. Homeowners often want to avoid making changes that risk lowering their home's value or angering their neighbors or their homeowners' association (HOA). Thus, making the changes recommended by Extension agents is, in the view of the customer, inconvenient and potentially risky. By continuing to do things in the way they are accustomed, even if it wastes water or leads to fertilizer runoff, the homeowner is minimizing his costs and acting in a rational manner.

Extension agents also should take special care where they place the new behavior so the customer can find out about it easily and learn how to do it correctly at low risk. Product placement is largely about convenience. Extension agents must find ways to make it easy for their customers to choose a new behavior. Where do homeowners make the decision about which fertilizer to buy? Most often at the big box home improvement store, so this would be the ideal place for a campaign to inform them about using slow-release or low-phosphorous fertilizers. Often, the most convenient place to reach a homeowner making decisions about landscaping is at home. Extension agents could recruit neighbors, block captains, HOA leaders, students, or Boy Scouts to go door to door and present homeowners with a new behavior alternative. This has had proven results for outdoor water conservation in other areas (McKenzie-Mohr et al., 2011).
Finally, promotion includes communication, advertising, educational outreach, and social networks. Extension agents are already comfortable with many promotion tools, and they know how to communicate information about new behaviors so that they will reach the largest audience in the most cost-effective way to convince them of the benefits of adoption. Research should be continually employed at this stage so as to learn the best media channels to reach a particular audience and evaluate the impact of campaigns on awareness and recognition. Once the first three Ps (product, price, and place) have been defined for a particular behavior, the creative work of promotion can take over. Because promotion often involves media marketing (public service announcements, billboards, brochures), many people confuse this kind of social advertising with social marketing. Social advertising can be very effective in raising awareness about an issue. However, agents can increase their chances of success if they identify their target audiences, define a behavior as a product, make a concerted attempt to lower barriers to change, and then develop an effective promotional campaign.

**Community-Based Social Marketing**

A key principle of social marketing is that it is designed to benefit the customer and the larger community, not the marketer. One way to stay connected to the customer and know how best to promote these behavior changes is through an approach known as community-based participatory research (CBPR). The combination of social marketing with community participation has its roots in collaborative research efforts between academics and underserved communities seeking to address difficult public health issues. Many researchers in public health found they had better success in promoting healthy behaviors when they gave their target audiences control over the research topics, shared data results with them, and let them prioritize the approaches to making improvements in their communities. The combination of this approach with the tools and concepts of social marketing came to be known as CBSM.

Like the field of social marketing, the use of CBSM can provide Extension agents with a set of principles and tools that may improve program outcomes while facilitating public deliberation and decision-making in their communities. Forming a social marketing community advisory board can help in the design, collection, and interpretation of data. Because these boards are composed of members of the target population and key stakeholders who are interested in promoting the product, they can actually help disseminate the changes among their peers and neighbors.

**Conclusion**

While utilizing the CBSM methodology can make Extension programs more effective, Extension agents must acknowledge that, along with their traditional role as educators of the public, they are acting as social change agents. Most CBSM campaigns do not rely on an education-based model for promoting behavior change. The field has developed because even when citizens had sufficient knowledge of unhealthy or dangerous behaviors, they continued to do them because of barriers to change. The field of social marketing expanded as methods were discovered to overcome those barriers and use marketing techniques to motivate people to adopt change. In the field of environmental behavior change, Extension agents can benefit from trying new approaches that have proven success (McKenzie-Mohr et al., 2011).

**References**
