



Application of Social Marketing in Assisting Program Managers to Tackle Public Health Concerns

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Dear Editor-In-Chief

In the modern era, the program managers and public health professionals need to be well prepared to counter the spectrum of diseases associated with adoption of harmful practices (1). Among the multiple strategies tried with variable range of success, social marketing is a strategy to facilitate acceptance and willingness on the part of the concerned individuals to adopt a particular behavior (1). It is built on the rationale that health professionals should assume more responsibility for promoting health education in the community (2). Broadly, social marketing is the process of motivating people through application of marketing techniques to adopt willingly a behavior, which is beneficial to them, over other 'potentially' harmful behavior (2). The objective of social marketing is to promote public health with the overall aim of improving health for all (1).

In health care settings, social marketing essentially comprises of four key elements, namely the product (viz. a tangible material like educational pamphlet of a drug or a non-standardized service like sensitization session on prevention of sexually transmitted infections) and its quality / packaging; the place (viz. deciding the place based on the type of product where it is made available so that the target beneficiaries can utilize them easily without any stigma); the price (viz. the cost of a promotive / preventive health care service is the key determinant of the success of the strategy and

it should include the cost of loss of work / pay or travel if the individual has to visit a clinic); and promotion (viz. ensuring high visibility by designing locally sensitive / short / correct messages based on the existing health problem & deciding appropriate timing when the user is most likely to accept the idea, product or the service) (2-4). The strategy of social marketing with regard to any product can be successful if all the elements are pre-tested among a small cohort of the target audience (2, 4).

A public health specialist should realize that social marketing techniques cannot be universally employed and have certain inherent limitations such as it is of minimal utility where parameters like lack of health facilities, social discrimination and lack of political will is prevalent; if consumers are not involved in decision making; if message does not address the needs of target audience; selection of inappropriate media; and financial constraints / scarce resources (1,3,5). Owing to the long duration needed for bringing about a change in human behavior, the process of social marketing does not give immediate results. Thus, it is not much prioritized by the program managers (2). Furthermore, social marketing programs often face failure due to limited knowledge of marketing principles among health planners and because of opposition from competing groups such as tobacco companies in anti-smoking campaigns (1).

To conclude, social marketing offers a unique opportunity for public health specialists to bridge the gap between the health care delivery systems and those who are unaware or unwilling to utilize it.

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