



Progressive Thinking:

Ten Possible Futures for Public & Community Services

The State and Social Marketing: can we embrace change?

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Social marketing – the use of commercial marketing and communication techniques for social purposes – is a powerful tool for positively and voluntarily changing the behaviours of individuals and populations.

Social marketing is more than the use of just social media, or advertising, or any other single tool; it is the strategic choice and use of a combination of techniques, products and technologies to achieve voluntary behaviour change for social good.

Social marketing in New Zealand has a varied recent history. It has come in and out of fashion with different administrations, and the public sector's institutional understanding of the evidence base and key tenets of good practice has waxed and waned. Achieving social behaviour change is complex and there are many traps for inexperienced or careless players: underinvestment, over-communication, and short-termism to name just a few.

But through this history New Zealand is blessed with a number of experts – within the public sector and in its partners in the private, academic and non-government sectors – with practical experience and theoretical insights to contribute.

The pandemic and the long term social-impacts it will create provide fresh challenges for social marketing and behaviour change practitioners in the public sector. Many of the social problems that social marketing sets out to address will be more difficult to solve; more complex and more entrenched. But these challenging times also bring an opportunity to reflect on lessons of the past and change how we work; to modernise our practice and make it more progressive.

Three enduring features of good practice

The success of the Government's COVID-19 communication and marketing programme, causing nearly the entire population to change working, social and recreational habits almost over night, is evidence of just how powerful this tool can be, and how capable the public sector is of wielding it effectively, alongside strong policy and regulatory initiatives.

The actions of the New Zealand Government in March set out almost a case book for how to approach behaviour change. That's not to say they've got everything right – and time will no doubt be the critic's friend, as hindsight reveals flaws like no other kind of vision ever can. But the scale of public behaviour change relating to COVID-19, and the rapidity of it, is unlike anything we've seen before. In part, we can attribute this to the clear and obvious need to act, that was playing out on the global stage. But in mid-March the Government was walking a tightrope: if it had moved too soon, it would have moved ahead of public willingness to respond and comply. If it had moved too slowly it would have risked panic, confusion and losing the trust that was so crucial in bringing people along.



So the COVID-19 programme is a great case study for the enduring features of behaviour change best practice.

First, it took a **multi-layered and integrated approach** to communications, ensuring they were unmissable for the target audience (in this case – and perhaps for the only time in history justifiably – all New Zealanders). Rather than relying on one mechanism (for example, television advertising), the campaign is visible through news media, social media, advertising on a very wide range of channels; through partnerships and use of collateral; through word of mouth and aligned spokespeople from every agency of Government (and beyond). And it was repetitive and enduring – with briefings to media and the public happening daily and all other forms of marketing and commentary sustained throughout the lockdown phase and beyond.

The second key tenet of best practice, where the COVID-19 campaign is so strong, is its clear **focus on behaviour** (and a single, “non-divisible” behaviour¹ at that). The Government didn’t ask people to “be virus-wise” or promote a bundle of behaviours (eg “protect our community”). Instead, the simple catch cry that headlined every communication from the start of the COVID-19 response was “stay home”. Although there was debate about what we might be allowed to do if we *didn’t* stay home (can I surf? Can I go mountain-biking?) these were marginal to what was a very swift response at a mass level, that was enabled by the absolute clarity of the message.

The third tenet of best practice (and perhaps the most important) is a **focus on the audience, or citizens**. The UK’s National Social Marketing Centre’s [Benchmark Criteria](#) make this clear, placing Customer Orientation as their first criterion. Successful behaviour change programmes understand and respond to what will motivate people; and what will stop them from behaving the way you need them to. We have seen with the COVID-19 communications a powerful balance held between the policy changes required by the science and economics of the pandemic; and the emotional and practical needs of the citizens who would be asked to implement those changes.

Not every programme over the years has had the success of the COVID-19 communications, in part because not all programmes have been designed in a way that is consistent with good practice; but other difficulties have also been in play. Less perceived urgency, less investment, less combined expertise in the creation of the programme and less strength in leadership have all been a feature of our practice’s history – and will likely be so in the future, for we are all human, and human behaviour change is particularly complex and difficult.

And if it was complex in the past, in the immediate, post-COVID future we will have new challenges, as communities are harder pressed than ever before. Even at its evidence-based best, old social marketing practice might not be enough to see us through. This is a moment to test the State’s involvement in social marketing, and to find new ways to operate to meet these challenges.

An invitation to change

As we imagine the post-COVID-19 future, some features stand out more than others as potentially challenging for public sector behaviour change practice; and open the door to some interesting new ways to work.

¹ Doug McKenzie-Mohr, Community Based Social Marketing www.cbsm.com



These features were not absent in the past, but our practice has generally been slow to respond to them. My hope is that now it will be clear we must tackle them; and that now we will be able to find previously unreachable ways to do so.

First we have an opportunity to really examine how social marketing practice contributes to or **reduces inequalities**. Despite generally setting out to reduce inequality, in some cases social marketing practice has had the opposite impact; either by increasing inequality; or increasing the stigma that is associated with inequality. To a degree, it is in the very nature of social marketing, which targets communities perceived as being most in need of change; but this is exacerbated in the way many programmes are initiated, conceived and conducted; by reinforcing dependency and deficits, and taking an expert-led, rather than community-led approach.

With the very real risk of deepening health, social and economic inequality as a result of COVID-19, we have the opportunity and the obligation to ask ourselves, how can our practice contribute to reducing inequality? What can we do differently to shift the balance of power? How can we shift our practice from paternalism to partnership?

Community-based practice and true co-design are not new concepts, and they are in place in some programmes and some areas. But these days they are the domain of the brave and the patient; they are like the slow food of policy and behaviour change practice; they demand a degree of flexibility and openness that isn't always easy to achieve. But what an opportunity we have now to find the time and the space to deeply and genuinely engage with communities, and to ensure our approaches are designed in ways that enable those communities to participate in engagement.

A second area for reflection for behaviour change practice lies in our response to the deepening complexity of social problems. The problems themselves do not arise from a single source; so the solutions should not arise from a single source either. And so another opportunity we can seize now is to act on what UK think tank Demos has called the public sector's "**moral obligation**" to **collaborate**.

Collaboration has been an unresolved question for social marketing and behaviour change practice for many years. It's an area where intention and action have been slow to connect, as the time needed to collaborate generally works against the sometimes urgent (and perhaps artificial) deadlines for many behaviour change programmes. COVID-19 has shown us that collaboration can happen, even in genuinely urgent circumstances, and that determined leadership can make it happen. The benefits of that collaboration are obvious, and enduring.

The third challenge and opportunity that the pandemic and its aftermath invite us to consider is an external one. Like the others it is not new; and like the others, the current environment makes it more urgent to confront than ever – and more possible.

How does the **rapidly changing media environment** change our ways of reaching people with our behaviour change programmes? What does the loss of orthodoxy mean for our ability to communicate with many people, from a single source? What opportunities and risks arise from the voice that social media has conferred on people previously invisible in a heavily mainstreamed media and entertainment context? If good communications is "simple clear messages, repeated often, by a variety of trusted sources²", how can we take advantage of the new environment to

² Dr Edward Maibach, in conversation



identify, empower and motivate a greater variety of trusted sources? And let us be careful not to transfer our old over-reliance on “above the line” communications (advertising) into the new paradigm, but find ways to elevate real and diverse community voices through a rich portfolio of channels.

The benefits of these approaches will be manifold: In a future of greater collaboration we may see fewer social marketing programmes initiating from Government, and at the same time, more that address root causes of harm. In a future of greater citizen-centricity, we may see greater shared ownership of problems and solutions; in a future of more diverse communication channels we may see a wider range of voices sharing social good messaging in more intimate and trusted ways.

Marketing and communication are powerful tools government can use to generate real and positive change for New Zealand citizens. Right now – when so much has changed; and we are rethinking what our future might look like – we have the opportunity to embed good behaviour change practice more consistently, and create new approaches that put communities and citizens at the centre. It’s a bright future, if we are patient and brave.

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