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**What is Commercial Social Marketing? And Is It a  
Force for Good or Bad?**

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# **What Is Commercial Social Marketing? And Is It a Force for Good or Bad?**

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to introduce the concept of commercial social marketing (CSM) and discuss some major ethical aspects of CSM. In the first section, we introduce 6 social marketing benchmark criteria. Against this background, we demonstrate Dove's 'Campaign for Real Beauty' to be an instance of CSM. In relation to the benchmark criteria, the second section focuses on 3 key ethical challenges in CSM. a) We describe the problem of paternalism and suggest that CSM can deal with it by anchoring social campaigns in the target groups' world-view. b) We address the problem of power imbalances and argue why it is more severe in non-profit social marketing. c) We argue that CSM could create a new and unethical kind of social competition due to its inherent motivation to gain ownership of the social cause it addresses.

## **The Concept of Commercial Social Marketing**

Academics often invoke a clear distinction between commercial marketing and social marketing (Blitstein, Evans and Driscoll, 2008; McCormack, Lewis and Driscoll, 2008; McDermot, Stead and Hastings, 2005; Donovan and Henley, 2003). In effect, some researchers argue that commercial marketing cannot be characterized as social marketing, due to its inherent motive to raise profits (Fry cited in Davidson and Novelli, 2001). However, social marketing increasingly inspires commercial marketing. Two observations illustrate this trend. First, marketing professionals argue in favor of a positive link between commercial and social marketing (CIM, 2009; Brand Republic, 2008). Second, a number of contemporary commercial campaigns are in effect examples of commercial social marketing (CSM). Or so we will argue in what follows. But first we need a quick introduction to the concept of social marketing.

In the seminal paper 'Social marketing: an approach to planned social change' Kotler and Zaltman (1971, p.5) launched the following definition: "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". However influential this definition has been, it omits direct reference to behavioral change as a key objective of social marketing. As a corrective Andreasen (1995, p.7) has proposed what has become a very dominant definition: "Social marketing is the application of commercial marketing technologies to the analysis, planning, execution and evaluation of programs designed to influence the voluntary behaviour of target audiences in order to improve their personal welfare and that of society." Though Andreasen's definition provides a useful corrective, it still misses out on the insights of contemporary relationship marketing (Hastings, 2003; Wood, 2008). We are still in need of a powerful generic social marketing definition that incorporates the consumer

as a co-creator of the mutual exchange, which lies at the heart of contemporary marketing (Grönroos, 2006; 1990). Andreasen (2002) is very well aware of this problem and has suggested downplaying the importance of generic definitions and instead focusing more on elaborate benchmark criteria. We follow this approach, because it allows for a more detailed understanding of CSM and thereby facilitates a more careful ethical analysis. The following benchmark criteria are key to full-blown social marketing campaigns (Andreasen, 2002; McDermot, Stead and Hastings, 2005; Stead and Angus, 2007).

1. Behavioral change. The aim of social marketing is to obtain (Andreasen, 1995) or improve the prerequisites for (Wood, 2008) behavioral change.
2. Consumer research. Consumers' world-view (e.g. needs, values, wants and experiences) is revealed through mainly qualitative studies (e.g. focus groups, personal interviews, field observations, persona methods) (Hastings, 2008).
3. Segmentation and targeting. The target group is narrowed down to specific social groups that share a set of core beliefs, values, and desires (Hastings, 2008).
4. Marketing mix. Strategic use of the 4Ps of the marketing mix.
5. Exchange. In exchange of behavioral or attitudinal change, social marketers offer tangible or intangible benefits (Deshpande, Rothschild and Brooks, 2004).
6. Competition. Competing forces to the desired behavioral or attitudinal change are identified and the campaign uses strategies to outsmart this competition.

### **Paradigm Case of Commercial Social Marketing**

Corporations have employed social marketing techniques to promote social objectives in the workplace (Stead and Angus, 2007) as well as in the marketplace (Davidson and Novelli, 2001). Thus, there is a distinction between internal (employee-oriented) and external (consumer-oriented) CSM. In this paper the focus is exclusively on external CSM. We will now introduce a contemporary case of CSM. Dove's 'Campaign for Real Beauty' is a paradigm example, because the campaign draws extensively on all of the 6 benchmarks in order to reach a social aim. Dove states that the campaign is "a global effort intended to serve as a starting point for societal change (Dove, 2009a)". The social goal Dove is aiming at is to change women's perception of beauty through introduction of new inclusive ideals of beauty (benchmark 1).

To get a detailed picture of the target group's conception of various issues relating to ideals of beauty and feelings of self-esteem, Dove commissioned a 10 country consumer research study (benchmark 2). Thus, 'The Real Truth About Beauty: A Global Report' (Dove, 2009b) surveyed 3,300 girls and women between the ages of 15 and 64. The findings were discussed and interpreted with the help from professional scholars (Dove, 2009c).

The campaign employs all of the 4Ps (price, product, place and promotion) (benchmark 4). Interestingly, monetary price is not part of the marketing plan, but social price certainly is. The campaign highlights in TV ads like 'Onslaught' and 'Talk to your child before the beauty industry does' the psychological price women have to pay for being subjects to suppressive social ideals of beauty. Dove offers a

tangible, commercial product (cosmetics) as well as a sophisticatedly defined social product (new ideals of beauty). The channels by which the product/social change is promoted include various media, interpersonal channels (SMS- interaction) and the creation of a fund (Dove Self-Esteem Fund). The means by which the product/social change is promoted include advertising, Internet games, consumer interaction (e.g. through SMS), expert articles and reports, media advocacy and even sleepover events.

The main campaign is targeted at ‘ordinary women, who want to feel beauty and are unsatisfied with the contemporary ideals of beauty’. However, different campaign activities work with much narrower segments and targets (benchmark 3). To take just one example, Dove has developed guides, which equip their consumers to run workshops in order to develop self-esteem among young girls. These guides are made in different versions, which quite clearly target different groups: a) teachers, b) mums and daughters and c) girl guides or leaders (Dove, 2009d).

In exchange of behavioral or attitudinal change, the campaign offers a real social benefit: self-esteem (benchmark 5). The campaign aims at an epistemological exchange with its target (i.e. increasing knowledge and awareness of beauty stereotypes) as well as an emotional exchange (i.e. increasing individual consumers feeling of worth and self-esteem).

With striking creativity a series of videos identify and attempt to outsmart competing forces to the desired behavioral and attitudinal change (benchmark 6). The video ‘Evolution’ identifies as a competing factor the use of modern IT technology (e.g. ‘photoshopping’) to manipulate with models in order to make them match stereotyped ideals of beauty. In the same vein, the video ‘Onslaught’ depicts the beauty industry (advertising, cosmetic surgery, beauty stereotypes) as a competing force to improving the bases of self-esteem and warns the consumer to “talk to your daughter before the beauty industry does (Dove, 2009e)”. Dove quite obviously draws on all of the benchmarks. What is more, they do so to promote a behavioral or social aim, i.e. introducing new ideals of beauty in order to reinforce the bases of self-esteem. Accordingly, the ‘Campaign for Real Beauty’ is a full-scale social marketing campaign carried out in a commercial context. In the next section we will identify 3 key ethical challenges in CSM.

### **Ethics in Commercial Social Marketing**

The aim of commercial marketing is to establish a market exchange (e.g. money for products or services). In contrast, social marketing aims at establishing a much more complex and ethically controversial welfare exchange (e.g. behavioral change for tangible or intangible benefits) (McDermott, Stead and Hastings, 2005; Brenkert 2002). As illustration, social marketing has been used to a) influence judges to reduce UK prison numbers (Hastings, 2008), b) encourage educated parents to have more children (Donovan and Henley, 2003) and c) persuade people to sign up as organ donors (Jeffreys, 2008). Compared to commercial marketing, social marketing interferes more seriously with our lives. Accordingly, CSM is an ethically controversial branch of modern marketing. Though social marketing ethics as such is still nascent, the field is evolving rapidly (e.g. Eagle, 2009; Guttman and Salmon, 2004; Hastings, Stead and Webb, 2004; Brenkert, 2002, Andreasen, 2001; Callahan, Koenig and Minkler, 1999, Laczniak, Lusch and Murphy, 1979). However, for-profit

social marketing is by and large left out. Apart from Davidson and Novelli (2001), this paper is a pioneering exploration into the ethics of CSM.

### **Paternalism**

The aim of social marketing (for-profit as non-profit) is to encourage behavioral change (benchmark 1). Accordingly, social marketing will always impose social values and norms on their target groups (Donovan and Henley, 2003; Brenkert, 2002, 2001). Most obviously, social marketing interventions can be justified with reference to the fact that they aim at making people better off. But this justification is paternalistic (Buchanan 2008; Dworkin, 2005). Paternalism runs counter to the value of personal autonomy that lies at the heart of western liberal democracy (Kymlicka, 2002). Paternalistic interventions can be necessary when target groups very clearly are in need of help but do not recognize this to be the case (e.g. pregnant drug abusers, neglected children, alcoholics). Non-profit social marketing can defend paternalistic approaches by pointing to the fact that the welfare of the target group is an intrinsic goal. Yet regardless of the plausibility of such an approach, it should be noted that it would not work for CSM, because the welfare of the target group is merely an instrumental goal (e.g. to improve profit and brand equity).

Brenkert (2002, p.16) points out that social goals are “subject to determination through processes of social argumentation and justification”. On this understanding, CSM can justify to impose social norms and values on its target group if the associated purpose is evidently recognized as worthy and significant by society. But we have to realize that this solution does not make the marketing intervention less paternalistic, it simply distributes the problem to a public, governmental level. Our suggestion for a truly non-paternalistic solution is to only induce motivations to behavioral changes and impose social values, which the target group desires. On this account, the way to non-paternalistic CSM is to approach social problems through extensive consumer research in order to anchor the interventions in the hopes, dreams and desires of the target group. Dove provides a good example of non-paternalistic CSM; their consumer research revealed that girls and women, at a transnational scale, viewed contemporary ideals of beauty as a real problem and that they wished for more inclusive ideals of beauty. Dove escaped being paternalistic by tailoring their campaign to the world-view of its target.

### **Asymmetric Power Relations**

In relation to the concept of ‘voluntary exchange’ (benchmark 4), the problem of power imbalances pops up. In fact ‘power relations’ are sometimes underscored as the key ethical problem in social marketing (Donovan and Henley, 2003; Laczniak, Lusch and Murphy, 1979). It is argued that power imbalances in CSM are likely to be even more problematic and asymmetric due to greater financial resources in the private sector (Davidson and Novelli, 2001). Though the power problem indeed is crucial, we will argue that it actually might be less serious with regard to CSM than standard social marketing. To argue the point we need a closer look at a) the concept of power and b) consumer attitudes towards cause-related marketing.

a) Following Arendt’s (1986) seminal analysis of communicative power, Cunningham

(2003) argues that a marketer has power over a consumer to the extent that the consumer allows the marketer to influence his or her behavior and desires. On this account, “power requires a certain willingness to be influenced (p.235)”. Power might be an asymmetric relation of strength, but it presupposes some degree of autonomy on both sides. b) Marketing research demonstrates widespread consumer skepticism concerning the effective motivations in corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Vanhamme and Grobben, 2008). Of particular interest, Webb and Mohr (1998) reveal that consumers are more skeptical about for-profit cause-related marketing than is the case with non-profit cause-related marketing due to the perceived difference in motivations.

Now the question is how ‘skepticism towards an agent’s motives’ relates to ‘willingness to be influenced’. On the assumption that most persons under normal circumstances will be less willing to be influenced by an agent whose motivations they doubt or distrust, it is reasonable to expect most consumers to be less willing to be influenced by CSM than non-profit social marketing, because of the predominant skepticism of corporate motives to do good. On this analysis the power imbalances are likely to be less asymmetric in CSM than is the case with nonprofit social marketing. However, the argument needs empirical testing.

### **Gaining Ownership of Social Problems to Increase Competitive Strength**

A corporation that tries to solve a social problem through social marketing does have an interest in outsmarting other forces that aim at solving the very same social problem. As an example, Dove has an interest (perceived or not) in gaining exclusive ownership of their social cause (ideals of beauty linked to self-esteem) insofar as corporations normally will use social marketing as a tool to create a strong corporate brand and increase product brand equity. The rationale underlying this argument is the observation that ‘uniqueness’ or ‘differentiation’ is indicative of brand strength (Aaker, 2002; Keller, 2008). Thus, corporations running CSM campaigns are likely to try to outsmart other commercial forces that address the same problem, because ownership of the problem facilitates brand uniqueness.

The ethical problem is that gaining competitive ownership of social problems might be counterproductive. Consider the case where, say, a corporation challenges Dove by also building its cosmetics brand around new, more inclusive ideals of beauty. Insofar as Dove and its new competitor really approaches an important social problem (commercially impoverished self esteem), it would be highly inappropriate for Dove to try to gain exclusive ownership to the problem and outsmart the new brand that taps into their social cause. It is simply unethical to try to impede efforts to improve a social cause for the sake of increasing brand equity and corporate competitiveness. But Dove certainly has a competitive reason to try to do so just because uniqueness is a brand equity benchmark. Note however that having a reason to do an action does not necessarily imply that one acts on that reason. Though CSM campaigners like Dove do have a reason to gain exclusive ownership of their social cause, it is an open question whether or not they choose to act on that reason. The likelihood could be very low, but still it is important to get a clear picture of why corporations get involved in CSM.

The problem of gaining ownership of social problems is very hard to get around, because competitive strength – which is the source of the problem – is a survival benchmark and, as such, corporations do not necessarily have a strong interest in resolving it. The main interest is to be associated with *trying* to solve social problems, not necessarily to actually solve them. The corporate pay-off of CSM is likely to emerge from the fact that consumers and stakeholders *perceive* of the corporations as acting socially responsibly. In other words, the corporate pay-off emerges from the *perception* of the corporation as an active socially responsible agent, that is, the pay-off emerges independently of whether the problem is actually improved on or not. Again consider Dove; they surely have not solved the problem of distorted ideals of beauty, but they are *perceived* as addressing the problem and, indeed, they have got their corporate pay-off: the campaign is reported to have led to “a 700% increase in product sales (CIM, 2009, p.10)”.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has introduced the concept of CSM and discussed 3 key ethical challenges that CSM faces. Against Andreasen’s (2002) 6 social marketing benchmarks, we demonstrated that Dove’s commercial marketing campaign, ‘Campaign for Real Beauty’, is a full-blown social marketing campaign, because it draws on all the benchmarks in order to obtain a social goal (improving self-esteem). Next, we discussed 3 key ethical challenges that CSM faces. a) We pointed to the problem of imposing values on consumers (paternalism) and suggested to resolve the problem through anchoring CSM in the target group’s value universe. b) We discussed asymmetric power relations and argued that power imbalances are potentially less severe in CSM compared to nonprofit social marketing. c) We finally demonstrated that a corporation doing social marketing have an inherent interest in gaining ownership of the social problem it addresses and outsmarting other forces that address the very same social problem.

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