

Reaffirming the Neutrality of the Social Marketing Tool Kit: Social Marketing as a Hammer, and Social Marketers as Hired Guns

BY STEPHEN DANN

ABSTRACT

Social marketing has been a discipline founded on the open and robust exchange of ideas regarding the nature of social change, the adaptation and adoption of commercial marketing, and the ethics of influencing behavior for beneficial outcomes. As a practical discipline, with a strong theoretical and philosophical framework, it also relies on the open communication between academic and practitioner to ensure those researching and those implementing are speaking the same social marketing language. In early 2006, the international social marketing mailing list (SOC-MKT) was subject to a short, albeit critical, debate on the ethics and nature of social marketing, the social marketing tool kit, and the role of social marketers. This article reports on the summary and implications of the debate among academics, practitioners, and founders of the social marketing discipline.

Introduction

While the ethics of social marketing have been debated continuously over the history of the discipline, there has been a consistent emphasis on the ethical application of the tool kit of social marketing, rather than the ethics of social marketing as a tool kit (Andreasen 2006). The position of many of the senior figures of social marketing is reasonably clear. For example, although Andreasen (1993) states categorically that anyone may use social marketing, including the

Klu Klux Klan, there are still those who believe that the social marketing tool kit comes with a morality safety catch. Fine (1995), Kotler, Roberto, and Lee (2002); Andreasen (2001) and others debate the impact of the social marketing outcomes. Rothschild (1999 in Andreasen 2001) writes of the ethics of the implementation of marketing and social marketing, describing the marketer as the “contractor who builds from the plans” (p. 23) rather than the architect. In this manner, the ethicality of the outcome of the application of the marketing tools is the question, rather than arguing whether adjusting the marketing mix is immoral or unethical.

In 2006, a debate on the international social marketing list brought to light a divide between two camps in the social marketing field—those who perceived social marketing as a value-neutral tool kit for social change and those who felt that social marketing carried an implicit set of values that prohibited its use in “unworthy” campaigns. On one side of the equation, a range of social marketers brought forth ideals that the tool kit of social marketing had an implicit value statement that meant they can only be used for “good” and that social marketers were inherently bound to be “doers of good” (Glecker 2006). In contrast, a second group of social marketers posited the value-neutral tool kit approach to social marketing, arguing that the tools of social marketing held no inherent value position and that the social marketers themselves were not bound to be “doers of good” as much as they were bound to be users of the social marketing tool kit (Andreasen 2006). This article examines the construction of the arguments surrounding the neutrality of the marketer and/or the marketing toolkit.

Method

The debate was conducted in the public forum of the SOC-MKTG mailing list that is operated by Georgetown University (Washington, DC, USA), under the ownership and supervision of Professor Alan Andreasen. The mailing list is unmoderated, with open subscription and a mix of membership base from academic and practitioners. Over the course of the debate, 30 e-mail exchanges were exchanged in 6 days, with 20 participants from a range of backgrounds. Data were not collected on country of origin or organizational affiliation. E-mails were analyzed for thematic consistency, and the use of thematic imagery and metaphor in the definition and support of the respondent’s position within the debate. Findings are reported here by thematic cluster rather than sequential appearance in the debate.

If I had a hammer

Many colorful metaphorical descriptions were invoked, although the two most persistent metaphors within the list became that of social marketing as a

metaphorical hammer (Dann 2006a) and the persistent image of social marketers as “hired guns” (Andreasen 2006). This article further explores the use of these two metaphors in the negotiated redefining of the role and purpose of social marketing on the international marketing mailing list.

I'd hammer in the morning...

The first reference to the metaphorical hammer arose from Dann (2006a) invoking the neutrality of a physical tool kit in the construction of a gallows.

One of the things to never forget about the social marketing tool kit is that it's just a tool kit. Just like a hammer or a knife, it's how you weild (sic) it that makes it a weapon or a tool... You can't condemn the hammer because it was used to build a gallows. Same for the social marketing tool kit. It's just a set of marketing hammers (and other blunt instruments) for use in building social marketing campaigns. (Dann 2006a)

Dann's (2006a) invocation of the marketing hammer also brings allusion to oft-cited criticism of marketers as being those people who believe they are on the cutting edge when they are more at home with a blunt instrument. The invocation of the marketing hammer was primarily in response to Glecker's (2006) question of whether social marketing could, or rather was, applied by the Taliban:

... that leaves open the idea that someone can do social marketing to keep women out of schools because they shouldn't be educated - did the Taliban do social marketing? (Glecker 2006)

Although the propositional notion of Glecker's (2006) social marketing Taliban was disputed, and eventually declared void due to the lack of voluntary compliance invoked by the Taliban regime, the division between neutrality of the tool kit and the outcome was questioned. The nature of Glecker's (2006) query as to whether social marketing could be used for “negative” purposes (e.g., keeping women out of schools) invoked a string of ethical position statements. Notably, Dann (2006b) reintroduced the “ethical in the eye of the beholder” statements, particularly with reference to the use of “social good” as a determining factor in social marketing. One of the fundamental ethical dilemmas of social marketing revolves around the notion of “social good.” What is considered an action advancing society and for social benefit and therefore worthy of being the subject of a social marketing program is basically in the eye of the beholder (Dann 2006b).

I'd hammer in the evening...

Dann's (2006b) introduction of the "ethics by perspective" argument invokes the pragmatism of social marketing ethics, where the utilitarianism of the discipline is inherent in the definition of social marketing. Andreasen (1995) presents social marketing as:

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 their society.

Inherent into the core of the social marketing definition is the utilitarian ethical argument of action for the welfare of society. In fact, this notion is further supported by Kotler et al. (2002) who define social marketing as:

the use of marketing principles and techniques to influence a target audience to voluntarily accept, reject, modify, or abandon a behaviour for the benefit of individuals, groups or society as a whole.

Behavioral change for benefit, or improvement of society, brings with it an implicit assumption that the campaign is acting upon a socially positive outcome.

All over this land...

Lebfreve (2006) invoked a semiotic position by offering the division between the ethics of the conceptual ground of "social marketing" and "social marketing practice." Dividing the ethical constraints of the discipline as a value-neutral system, and a value-laden practice allows for social marketing to exhibit both neutrality and subjectivity. Tools, theory, and models can remain detached from the outcomes of their application, and the Taliban-marketer who adopts the marketing mix will not prejudice the future non-Taliban use of the same technique. The hammer would not be blamed for the fate of the nails in this dichotomous structure. Similarly, the social marketer would be able to claim personal responsibility for the outcomes of the social campaign—something that could not be separable from the tool kit if both hammer and carpenter are responsible for the end product.

I'd hammer out danger...

Support for the marketing hammer protocol continued during the debate, with Doner (2006) supporting Dann's (2006a) position of the neutrality of the hammer compared with the bias of the wielder.

Thanks for the thought-provoking discussion. I agree with Stephen's comments that social marketing is just a tool kit; whether it is being used for "good" or "evil" often depends on one's perspective and values. As a practitioner, there are certainly times when I refuse to work on something because I don't believe it will be to society's benefit, even though the funder "means well" and believes it will be. (*Doner 2006*)

At this point, Doner (2006) re-invoked Andreasen's (2006) "hired gun" position, whereby the social marketer was seen as the servant of the campaign or the campaign's masters.

We need to be clear that social marketers are "hired guns" (excuse the metaphor). That is, give us a behavior you want influenced and we have some very good ways of making it happen. The decision about which behaviors "ought" to be influenced is not ours to make. Clients – or even societies or governments – make those judgments. (*Andreasen 2006*)

Support for Andreasen's hired gun position was mixed, with Graham (2006) illustrating that the "hired gun" mentality of the social marketing may be at odds with the commercial parent discipline.

While the technology basis for social and business marketing might be the same the social ideologies underlying the use of the technology come from different discourses. Hence the notion "hired gun" tends to signal the discourse of the user. It's not likely that you'll find the term "hired gun" in any text used to train practitioners of social science disciplines. (*Graham 2006*)

Dann (2006a) adopted the more evocative phraseology of the "social marketing ronin," with the evocation of the imagery of the masterless samurai. Although used sparingly on the list, the invocation of the ronin image also brings with it the negativity of the disgraced samurai. Perhaps in this manner, Dann (2006) invokes the darker side of the skills-for-hire, while Andreasen (2006) invokes the neutrality of the hired guns. Within this debate, only these two participants placed specific metaphors relating to the nature of the independence of the social marketer from the social marketing tool kit. However, a third metaphor brought together both Andreasen and Dann's individualistic, free-ranging social marketing contractor and the use of the social marketing hammer metaphor.

I'd hammer out a warning...

Aguilar (2006) introduced the merger of hammer and hammer wielder with a simple, albeit descriptive analogy:

A further expansion on the hammer metaphor; just using the hammer does not make you a carpenter. (*Aguilar 2006*)

Invocation of the nonviolent skilled contractor at this point reinforced the original metaphoric ethical invocation by Dann (2006a) – whereby the hammer was excused from its role in the construction of the gallows, since the decision to accept the gallows contract was that of the carpenter. Even then, the decision to use the gallows would not necessarily be the responsibility of either the hammer or the carpenter.

I'd hammer out love between my brothers and my sisters...

To extend the metaphorical circular argument, both Dann (2006a) and Andreasen (2006) proposed the neutrality of the social marketing tool kit and the independent “freelance” nature of the social marketer. By portraying the social marketing tool kit as a series of objective devices, each designed to extract a specific behavioral outcome for the overall effect of implementing a campaign, both parties attempted to defuse the concept of social marketing having an inherent bias toward an objective standard of “doing good.”

Glecker (2006), although not intentionally, brought forth a declarative position between the actions and intention of the marketer and the reputation of the marketing tool kit. Understandably, even within the metaphorical confines of the “social marketing as a hammer,” it is possible to evoke an acceptance of the need for social marketing “to do good.” While Dann’s (2006a) position on social marketing as weapon or tool is based on the intention of the wielding party, other invocations of the hammer metaphor imply the specific need for “good intentions.” The most common example of the dichotomy of the “hammer as weapon” versus “hammer as tool” would be to place the hammer in the hands of the Nordic God Thor.

Extending the metaphor of the social marketing hammer, only making the tool kit of social change available to those who were determined to “do good” with it, would be to create the condition known as the Mjolnir Clause. In Nordic mythology, and certain aspects of pagan and Norse theology, Mjolnir, the Hammer of Thor, was purported to be enchanted to the point that only those most noble of heart and spirit could lift it. Working on this principle, social marketing could only be available to those with either noble hearts and spirits or who were intent on producing an objective “good” outcome for society. Pragmatically, restricting the adaptation of commercial tools and techniques to those of pure nature would be to restrict the use of the technique to a chosen few individuals,

and even then, the determination of “objective good” may never be resolved to a satisfactory outcome.

All over this land . . .

The alternative to the introduction of the Mjolnir Clause to social marketing is to unlock access to the social marketing tool kit and to diffuse the tools and techniques across social causes, rather than simply restrict them to “the pure of heart and spirit.” Social marketing, unlike many tools and/or weapons, depends on the voluntary behavior of the targeted individual. Consequently, deploying and defusing a mass array of voluntary social change techniques is unlikely to create an intellectual arms race, or the proliferation of mutually assured persuasion. Restrictions, however, may lead those who lack the means for social change by persuasion to seek alternative mechanisms to bring forth their preferred social outcome.

Implications for Social Marketing

Social marketing is a dynamic discipline, interpreted and reinterpreted by application as much by discussion. The social marketing mailing list provides a cross between a demilitarized zone for academic and practitioners to discuss issues and a clearing-house for those seeking insight and shared experience of other campaigns in related fields. Since the time of the debate in March 2006, the landscape of social marketing has continued to shift and adjust. French and Blair-Stevens (2006) released a new definition that is the core of the UK government’s spearhead into the implementation of health policy through social marketing. Jupiter Media and other social media marketing organizations have attempted to capture the semantic real estate occupied by social marketing by force of ignorance and Technorati tagging (Weinreich 2006).

The new semantic battlegrounds of blogs, mailing lists, and the Wikipedias of the Internet present an ongoing renegotiation of the meaning of social marketing as a term. Also coupled with the renewed level of interest in debating the ethics, application, and understanding of the discipline, venues such as the social marketing mailing list (soc-mktg@listproc.georgetown.edu) are vital spaces for social marketing practitioners and academics to engage in ongoing dialogue. As the credibility of new media spaces such as this one increases, it is vital to the ongoing health, success, and identity of the social marketing discipline that these debates are engaged and recorded, studied, analyzed, and ultimately used to inform the broader social marketing community of contemporary thinking on these key issues.

Conclusion

Social marketing is an active, dynamic, and at times argumentative discipline. Over the space of a fortnight in the international forum of the social marketing mailing list, 20 academics and practitioners of social marketing engaged in a robust, civilized, and illustrative debate to position and reposition social marketing as a system of value-neutral tools for value-laden outcomes. The end result is a renewed understanding of the role, both perceived and actual, of social marketing as a means of social change, and how the practical implementation of campaigns is matched to the theoretical and conceptual understanding of the ethics of social marketing.

Although the recurrent metaphor of the hammer as a blunt object may seem crude, it was illustrative of the nature of social marketing being one part of a broader tool kit of social change, but a part that was in itself a value-neutral instrument. It is the choice the social marketer makes in how to use that hammer that ultimately determines the ethicality of his or her.

About the Author

Stephen Dann, B.A., B.Com (Hons), Ph.D., is a senior lecturer in marketing at the Australian National University School of Management, Marketing & International Business, Canberra, Australia. He has been an academic for ten years, having researched, taught, and written on a wide range of social marketing and commercial marketing subject areas. He is a regular contributor to the social marketing Wikipedia (<http://socialmarketing.wetpaint.com>), and frequent participant in debates on the SOC-MKT mailing list.

References

- If I had a hammer (The Hammer Song)*, words and music by Lee Hays and Pete Seeger, ©1958, 1962 (renewed), 1986 (renewed). New York: TRO-Ludlow Music, Inc. (BMI).
- AGUILAR, M. 2006. RE: Issues and social marketing—reply—E-mail note sent to < soc-mktg@listproc.georgetown.edu > (a list for social marketers) on 03/18/06 6:31 am.
- ANDREASEN, A. 1993. Presidential address: A social marketing research agenda for consumer behavior researchers. In *Advances in consumer research*, vol. 20, ed. M. Rothschild, and L. McAlister, 1–5. Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research.
- ANDREASEN, A. 1995. *Marketing social change: Changing behavior to promote health, social development and the environment*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- ANDREASEN, A. 2001. *Ethics in social marketing*. Washington: Georgetown University Press.
- ANDREASEN, A. 2006. Issues and social marketing. E-mail note sent to < soc-mktg@listproc.georgetown.edu > (a list for social marketers) on 03/17/06 7:23 am.

- FRENCH, J., and C. BLAIR-STEVENS. 2006. From snake oil salesmen to trusted policy advisors: The development of a strategic approach to the application of social marketing in England. *Social Marketing Quarterly* 12(3): 29–40.
- DANN, S. M. 2006a. RE: Issues and social marketing—reply—E-mail note sent to < soc-mktg@listproc.georgetown.edu > (a list for social marketers) on 03/17/06 12:47 pm.
- DANN, S. J. 2006b. RE: Issues and social marketing—reply—E-mail note sent to < soc-mktg@listproc.georgetown.edu > (a list for social marketers) on 03/17/06 1:30 pm.
- DONER, L. 2006. RE: Issues and social marketing—reply—E-mail note sent to < soc-mktg@listproc.georgetown.edu > (a list for social marketers) on 03/10/06 1:54 am.
- FINE, S. 1995. *Social marketing: Promoting the causes of public and nonprofit agencies*. Sydney: Allyn and Bacon.
- GLECKER, E. A. 2006. RE: Issues and social marketing—reply—E-mail note sent to < soc-mktg@listproc.georgetown.edu > (a list for social marketers) on 03/17/06 10:36 am.
- GRAHAM, E. 2006. RE: Issues and social marketing—E-mail note sent to < soc-mktg@listproc.georgetown.edu > (a list for social marketers) on 03/17/06 7:46 am.
- KOTLER, P., E. ROBERTO, and N. LEE. 2002. *Social marketing: Improving the quality of life*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- LEBFREVE C. 2006. RE: Issues and social marketing—reply—E-mail note sent to < soc-mktg@listproc.georgetown.edu > (a list for social marketers) on 03/18/06 12:38 am.
- ROTHSCHILD, M. 2001. Ethical considerations in the use of marketing for the management of public health and social issues. In *Ethics in social marketing*, ed. A. Andreasen, 17–38. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- WEINREICH, N. 2006. An open letter to new social marketers. *Spare Change*. <http://www.social-marketing.com/blog/2006/02/open-letter-to-new-social-marketers.html> (accessed January 12, 2007).