

# Chapter 4

## Applying Social Marketing to Healthcare: Challenges and Opportunities

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### **ABSTRACT**

*There is now an emerging view of health care as a sector of the economy. The subject is increasingly gaining the interest of policy makers and health care industry researchers as a way of modifying the incidence and impact of unhealthy behavior and disease. Health-related social marketing is the systematic application of commercial marketing principles to achieve behavioral goals relevant to improving health and reducing health inequalities. Whilst commercial marketing seeks to influence behavior for profit, social marketing encourages behaviors that provide well being for individuals or for society as a whole. Several studies set out the importance of using a social marketing approach to encourage positive health behavior. There are therefore a number of challenges and opportunities for social marketing to be used to change health care consumer behavior. Social marketing has been used to persuade a specific audience, mainly through mass media, to adopt an idea, a practice, a product, or all three. To develop social marketing programs, marketers must know about the problem to be addressed, understand the audience to be targeted, and interpret the environment in which the program will be applied. The premise is that all program planning decisions must emanate from a consideration of the consumers' wants, demands, and needs. The aim of this chapter is to examine*

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*ways in which social marketing can help to promote health care attitudes. Exploring key concepts, the study focuses on the application of social marketing theory and principles to healthcare. Using a social marketing approach, it examines the program UpForIt, which aims to influence students aged 16-24 years old to increase their levels of physical activity and adopt healthy eating behaviors. By examining strategies implemented, it identifies that young adults are willing to voluntarily change their lifestyle behaviors, given the appropriate target audience.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Social marketing refers to the systematic application of marketing techniques and principles to influence target audience behaviors in order to improve health or benefit society. Whereas marketing in the commercial sense ultimately seeks to influence consumer behavior for profit, social marketing encourages behaviors that provide benefit for individuals and society as a whole. Some claim that applying marketing principles to healthcare eventually clash with the social purposes of public health. Ethical concerns about the new discipline abound in the literature. Some fear that social marketing operates without any control and regulation. Others criticize social marketing for not being responsive to the needs and concerns of the user, but driven by marketing and sales signals defined by commercial marketing practice. Although some remain critical of social marketing's ethical dimension, its impact, and its capacity to deliver what it promises, there has been a considerable acceptance of marketing principles in many health spheres. Lefebvre and Flora (1988) conclude that although not a panacea, marketing applied to health projects has the potential of reaching the largest possible group of people, at the least cost, with the most effective consumer-satisfying programs.

The literature presents many social issues that could benefit from the application of social marketing principles and techniques. Kotler and Lee (2008) emphasize four major areas that social marketing efforts have focused on over the years: health promotion (e.g. tobacco use, heavy/binge drinking, fat intake, fruit and vegetable intake, obesity, skin cancer, blood pressure), environmental protection (e.g. water conservation, litter, forest destruction), injury prevention (e.g. sexual assault, suicide, seat belts), and community mobilization (e.g. organ donation, blood donation, voting).

Social change is a complex and challenging process. Social change happens when we change internal attitudes or external structures. As it is the synergy of efforts of multiple change agents, health behavior cannot be separated from political issues; economic and social circumstances; religious allegiances; personal attitudes; societal norms; and the embedded interests of businesses, institutions and professional groups. At the international level, the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF support a broader approach to change. It is assumed that "Health is a product of social action".

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