

Social Marketing and Social Media Marketing: The Public Health Difference?

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In the past year, I've noticed what seems to be a misunderstanding between the almost 45 year old discipline known as social marketing and the recent rise in the notion of social media marketing. As someone who has spent the majority of their early career in healthcare as a medical provider, I feel it is important to provide a perspective of distinction from the public health point of view.

Someone may ask, "so what's the big deal? 'Social Marketing' and 'Social Media Marketing' are only one word apart, who cares? When did all of this begin anyway?" Great questions...I'm glad you asked.

As early as 1969, Philip Kotler and Sidney Levy captured the academic community's attention with their pioneering article "Broadening the Concept of Marketing" whereby the idea of social marketing was presented and discussed. Later, in 1971, Kotler and Gerald Zaltman formally coined the term social marketing. Although current wording of social marketing definitions may vary, the essence of the discipline rests unchanged. Kotler, Lee, and Rothschild (2006) defined social marketing as:

"Social marketing is a process that applies marketing principles and techniques to create, communicate, and deliver value in order to influence target audience behaviors that benefit society as well as the target audience (Kotler, Lee, & Rothschild 2006, p. 26)."

In other words, from a public health point of view, it's the use of marketing principles and techniques to solve public health problems. Rich with research and grounded in practical application, social marketing provides health professionals with the tools to develop programs to support healthy behaviors (Coreil 2010).

Applications (Cheng, Kotler, & Lee 2010):

Currently, social marketing principles and techniques are applied in various ways to benefit society and the target audience. Specific to the area of public health, four groupings tend to receive the most attention. The initial grouping is known as health promotion, whereby social marketing methods are used to promote health related behaviors such as tobacco cessation, obesity, teen pregnancy, cancers, and blood pressure. Second is the injury prevention grouping which targets behaviors common to injury such as drinking and driving, proper safety restraints for children in vehicles, suicide, falls, and household poisons. Behavioral issues related to environmental protection is the third area. Examples include matters related to waste reduction, wildlife protection, water conservation, and air pollution from automobiles. The final group is community mobilization which consists of behaviors such as blood donation, identity theft, literacy, and animal adoption.

While the area of social marketing began over 40 years ago, it is often one of the most frequently misunderstood. Today, the most common error is that many people seem to confuse it with social media marketing. Just do a quick Google search, and you will find numerous chat rooms, blogs, web pages, and videos that mislabel social media marketing as simply social marketing.

For clarity and over-generalization, social media marketing is a process of gaining website traffic or attention through social media sites (e.g., YouTube, Twitter, etc.). However, while social media is a critical part of the communication tools and channels for social marketing, the latter is a specific field of marketing practice, research, and education. As I mentioned earlier, there are various formal definitions of social marketing as well as numerous applications for social media focus and format. However, social marketing and social media marketing are dramatically different and should not be accepted as the same based on general references and hurried shorthand.

It is undisputed that the recent explosion of social media marketing campaigns has changed the landscape of how modern marketing strategies and tactics are executed. Likewise, it is widely recognized that social marketing has dramatically changed the way public health problems are being solved and is becoming a large part of the overall health domain.

It's important to recognize that experts in both areas continue to work hard as they explore innovative ways to advance their discipline. So as practitioners and academics alike, let's be sure not to minimize the value and significance of either discipline by mislabeling or lazy shorthand.

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