

Social Marketing – A Fresh Approach To Promoting Sustainable Lifestyles ?

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Abstract.

The discipline of social marketing involves the application of the philosophy, perspective and toolkit of the commercial marketer to key social policy issues. It is a relatively young, but rapidly growing, discipline. Many of its early successes have been in areas relating to personal health, where it has been used to influence individuals' behaviour to quit smoking, drink less, or exercise more. Social marketing initiatives have been less prevalent in environmental issues, although it has been applied to the promotion of behaviours such as energy saving and recycling.

This paper looks at the potential for social marketing to promote more sustainable lifestyles, and to encourage new partnerships between commercial organisations and policy makers. Recently there have been calls from the United Nations for approaches to promoting sustainability which rely less on generating fear and guilt amongst consumers, and which are better at understanding consumers and engaging with them. Social marketing offers a ready-made approach that is ideally suited to answer this call. It also has the potential to encourage constructive public-private partnerships because it frames key sustainability challenges in a language and logic that businesses can relate to.

However, the promotion of sustainability represents an issue of a size, scope and complexity beyond anything that has yet been tackled using social marketing. It therefore represents a major challenge to those who practice and promote social marketing, and to the policy makers for whom it represents a novel way of approaching the promotion of sustainable lifestyles. This paper combines insights from the evolution of social marketing, writings on sustainable lifestyles, and experience from the field of environmental marketing to explore some of the theoretical, cultural and practical challenges that the social marketing of sustainability will entail.

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Introduction.

There is widespread consensus about the importance of integrating the principles of sustainable development (SD) into public policy, education, production, consumption, investment and almost every aspect of the way we live as individuals and as societies. However, since this consensus began to emerge following the publication of the Brundtland Report in 1987, it has become clear that making substantive progress towards more sustainable societies is remarkably difficult.

Suggestions about how to make greater progress towards SD typically fall into one of two camps. One reflects an emphasis on regulation and “*command and control*” solutions, often accompanied by social education and support for both individuals and organisations. The other reflects an emphasis on harnessing market mechanisms to support SD, including an emphasis on positioning sustainability as an issue on which companies communicate and compete, and on which corporate customers and end consumers will differentiate between suppliers. These two camps are not entirely mutually exclusive, consumer education about sustainability or regulation requiring companies to engage in social, ethical and environmental disclosure are both examples of initiatives with a foot in each camp. Porter and van der Linde’s (1995) paper on the environment as a source of competitive advantage stresses that responding to regulation can encourage companies to innovate in ways that brings advantages for consumers. However, many contributions to the debate about SD tend to see the two approaches as alternatives, or at least to focus almost exclusively on one rather than the other, and many initiatives are clearly based in one camp or another.

Supporters of either market-based or regulation-based approaches to delivering SD can each point to good examples of successful initiatives, and to examples of successful integration between the two approaches. Overall though, the effectiveness of both approaches, and the degree of integration that has been achieved between them has been disappointing in the seventeen years since the Brundtland Report was published (WCED, 1987). Regulation is criticised for being slow, too often watered down by the lobbying of powerful vested interests, and too dependent on inspection and enforcement. Many argue that regulation either has insufficient potential to create the necessary changes, or that the potential it does have has been largely exhausted (see e.g. OECD, 1997; Cogoy, 1999; Ropke, 1999). Voluntary approaches based around market mechanisms and developing “*green*” markets have also been criticised as focussing more on sustaining the status quo and the market in the short-term, than promoting social and environmental sustainability in the long-term. There are also concerns that a market-based approach assumes that transactions involving the one-fifth of the World’s population with sufficient disposable income to make consumption decisions are unlikely to deliver greater sustainability for themselves or the four fifths of people living outside the consumer society (Durning, 1992).

It is clear that some new types of thinking and initiatives are needed in order to deliver change, and to find new ways to integrate the principles of commerce and policy-making to deliver the substantive changes that progress towards sustainability will require. This paper examines the potential of one approach, social marketing, to contribute to this process.

The SD Challenge and the Rise and Stumble of Green Markets.

In relation to industry, there are various ways to envisage the factors that determine the economic, social and environmental impacts and sustainability of a business. One way is to envisage two spheres of management: *process management*, in terms of the supply chain through which value is delivered to customers, and *resource management* in terms of policy and practice relating to a firm's physical, financial, human and informational resources (Peattie, 1995). An alternative approach is to divide the supply chain of an industry between its means (production) and its ends (consumption), and considerable thought has been given to the sustainable consumption and production agenda by the UK Government, at Johannesburg and via the European Roundtable on Sustainable Production and Consumption. Although not an entirely neat divide, a consensus view is emerging that it is in terms of process management and the sustainable production agenda that regulation has had the greatest impact; whilst efforts to encourage more sustainable modes of consumption have tended to rely more heavily on market-led initiatives. Policy makers have sought to stimulate the development of more sustainable consumption through a range of measures such as education, labelling initiatives and tax incentives. Although there have been some successful developments, such as the development of markets for organic food or recycled paper, in general the 1990s did not turn out to be the "green decade" that was forecast at the end of the 1980s. In most markets, although there may be thriving and profitable niches for significantly more sustainable products, the greening of the mass market has not taken place. This is leading commentators to question why the creation and development of greener markets has proven such a difficult challenge. To understand this, it is helpful to briefly consider the evolution of green markets and the discipline of green marketing.

The first formal attempts to incorporate environmental dimensions into marketing occurred in the early 1970s. This took the form of "ecological marketing", which mainly focused on the environmental responsibilities of a narrow group of industries with major environmental impacts (such as chemicals and oil). It was only in the late 1980s that the idea of green marketing emerged, with its emphasis on broadly-based marketing opportunities linked to growing awareness about environmental issues amongst consumers (Van Dam and Apeldoorn, 1996). Early academic discussions about "green marketing" spoke of the rapid increase in green consumerism at this time, as heralding a dramatic and inevitable shift in consumption towards greener products (e.g. Prothero, 1990; Vandermerwe and Oliff, 1990). Survey evidence was used to support these claims, and bodies such as the Roper Organization in the USA, and Mintel and MORI in the UK, were all widely cited as identifying heightened environmental awareness, a growing consumer interest in green products, and even a more pronounced willingness to pay for green features (see Roper Organization, 1990; Mintel, 1991; Worcester, 1993). Practical evidence of consumer involvement was provided by the highly effective global consumer boycott of CFC-driven aerosols, and the international best-seller status achieved by *The Green Consumer Guide* (Elkington and Hailes, 1988) and its many derivatives. In business practice and business scholarship, environmental concern and sustainability were themes that were being enthusiastically embraced at the beginning of the 1990s.

Corporate interest in green marketing was indicated by early research findings indicating considerable change and innovation. Vandermerwe and Oliff's (1990) survey at the beginning of the decade found that 92% of European multinationals claimed to have changed their products in response to green concerns, and 85% claimed to have changed their production systems. Green product introductions in the US more than doubled to 11.4% of all new

household products between 1989 and 1990, and continued to grow to 13.4% in 1991 (Ottman, 1993). Similarly, the volume of green print ads grew by 430%, and that of green TV ads by 367%, between 1989 and 1990 (Ottman, 1993). Success stories of companies such as the Body Shop, Ecover, Volvo 3M, and McDonalds were widely cited to demonstrate how and why green marketing initiatives could pay. Iyer and Banerjee (1993) responded to these developments by pronouncing that '*green is in, no question about it.*' This was one of many, almost invariably upbeat contributions to the debate at this time (including several from the author). With only a handful of exceptions, during the 1990s writers consistently returned to the theme of the inevitable and perpetual greening of consumer markets. For example, Schlegelmilch *et al.*, (1996) claimed there was a '*dramatic increase in environmental consciousness,*' underway leading to '*the green product market expanding at a remarkable rate,*' whilst Menon and Menon, (1997) suggested that, '*there is now a general consensus within the business and consumer communities that the.... green market appears to be real and growing.*'

However, by the mid-1990s, research evidence started to emerge which raised doubts about the growth of green consumerism. Mintel's follow-up report on the environment (Mintel, 1995) recorded only a very slight increase in green consumers since 1990, and perhaps more importantly, identified a significant gap between environmental concern and environmental purchasing. Wong *et al.*'s (1996) interviews with marketing managers and other research (e.g. Crane, 2000; Peattie, 1999) also suggested that businesses had often failed to see green consumer concern translate into consistently greener purchasing. The frequency and prominence of green claims was also found to be in decline (National Consumer Council, 1996). Even green products themselves seem to have achieved only relatively limited market success (Wong *et al.*, 1996). Specialist brands such as *Ecover* and *Down to Earth* were unable to sustain the growth they enjoyed in the early 1990s, and the specialist green ranges from some major companies such as Lever Brothers and Sainsburys were discontinued. Although green product growth continued strongly in certain markets such as tourism and financial services, across the majority of markets there was no longer talk about the impressive growth in green product introductions. Even many of the blue-chip firms that led the way in developing greener products and markets often ran into difficulties in sustaining the momentum of their strategies in the longer term (Shelton 1994).

So why did the green marketing revolution of the 1990s run into difficulties? A number of potential explanations and contributory factors have been suggested including :

- **Non-marketing.** Many green products arrived on the market without going through the classic systematic and consumer-orientated development process that marketing academics would recognise as central to "*marketing*". Many of the best examples of green products arrived on the market as a result of an entrepreneur's vision or the development of a technology that was found to have commercial application. Other products involved the repositioning or repackaging of existing products because they were found to be "*high in something good, or low in something bad*". It is far harder to find examples of products that were specified, developed, tested and launched by researching and responding to explicit customer needs. Therefore much of what has been labelled as "*green marketing*" reflected a production or selling orientation, and not a marketing orientation, and not the systematic approach to developing a green marketing mix envisaged by Fuller (1999). In some cases this tendency lapsed from an emphasis on "*green selling*", into "*green mis-selling*". Carlson *et al.* (1993) found that 60% of environmentally based advertisements featured unacceptable claims ranging from the ambiguous to the '*downright false*'.
- **Perceived shortcomings of many green brands.** In terms of meeting customer expectations, a 1992 a McCann Erickson/Harris survey of European consumers showed that 31% had been '*disappointed*' by a green product. A failure to meet consumers'

expectations creates dissatisfaction, which reduces the likelihood of repurchase. It can also rapidly tarnish the reputation, not only of the brand in question, but of green brands across an entire market. Although marketing managers are quick to blame the fickle consumer for failing to back up their environmental concern with consistent purchasing (see Wong *et al.*, 1996), some of the blame must lie with marketing managers for the promotion of products which have failed to live up to their environmental or commercial promises. It has created a situation where over 40 % of consumers associate environmentally marketed products with concerns about functional quality (Torres, 2002);

- **Over-reliance on guilt.** Among both commercial marketing and public policy makers, a tendency to overplay the guilt card may have been counter-productive. Klaus Toepfer, Executive Director of United Nation Environment Programme, commented in a February 2003 press release, that "*Messages from Governments, exhorting people to drive their cars less or admonishing them for buying products that cause environmental damage, appear not to be working. People are simply not listening. Making people feel guilty about their life-styles and purchasing habits is achieving only limited success.*" In marketing terms, guilt can be a powerful motivator, but it is a less predictable motivator than other sources. Put in a position of being made to feel guilty, most peoples' response is to seek to assuage that guilt. Although that could come in the form of responding positively to the message that caused the guilt in the way the those behind the message intended, it can just as easily be by finding reasons to discredit the validity or relevance of the message. Issues surrounding sustainability are typically complex and involve considerable uncertainty (for example the role of human-based emissions in creating climate change, and the potential consequences of those changes). This provides consumers with an opportunity to latch onto the presence of uncertainty and debate as a reason to ignore unwelcome and guilt-laden messages that they need to change their own behaviours.
- **Cynicism.** One of the most disturbing factors behind the struggle that green markets have faced in developing, is the alarming cynicism being displayed by consumers about green products, green claims, and the companies behind them (see e.g. Kangun *et al.*, 1991; National Consumer Council, 1996; Mohr *et. al.*, 1998)). Ackerstein & Lemon (1999) note that "*... the voices of companies sincerely committed to such notions are too easily drowned in a sea of often misleading, unethical or even untrue claims by firms seeking to grasp a share of the environmental marketing and put environmental-guilt-feeling consumers at ease.*"

Underlying Problems with the Green Market-Building Approach.

Each of the factors outlined above undoubtedly contributed to the failure of past market-building approaches. However, each of these factors represent shortcomings in the execution of building sustainable markets, in other words, they deal with the "*How?*" factors. There are other, more fundamental, problems with the entire vision of commercial market development as a means of delivering sustainability, in terms of the clarity and breadth of that vision, and its reliance on a rational economic perspective.

The problem of clarity has troubled both marketers and consumers in terms of the relationship between products, their consumption and production, and sustainability. This has been exacerbated by an ongoing debate about definitions and terminology involving terms such as "*green*", "*greener*", "*sustainable*", "*environmental*", "*ecological*" and "*responsible*". Trying to identify and evaluate a "*sustainable*" product is very problematic, and so it is easier to think in terms of "*green*" products as those with advantages in terms of social and

environmental impacts compared to competing or previous products (Peattie, 1995). It is also relatively difficult to promote such products to consumers when their understanding of the entire concept of “sustainability” is relatively poor. A 1995 study conducted by researchers from Lancaster University (MacNaughten *et. al.*, 1995) revealed that : *“People generally are unfamiliar with the idea of ‘sustainability’ in its environmental sense. But once they understand it, they appear to identify positively with its values and priorities.”*; and similar findings from Plant (1998) revealed that people remained generally unable to articulate what sustainability was. A 2002 survey by the Consumer Council of Wales (Bibbings, 2003) revealed that :

- 70% of Welsh consumers did not understand what SD means;
- 5% believed that it related to construction;
- 18% believed it to be an economic term;
- Those aged 35 to 54 were slightly more likely to understand what it means than younger or older consumers;
- Even among the best-informed professionals and skilled white-collar workers (those in social classes ABC1), only 40 % were familiar with SD.

Some commentators have also pointed out that confusion about what SD means is not limited to consumers and that those in business, government and education are also likely to have very different ideas about what SD means. Although the central “*soundbite*” definition from the Brundtland report provides a generally agreed starting point, the search for a more specific and operable definition leads swiftly into a veritable swamp of subtly varying and competing definitions (of which we are reliably informed there are well over 100).

The problem with the breadth of the vision relating to sustainability, markets and consumption comes from its narrowness. This has several dimensions :

- People are considered in a very limited role : the role of individual consumer, and against a relatively narrow concept of customer satisfaction. Relatively little attention has been given to the concept that one person will occupy and potentially have to reconcile other roles such as a role as a parent, or a role as a citizen. Therefore as a consumer, a person’s interests might be satisfied by the purchase of a new car. However, as a parent and citizen this might conflict with their desire to raise their children in a safe environment where traffic volumes are low;
- Consumer behaviour is considered narrowly in terms of purchasing behaviour. Other elements of behaviour such as decisions not to purchase something, and product use, maintenance or disposal are not considered. Studies often view a failure among consumers to purchase on the basis of their environmental concerns as an example of social over-reporting of concern and of a failure to match concerns with actions. However, consumer concern may be expressed in actions at other locations than the supermarket check-out.
- The relationship between the consumer and the product is typically considered in isolation from other elements of their consumption and in terms of the benefits that the product supplies to the consumer.

Another fundamental problem has been a tendency amongst those in business and policy-making to view the relationship between sustainability and consumption from an overly rational-economic perspective (see for example Stanley and Lasonde, 1996; and for a review of the classical rational consumer behaviour perspective on sustainable consumption, including its short-comings, see Paavola, 2001 and Jackson, 2004). The starting point of this approach was research evidence showing that people were increasingly concerned about the

state of the environment and the future of the planet, and also apparently interested in buying greener products even if it involved a modest premium (see Gallastegui, 2002). The logic of this approach is that if people were provided with the relevant information to help develop their environmental consciousness, and presented with consumption opportunities where their concern could be expressed, then they would do so. The exact nature of their response would depend upon

- the perceived costs and benefits including the effort involved in acquiring and processing information about the sustainability implications of a product;
- their knowledge, attitudes, intentions and values, and in particular the extent to which they were purely motivated by self-interest and the extent to which they placed value on benefits to others now and in the future (Paavola, 2001);
- the influence of family members, social groups and wider cultural norms and values;
- situational factors (Dembkowski and Hanmer-Lloyd, 1994) and barriers which might constrain choice, ranging from economic constraints to habits and perceived social pressures (Jackson, 2004);

Overall, the early 1990s was marked by a widespread belief that knowledge, education and information about sustainability, backed up by better consumer education and information (e.g. through better eco-labelling) and a wider choice of green products would produce a substantive change within markets. In practice this didn't occur, and gradually a more sociological view of sustainability and consumption is emerging in which the emotional and symbolic aspects of consumption are better understood. As Jackson (2004), notes *"This symbolic role of consumer goods facilitates a range of complex, deeply engrained 'social conversations' about status, identity, social cohesion, group norms and the pursuit of personal and cultural meaning."*

In Search of Sustainable Lifestyles:

The classical business-orientated approach to sustainability and consumption has been to consider environmental and social attitudes and knowledge as a potential influence on consumers' purchasing behaviour, and therefore social and environmental performance as an attribute and potential source of differentiation and competitive advantage for companies. Even where more sophisticated approaches to understanding consumer behaviour have been adopted (and for an excellent review see Jackson, 2004), the emphasis is mostly on considering sustainability issues by fitting them into existing models of consumer behaviour, rather than on seeking new models and frameworks to aid our understanding. There are a number of important issues that this approach of simply bolting on sustainability concerns into the existing models of business and consumer behaviour, fails to engage with properly :

- The importance of non-purchase elements of consumer behaviour including product use and disposal;
- The potential importance of non-purchase based alternatives as potential sources of satisfaction;
- The potential of environmental and social concern to encourage a reduction in the total level of consumption rather than as simply acting as a source of differentiation when choosing between brands and products.

Progress towards sustainability will require new ways to consider people's behaviour beyond rationally orientated models seeking to describe individual's purchase behaviour. One

approach to this is to consider sustainable consumption within a broader context of the promotion of more sustainable lifestyles. This allows the debate about consumption to consider non-purchase-related aspects of how people live and the quality of life that they enjoy, and to move beyond issues of green consumerism to consider the potential contribution of ecological lifestyles and approaches such as voluntary simplicity (see e.g. Elgin 1993). Christensen (1997), for example compared the consumption patterns and environmental impacts of the typical “*two car-two career*” American family with other family types including one leading a relatively “*radical green*” lifestyle. Using pollution as a measure, the conventional family lifestyle had eight times the environmental impact of the environmentally orientated lifestyle.

The focus on lifestyles as well as individual consumption choices has become a central focus of the sustainable consumption debate, particularly post-Johannesburg. It represents one of the few broadly agreed themes in terms of how to make progress towards sustainability that has emerged from international environmental policy debates (Jackson and Michaelis, 2003). The question that remains is how best to promote more sustainable lifestyles. Various approaches have been adopted with mixed results. Hobson (2002) interviewed participants in a major UK programme to promote sustainable lifestyles called “*Action at Home*”. She found that the concept of “*sustainable lifestyles*” had little resonance to those participating, and that there was a failure to connect the logic of a more eco-efficient lifestyle with participants’ social concerns.

For the idea of more sustainable lifestyles to become accepted, people need more than environmental awareness and concern; they need to understand the relevance of sustainability issues to their lifestyles. Understanding the relevance is also likely to be insufficient to motivate behavioural change amongst consumers if it is not accompanied by a high degree of “*perceived consumer effectiveness*” (PCE) of consumers in relation to sustainability issues (Straughan and Roberts, 1999). The literature on green consumer behaviour is riddled with contradictory results, but one of the very few consistently influential factors is PCE. This refers to the extent to which people believe that their personal behaviour and contribution can make a material difference to an issue. When PCE is high, people are often willing to make adjustments to their lifestyle and consumption, where it is low people become reluctant to change. Sadly, for many key elements of the sustainability agenda, PCE remains weak. For example, in a July 2004 ICM study of 1,007 British adults, although 64 % identified climate change as one of the most important issues facing the world, only 54 % thought that changes to their personal behaviour would make any difference.

Progress in the sustainable consumption agenda therefore depends upon finding effective ways of promoting more sustainable lifestyles that highlight the connections between our consumption choices and sustainability issues in ways that will make us feel that changing our behaviour will make a real, positive difference. Certainly experience and expertise about promoting lifestyles abounds, unfortunately it is almost all vested in commercial marketing, whose focus is typically on expanding the consumption of a particular product by connecting it with new customers, and maintaining a set of lifestyles and patterns of consumption by retaining existing customers. The promotion of more sustainable lifestyles will require a different approach, and will also need to be able to compete effectively with a great deal of communication from the commercial world which still promotes “*more of the same*” in relation to consumption.

Social Marketing - A Way to Market Sustainability ?

An approach to social change, which is rapidly growing in terms of its importance, and which has considerable potential to contribute to sustainable development, is the discipline of “*Social Marketing*”. In a nutshell, social marketing seeks to utilise the tools, techniques and concepts derived from commercial marketing in pursuit of social goals (Andreasen 1995). The term was first introduced by Kotler and Zaltman (1971) in an article that describes the use of marketing principles and techniques to advance a social idea, cause, or behaviour. It progressed on from social communication as an approach to affecting social change (Kotler 1982), by integrating into campaigns commercially-derived concepts such as market research, product development, facilitation and the provision of incentives (Fox and Kotler, 1980). Kotler et al. (2002) define social marketing as “*the use of marketing principles and techniques to influence a target audience to voluntarily accept, reject, modify, or abandon a behavior for the benefit of individuals, groups, or society as a whole*”

The majority of social marketing initiatives are focussed on changing behaviour to increase the well-being of individuals and/or society. This can involve the “*demarketing*” of a particular type of product or behaviour (e.g. littering) or the promotion of a particular type of product or consumer behaviour (e.g. engaging in recycling). Social marketing involves the development of a “*marketing mix*”, although with subtle differences from the conventional commercial marketing mix, in terms of :

- **Propositions instead of “*products*”**. Although social marketing campaigns can focus on the promotion of a particular type of product, at its heart social marketing promotes a particular “*proposition*” (Peattie and Peattie, 2003). This could be that “*organic food is good for you and the environment*”, “*you should recycle*” or that “*you shouldn’t litter*”. Embedded within virtually all of these propositions is a specific behaviour or set of behaviours that the social marketer is seeking to have their target market adopt and maintain;
- **Accessibility instead of “*place*”**. Since social marketing is not based around physical products (although they may be involved), it is not particularly appropriate to talk about “*distribution*” or “*place*” issues. Social marketing is more akin to services marketing in that the key issue is accessibility. This can refer to the ability to access particular services at specific places (such as recycling centres), or to gain access to information or expertise online or in person;
- **Costs of involvement instead of “*price*”**. In most social marketing interventions, the “*costs*” of changing behaviour are not financial (although a financial cost could be involved). Costs may be in terms of time and effort, or in terms of overcoming psychological barriers or even a physical addiction (as in the case of smoking cessation). It is a much more holistic concept than that of economic prices, and has much more in common with transaction cost theory derived from economics;
- **Social communication instead of promotion**. Although social marketing could be said to have superseded social communication (or social education) as a means to achieve social change, it can also be viewed as having subsumed social communication within a broader approach. So just as commercial marketers communicate to promote the trial, adoption, identification with and regular purchase of their products, social marketers communicate to promote the acceptance, adoption and maintenance of a particular social proposition or behaviour.

The heartland of social marketing consists of campaigns that focus on the health and safety of the individual, based around issues such as healthy diets, exercise, smoking cessation, healthy

sexuality and responsible drinking and road safety (Walsh, *et. al.*, 1993). Other campaigns stress the benefits of certain behaviours to society rather than the individual, for example through carbon emissions reduction.

There are a number of benefits associated with a social marketing approach to achieving social change :

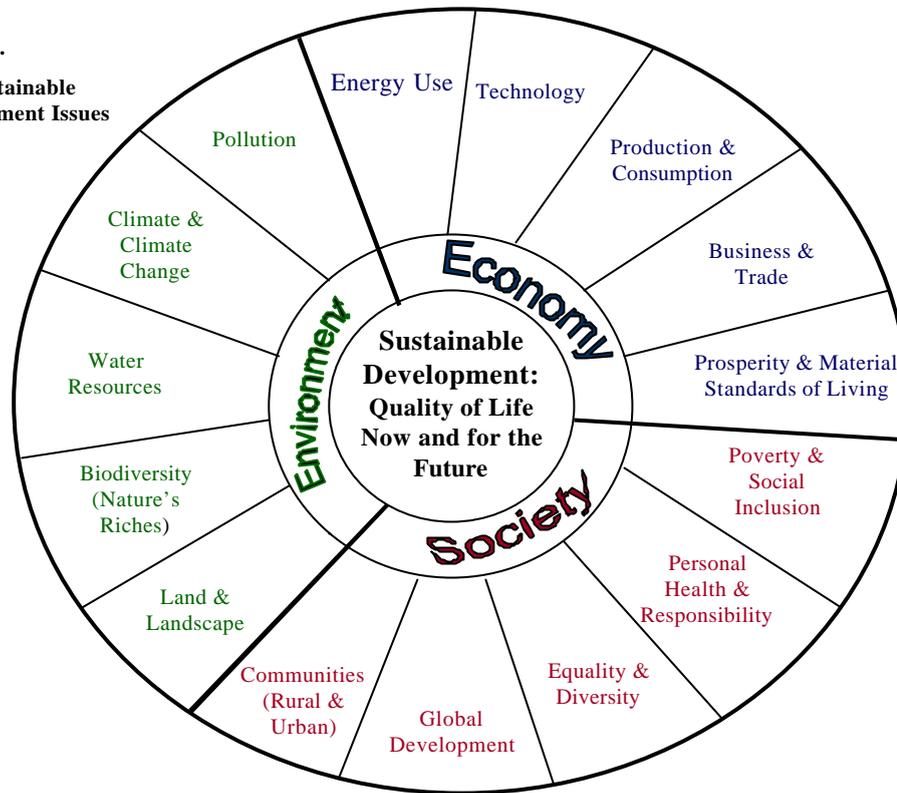
- **Customer orientation** : social marketing shares commercial marketing's emphasis on researching, understanding, responding to and communicating with customers. It helps to move the communication agenda away from a focus on the message and the expertise of those behind it, to understand the issues from the audience's point of view. This could be invaluable in helping people to "*connect*" with the idea of sustainability and to understand and overcome the barriers that currently stand in the way of behaviour change.
- **Emphasis on behaviour maintenance** : social marketing generally seeks to go beyond changing attitudes to changing behaviour, and to ensure that new behaviours, once adopted, are maintained. For the pursuit of sustainability, and the importance of getting people to move beyond token purchases to significantly change their lifestyles and consumption behaviour, an approach that encourages people to adopt and maintain a different lifestyle will be important.
- **Flexibility** : a key strength of social marketing is its flexibility. It can be applied to different types of stakeholder with an interest in a given issue (going beyond the target audience to include stakeholders such as the media, regulators or related businesses). It can also be applied to people within the target audience who are different stages of awareness and responsiveness in relation to an issue or behaviour. For those yet to consider an issue the emphasis will be on awareness raising, whilst for those who are committed to it, the emphasis will be on facilitating behaviour maintenance.
- **Partnership opportunities** : the tackling of social issues, such as the pursuit of sustainability, through social marketing can provide new opportunities for partnership amongst public bodies, NGOs, companies and communities. So, for example, a social marketing campaign to reduce the use of private cars for commuting could involve transport providers, major employers and public officials combining to understand the needs of commuters leading to the development and promotion of improved public transport services, car-pooling activities and cycle-user service. By tackling the issues using a vocabulary and conceptual toolkit that businesses are familiar with, policy-makers frame them in way that businesses can better relate to, and identify opportunities for involvement in social campaigns that can demonstrate the social responsibility of the business. Literacy campaigns are a common focus of social campaigns, particularly in poorer countries. Social marketing campaigns for literacy could act as a logical focus for partnerships between publishers and public services to work together in ways that would provide opportunities for cause related marketing, market research and the demonstration of social responsibility for the business.
- **Opportunities to "demarket" unsustainable behaviours** . Many unsustainable elements of our society are currently promoted by companies and organisations with a vested interest in the status quo. The most obvious example being the continued promotion of cigarettes by tobacco companies, despite the overwhelming evidence about the social and environmental harm they do. Largely on the basis of efforts to promote smoking cessation, social marketers have learnt how to analyse, critique and (where necessary) counteract the techniques used by commercial marketers. The world of commercial marketing is constantly innovating, and social marketers have become good at learning from their expertise, experience and resources.

At first glance, it would seem that the use of social marketing in relation to the promotion of sustainable development is already well established. The health campaigns that have been the mainstay of social marketing development all aim to deliver quality-of-life and well-being benefits that are central to the concept of sustainability. Also since the early days of social marketing, there have been campaigns on environmental issues, for example by aiming to promote involvement in behaviours such as recycling (Zikmund and Stanton, 1971). McKenzie-Mohr and Smith (1999) moved the debate forward with an emphasis on community-based social marketing campaigns for sustainability. The approach they outline represents a toolkit that could be applied effectively to almost any form of sustainability orientated behaviour within communities. The examples used however are relatively narrowly focussed on a handful of issues such as recycling, lawn-watering and transport.

Beyond a focus on purely environmental issues within industrialised countries, social marketing is already playing an important role in tackling a range of “*development*” issues, particularly in the context of less-industrialised nations. Dholakia and Dholakia (2000), review social marketing in a development context, focussing on examples such as family planning, micro-credit, disease prevention and literacy. They point out that the discipline has some weaknesses that can hinder its progress and its contribution to sustainability (e.g. a tendency to consider current generations of stakeholders only rather than taking a multi-generational view), but stress that “*Social marketing ... does have the potential to address some of the root causes that lead to economic and social crises*”.

However, what we have seen to-date is largely social marketing *for* SD, not the social marketing *of* SD. This distinction mirrors the ongoing debate within the field of education concerning whether the emphasis should be on education **about** SD, or education **for** SD (Peattie, 2004). The former seeks to educate those in schools and colleges regarding the principles of SD, the processes and patterns of activity that drive unsustainable development, and strategies for developing more sustainable futures. Education about SD seeks to encompass a range of social, economic and environmental issues affecting prospects for current and future quality of life such as those illustrated in Figure 1. (Peattie, 2004). The latter seeks to provide learners with the values, attitudes and skills to enable them to go out and lead more sustainable lives, and to contribute to more sustainable societies. Such values and skills might include respect for others, self-reliance, communications skills and the ability to analyse data. The UK Government’s vision of SD education is one that balances education about SD, with education for SD, to produce citizens with the motivation, knowledge and skills to contribute to a more sustainable society. In practice however, within many educational establishments the emphasis has been on education for SD, in terms of skills and values, whilst education about SD has not been reflected in significant changes in the curriculum. The result is an education system which embodies some very laudable aspirations in relation to SD, but continues to teach children about the world in a way which treats unsustainable patterns of behaviour and development as “*the norm*” (Jucker, 2002).

Figure 1.
Key Sustainable
Development Issues



The experience of greening (or more often the lack of it) within education has both direct and parallel relevance to social marketing and sustainability. Indirectly it provides a parallel in which individual social marketing campaigns are addressing important components of the sustainability agenda (such as recycling, social inclusion, emissions reduction, disease prevention and literacy) but where social marketing has not been used to promote the underlying concept of sustainable development that provides the common thread connecting all these campaigns to give them a shared purpose. It has direct relevance in that the need to apply social marketing to the concept of sustainability is underlined by the shortcomings of education as an approach. As Jucker (2002) notes, formal education as a solution to the sustainability crisis has been a recurrent theme over the last ten years, but it is a problematic one since it places the onus on change and finding solutions onto a generation who did not create the original problems. Even though there is much excellent work being done in relation to education and SD globally, more will be needed before a sufficient proportion of the population understands and identifies with sustainability, in order to make and accept the type of changes necessary to progress towards a more sustainable society.

This is where social marketing presents a means to market the principle of sustainability itself, as well as to act as the basis of campaigns to further individual components of the sustainability agenda. Social marketing as an approach is acknowledged to be particularly valuable in filling the "gap" between regulation and education as approaches to social change. The logic being that some issues in social behaviour are so potentially important, that they must be regulated (e.g. imposing speed limits), while other issues play sufficiently strongly to the individual's self-interest that people mostly only require some information and education about responses (e.g. encouraging people to claim entitled benefits). In between are a host of issues where regulation is inappropriate or impractical, and where education and information by themselves are insufficient. Social marketing can be very effective in addressing such issues, going beyond education to try to reduce any barriers to behavioural change that might exist, and to provide incentives for the desired behaviour change.

Conclusions.

This paper does not seek to present social marketing as a panacea for sustainability problems, nor as a superior alternative to either regulation or market-based solution in many situations. What social marketing does represent is a versatile and effective approach to social change which represents a useful supplement to other approaches, and which may offer a useful alternative in the many areas where current approaches based on regulation, education or market development are struggling to deliver change.

Jackson (2004), suggests that “*Behavioural change is fast becoming the ‘holy grail’ of sustainable development policy*”, and when it comes to understanding behavioural change, there is probably no group with a greater breadth of relevant experience than social marketers. Commercial marketers have a great depth of expertise when it comes to persuading us to adopt one very specific type of behaviour - making a particular purchase, and choosing one brand over another. Such behaviours can contribute something to sustainability, but many different forms of behaviour and behavioural change will also be needed. Substantive progress towards sustainable development is unlikely to accrue from the sum total of many individual additional or alternative consumption choices by individual consumers. Progress towards sustainability will also require lifestyle changes and behavioural changes on a community basis, which are key areas of strength and experience for social marketing (McKenzie-Mohr, 1999 & 2000).

Social marketing’s effectiveness in promoting specific behaviours which can contribute to sustainability has been demonstrated across a number of issues. McKenzie-Mohr (2000) cites a number of experiments to test the efficacy of social marketing campaigns. One example was an experiment comparing a community-based social marketing strategy against an information-only strategy in the context of discouraging lawn-watering. The social marketing strategy was found to have reduced the watering of lawns by 54%, whereas it increased by 15% over the same period in the conventional information-only campaign control groups.

There are however, some notes of caution that need to be raised. Just as commercial marketing campaigns have often failed to utilise marketing principles, it is common to find campaigns that badge themselves as “*social marketing*”, amounting to little more than traditional social communications campaigns with some nice merchandising thrown in. Concerns have also been raised about the suitability of social marketing as it currently exists for some key development issues (Dholakia and Dholakia, 2000), and about whether the concepts borrowed from the commercial context have been sufficiently well-tailored to their new social and environmental context (Peattie and Peattie, 2004).

The opportunities that social marketing present in relation to sustainability operates at three levels. There is an opportunity to use it to promote SD as an over-arching social proposition. There is the opportunity to promote more sustainable lifestyles and more sustainable communities, and there is the opportunity to promote individual propositions such as recycling, resource conservation or car-pooling. Utilising a social marketing approach at each of these three levels has the potential to lead to behaviour change and action, and to make SD the type of commonly understood and agreed-upon social goal that was envisaged seventeen years ago in the Brundtland report.

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