Global Social Marketing Manifesto

1st May 2025

Primary target audiences: Social Marketing practitioners and academics, policy makers, politicians, think tanks and policy influencers.

The ask

Please read and share this manifesto with your networks and colleagues. In so doing you will help increase understanding about why Social Marketing should be an integral part of all programmes that seek to influence behaviour that results in personal and community wellbeing.

Introduction

This manifesto sets out the case for the increased application of Social Marketing across all Government, NGO, Not-for-Profit and business activity.

Around the world we are faced by a complex web of challenges in the light of new understanding about what works and what does not. A fundamental reappraisal of how best to address these challenges is rightly underway.

This new era is characterized by a greater emphasis on working with citizens and value for money.

The rationale for applying marketing to help solve complex problems : Effectiveness, Efficiency and Ethical implementation

Marketing is a set of principles, strategies and tactics that have developed in the commercial world over many years as a proven approach to making business more effective and delivering the goods and services that people want. We can use the lessons learnt in marketing to help us better understand the social challenges people face and how we can more effectively, efficiently and ethically deliver interventions that people value rather than trying to manipulate their behaviour.

Organisations and governments all over the world have been using Social Marketing for more than fifty years because it works and is an efficient way to structure programme development and delivery. SM has been shown to have a positive impact on programmes designed to solve big complex problems like disease prevention, family planning, environmental protection, economic development, crime reduction and compliance with laws and regulations.

Social Marketing is successful because unlike other interventions it employs an insight and bottom-up way of working rather than being a top-down expert driven approach. Social Marketing uses market research and coalition building to develop interventions that people support. It is a deeply democratic and respectful approach rather than one that is focused on telling people what to do or forcing them to do things.

As citizens around the world become better educated and empowered, they are increasingly demanding a new relationship with the governments and agencies that serve them. People often want to play a bigger part in identifying problems and creating solutions. Social Marketing represents a process for engaging citizens and using their knowledge, ideas and resources to solve the big challenges we face.

Why Social Marketing should be a feature of all development programmes

A key reason for the development of the human species has been our focus on co-operation mutual beneficial exchange and actions to influence the behaviour of others for their good and the good of the group.

Social Marketing reflects these fundamental human characteristics of mutuality, exchange and reciprocity. These three fundamental human characteristics can be used as powerful tools to promote social good and are reflected in Social Marketing practice.

The added value of Social Marketing

Social Marketing was born over fifty years ago in the context of the fight for civil rights in the USA and the need to tackle huge health challengesin the developing world.

> ***An essential proposition of this manifesto is that Social Marketing is a process opposed to authoritarianism, any reduction in citizens' rights and freedoms and manipulation by governments or other organisations damaging to people's well-being.***

Social Marketing practice is guided by ethical principles. It integrates research, best practice, audience and partnership insight to inform the delivery of social change programmes that are effective, efficient, ethical and valued by both donors and recipients.

There are four main benefits of applying a Social Marketing approach as part of all policy development and delivery, these are:

1. To better reflect the needs and wants of communities in policy selection and delivery
2. To establish clear and measurable objectives for policies, programmes and services
3. To increase optimal return on investment (ROI) and value for money (VFM)
4. To increased learning about what works and what does not

Why some organisations do not use Socia Marketing

Some governments, NGOs and organisations are ideologically opposed to using marketing concepts to guide their interventions. Some oppose marketing on ideological grounds perceiving it to be an approach that is exploitative. Others consider marketing to be manipulative and therefore unethical. These organisations tend to focus on information provision, law enforcement and increasingly behavioural science to nudge people into the change that the organisations want to see Meta reviews however are now demonstrating that such approaches are limited in their effectiveness and public acceptability.

What we have learned about influencing behaviour from the pandemic and a multitude of research reviews

The first conclusion that we can confidently draw is that information provision even if it is specifically targeted is a necessary but usually insufficient approach to influencing behaviour for social good. Great social advertising, health education and social media campaigns can assist awareness raising and behavioural intention but intervention programmes limited to awareness are seldom enough to bring about positive social change especially in the short term.

A second lesson is that limiting interventions to addressing only individual psychology to the exclusion of a focus on wider determinants of behaviour is a gross simplification that is seldom effective. In this personal psychological view humans are viewed as inherently flawed and incapable of dealing with complexity and tending to panic in a crisis rather than as people with agency and capacity to make complex choices.

By emphasising the inability of people to govern themselves, a top down personal or victim blaming approach justifies the need for governments to control and manipulate citizens. However this approach is of limited use particularly when it comes to behaviour in a crisis. Only by exposing the way in which governments came to accept and rely upon this flawed model of influencing human behaviour will we begin to build programmes that work.

Social Marketing is a corrective to this failure as it provides a comprehensive people centred alternative approach that goes beyond behavioural science, information and individual psychology dominated approaches which have proven to be limited in their effectiveness.

Delivering Social Marketing

Delivering Social Marketing involves adopting six design concepts:

1.Citizen orientation and focus
Citizen orientation is concerned with ensuring that the people who are the focus of the Social Marketing interventions are engaged in the selection, development, delivery and evaluation of programmes designed to assist or enable them.

2.Setting of explicit social goals
Social Marketing goals are often expressed as strategic goals and more specific behavioural objectives. It is, however, necessary to adopt a reflexive approach to the setting and revision of Social Marketing goals and objectives.

3.Value creation
Value come in many forms including: service provision, social products, social policy, environments, economic incentives and socially approved sanctions and recommended behaviours. Value is not defined by the Social Marketer rather by the citizens they are seeking to help.

4.Insight, data, and evidence informed interventions

The gathering of understanding about the people who are to be helped is a key concept of Social Marketing as it develops a more differentiated approach to supporting communities and individuals.

5.Competition, barrier, and asset analysis
Within Social Marketing it is not enough to seek to influence, policy, individuals and group behaviour, it is often necessary to influence the ‘competition’ who are trying to influence target groups in a negative way.

6.Critical thinking and ethical practice
The Social Marketing process is both systematic and systemic. It involves comprehensive research, analysis, planning, management and evaluation of programmes. Social Marketers seek to continually adjust and improve programme delivery in the light of new opportunities, threats and feedback about programme delivery. Social Marketing practice is also informed by ethical principles.

Conclusion

In an era marked by unprecedented social, economic, and environmental challenges Social Marketing is a vital tool for creating sustainable positive change. Adopting Social Marketing is a commitment to understanding, respecting and empowering individuals and communities. By prioritizing solutions informed by citizens and fostering meaningful partnerships Social Marketing transcends methods focused on information and legislation, offering a proven path to influence positive behaviour and drive lasting impact.

Now more than ever, organisations and professionals should embrace Social Marketing as an essential component of public policy selection and delivery. By doing so our commitment to building resilient communities, advancing human well-being and ensuring that interventions are not only effective but ethically sound and are universally supported.

Share your feedback with us.

We would be delighted to receive your feedback and suggestions on this manifesto. Please send your comments to :

Jeff French PhD, MBA, MSc, DipHE, BA, Cert.Ed. President of the International Social Marketing Association. Office: 01428 751 896 . Email: Jeff.French@strategic-social-marketing.org, www.strategic-social-marketing.org

Suggested citation for this paper.

International Social Marketing Association. (2025) Global Social Marketing Manifesto. Statements - International Social Marketing Association (iSMA)