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Michael Polonsky,

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The role of corporate social marketing

Introduction

Social marketing has evolved since its introduction in the early 1970s (Kotler and Zaltman, 1971). Over the years there has been extensive debate as to the domain of social marketing and who should be involved (Lefebvre, 1997; Gordon, 2011; Dibb and Carrigan, 2013). The initial definition proposed by Kotler and Zaltman (1971) was that “Social marketing is the design, implementation and control of programs calculated to influence the acceptability of social ideas and involving considerations of product planning, pricing communication, distribution and market research (p. 5)”. More recently, as the result of global discussions among social marketing practitioners, there has been an attempt to develop a consensus definition of social marketing, which is “to develop and integrate marketing concepts with other approaches to influence behaviours that benefit individuals and communities for the greater social good (Tapp et al., 2013, p. 1).” It is worth noting, however, that defining ‘social good’ is potentially contestable, as not everyone would agree on the outcomes of initiatives (Stoeckl and Luedicke, 2015). For example, in some cases, marketing activities that might be seen to improve the quality of life of consumers in developing countries could, at the same time, might be seen as disrupting local culture. As such, the welfare benefit may be offset by cultural dislocation, making an overall assessment of the social impact difficult.

Consistent in the various definitions of social marketing activities is a focus on positive behaviour change that benefits society and individuals (Hastings et al., 2000). In the literature authors generally recognise that facilitating positive behaviour change requires a systems perspective, involving both up-stream and down-stream actors (Brennan et al., 2016; Cherrier and Gurrieri, 2014). The present definition of social marketing clearly allows firms to participate and potentially even lead initiatives. However, within the discipline there has frequently been extensive debate on who should be involved in social marketing (Anker and Kappel, 2011), with some

practitioners and academics adamant that for-profit corporates should **not** be involved in social marketing (Hastings and Angus, 2011). The rationale for this opposition is that for-profit firms have conflicting interests and are more focused on achieving their agenda (i.e., making profits) or achieving short-term goals, whereas, assisting society or any societal benefits are secondary outcomes, and may even be just a positive externality. This latter view, supports Freeman's suggestion that the "business of business is business" (Davis, 2005). There is, of course, a more inclusive perspective of social marketing that for-profit businesses are part of society and, therefore, are responsible to society and should be involved in social marketing activities (Anker and Kappel, 2011; Thorne McAlister and Ferrell, 2002). This approach would partly explain the increase in the use of corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities, whereby firms are assessed on their wider societal impact and seek to better engage with stakeholders. While some firms see CSR as an opportunity to extoll their corporate values, it has been suggested that they sometimes spend more on communicating the firms' good work than is spent on investing in societal benefit (Du et al., 2010), which may be why the social benefits of CSR are sometimes questionable (Crane et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2016). For example, do alcohol companies programs promoting drinking moderation, really seek to moderate drinking?

It is proposed that corporate social marketing is different and arises where social marketing actions are undertaken by firms, in instances where actions are directly linked to a product's use or functional impact, while at the same time focusing on benefiting society through promoting positive behaviour change. Thus, corporate social marketing is more than firms pursuing a tangential social benefit (Anker and Kappel, 2011) and is distinguished from strategic philanthropy (Thorne McAlister and Ferrell, 2002) where firms seek to maximise the corporate benefit of 'doing good' or undertake more general CSR actions (Du et al., 2010). All of which may not maximise social value (Polonsky and Wood, 2001; Stoeckl and Luedicke, 2015). Rather, corporate social marketing has, as a core focus, activities that seek to promote the purchase or use of goods in a way that influences "behaviours that benefit individuals and communities for the greater social good (Tapp et al., 2013, p. 1)" and

creates corporate value through increased sales and brand value. This clearly fits within the broader definition of social marketing, but as will be discussed, has the potential to be different to social marketing as it is currently practiced. There are many examples, such as firms promoting handwashing in developing countries to minimise the spread of dysentery while selling more soap (Biran et al., 2014). Alternately, firms may promote the more responsible use of goods, such as the Mars Corporation suggesting that some of its food products should only be consumed in moderation, or instances where firms promote reduced use of potentially harmful goods (Briggs, 2016). Of course, the sincerity of such corporate actions could be questioned. As, while promoting consumption moderation the Mars company maintains production of a range of goods that are high in sugar, fat or salt content. These ingredients have negative health consequences and some researchers have even suggested the ingredients are addictive (Schulte, Avena and Gearhardt, 2015). As such, it could be argued that authentic social marketing by Mars should also involve undertaking product modifications to reduce any potentially addictive ingredients, thus allowing consumers to be in a position to better moderate their behaviour.

The question for some social marketers may be whether it matters if firms are the primary source of social marketing (i.e., corporate social marketing) or whether they are active participants/partners in social marketing as up-stream agents (i.e., traditional social marketing)? As such, corporate social marketing is a deeper engagement than tactical activities such as cause related marketing, where firms are seeking to leverage social value without links to core activities. As in many cases, cause related marketing is related to changes in preferences regarding a specific purchases (Polonsky and Speed 2001), rather than focusing on long-term behaviour change that improves consumer or social wellbeing. For example, soft drink firms linking buying their good to a donation to breast cancer research, involves cause support that is not directly linked to the firm's activities or its goods. Simply because there is alignment of corporate interests with segments and causes does not mean that a firm is focused on wider social behaviour change and societal benefits. Thus, while worthy, it is suggested that this would not be considered corporate social marketing.

There is already recognition by social marketers that excluding for-profit entities from participating in the social marketing process is inconsistent with the view that complex or 'wicked' or complex problems can only be addressed if the full network of actors is considered (Duane et al., 2016; Kennedy and Parsons, 2012). Although, in some instances, firms may also be contributing to wicked problems rather than its solution (Reinecke and Ansari, 2015). As a result, social marketing solutions must involve all relevant upstream, downstream, and midstream actors (Brennan et al., 2016; Gordon, 2011; French and Russell-Bennett, 2015). This requires that effective social marketing solutions draw on stakeholders from across the exchange system (Lefebvre, 2012), including governments, non-profits, consumers *and* for-profit organisations. The network perspective also explains why a number of social marketing models have already been proposed to address the full social impact of harmful systems of activities (Domegan et al., 2016; Cherrier and Gurreri, 2014). For example, the harm chain (Polonsky et al., 2003) suggests that when looking at negative social issues, social marketers and policy-makers need to consider those who cause harm, those who are harmed, and those who regulate harm across pre-consumption, consumption and post-consumption activities. Of course, when considering stakeholders, there does need to be a concern that there is a true desire on the part of stakeholders, especially firms, to assist in addressing the issue rather than participating in social marketing which undermines social benefit, but advantages the firm (Landman, Ling, & Glantz, 2002). There is, however, no easy method of identifying the salient stakeholders or incorporating them in solutions. This concern warrants more examination, but is beyond the scope of this paper.

Network and stakeholder perspectives implicitly assume that *all* relevant groups, including for-profit firms, have a role to play in addressing social issues through the application of social marketing. It is, therefore, curious that most of the discussions of social marketing seem to suggest that social marketing is primarily the responsibility of governments or non-profit organisations. Some works even suggest that having for-profit firm involvement in social marketing somehow makes social marketing activities less socially focused (Hastings and Angus, 2011). This negative view

of for-profit involvement occurs even though models of social marketing clearly recognise that businesses can play an important role in solutions to complex problems, and that social marketers should be “leveraging resources in the private sector” (Lefebvre, 1997, p. 56). Furthermore, works that discuss social marketing from a governmental perspective also directly and indirectly suggest that for-profits could play a pivotal role in addressing social issues (Curtis et al., 2007; Reinecke and Ansari, 2015).

The discussion of alternative social marketing tools suggests that for-profits have an important role to play in implementing social marketing solutions. For example, Rothschild (1999) suggests that both carrots and sticks are needed to drive positive behaviour change. He goes on to suggest that these social actions can include laws, education and marketing. Establishing laws needs to be done at the governmental level, and can be used to regulate consumer or corporate action (e.g., setting the legal age for purchasing alcohol or tobacco products). On the other hand, education (i.e., informational messages, without direct reward or punishment) and marketing (e.g., activities that provide incentives or better communicate the consequences of behaviour change), can also result in behaviour change. Combining the three alternatives can then be used to form an integrated social marketing program, which can be jointly implemented by governments, non-profits and corporate entities. In fact, for-profit organisations might be better at implementing marketing and educational programs, given their expertise in communicating the value of adopting given behaviours (i.e., purchasing their goods and services). For example, it is unclear whether nicotine patches and related anti-smoking products would be as successful if they were branded and sold solely by governments or non-profits (Beard et al., 2013). For-profit firms marketing such goods have a vested interest in getting people to attempt to cease smoking, with the firms making cessation aids requiring extensive financial resources and marketing expertise to assist in achieving corporate sales goals. These products’ success is directly accompanied by a personal and public health benefit associated with smoking cessation. In fact, it has been suggested that the increased diversification of anti-smoking products has increased the number of people attempting to quit in the UK (Beard et

al., 2013). Of course, those who fail to quit and seek to try to stop again at a later date may be a highly profitable segment. Although it is generally not argued that firms seek to make cessation goods less effective in order to target such customers.

Overall, the focal aim of evaluating corporate social marketing actions should be to assess the extent to which corporate social marketing actions bring about both direct and indirect positive changes in consumers and in societal behaviour. This goal, of course, could be perceived differently from firms promoting the responsible use of goods that are potentially harmful, for example, fast food manufacturers providing healthy options alongside unhealthy options, or automobile firms promoting hybrids alongside less environmentally-friendly models. Thus, corporate intent and sincerity could partly be driving consumer, NGO and policy-makers' cynicism.

The discussion of the complexity around distinctions between positive and negative impacts is something that clearly warrants additional discussion. The goal of this work is to put forward an argument for reframing how we think about corporate social marketing and as will be discussed, later in this work, there are extensive future research opportunities to tease out the distinctions between when corporate action is exploitive or indeed truly focused on bringing about a social benefit. As such the discussion within this paper focuses on the arguments as to *why some corporate action is indeed worthy of being considered as social marketing*.

In the remainder of this paper I propose two typologies that can be applied to assess: (a) the firm-society benefit; and (b) the consumer-society perspective of firm action. These two typologies identify the extent to which corporate social marketing is appropriate, as well as the instances where it might be exploitive. The paper then finishes with a discussion of the implications for social marketing practice of corporate social marketing, and outlines several issues of potential future research interest.

Firm and Society Benefit

The concerns raised about corporate social marketing are not completely without foundation. In a number of instances corporate social marketing may not have been designed to bring about the positive social changes purported. For example, it has been argued that some corporate sponsored responsible drinking campaigns were not really designed to discourage risky behaviours, and that the cooperative actions undertaken promoted as responsible, were, in fact, distortive or anti-social marketing and encouraged increased drinking (Barry and Goodson, 2010; Jones et al., 2016).

However, this does not mean that all corporate social marketing initiatives are inherently flawed. For example, condom manufacturers actively seek to educate people and market their products by leveraging the benefits of condom use as a means of limiting sexually transmitted diseases (Purdy, 2011). In this instance there is a direct correlation between firm success and social benefits, which could be classified as corporate social marketing. In many other instances there are joint social marketing initiatives involving business and non-profits (Curtis et al., 2007). For example, firms have worked with governments in a range of developing country contexts to promote handwashing with soap to prevent dysentery (Biran et al., 2014). Thus, the firms marketing soap products benefit from sales and an improved corporate image in developing markets, while educating communities about the benefits of washing hands, thereby increasing the use of soap. In turn, lives are saved and the health burden on local governments reduced, as well as the reductions achieved in the health and social costs associated with dysentery.

The above examples demonstrate there are clearly situations where corporate-driven outcomes benefit both society and the firm. That is, firms are not simply concerned with maximising the value of social activities in regards to return, as would occur in strategic philanthropy or cause related marketing, but rather that corporate purpose and social outcomes are aligned and focus on the firm's activities. There will be many situations where commercial marketers have a vested interest in undertaking commercial activities that have a positive social impact; the question is to

what extent is the focus of action on social benefit as compared to corporate benefit? This may even apply to instances where the social benefits are not the main driver of the commercial activity, such as manufacturers of home solar panels wanting to increase use of their products to increase corporate profits. The increased uptake of solar panels increases profits for the firms making the goods, reduces demand for coal-fired energy production thus reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and assists consumers through lowering long-term energy costs and expenditures.

In another example; as car share schemes grow, the demand for car ownership reduces, thus saving natural resources, as well as shifting the role of car retailers within the commercial sector, while still ensuring consumers have convenient, flexible transportation options. These examples clearly reflect that the elusive commercial-social win-win is possible. Traditional market exchange systems, therefore, allow social issues to be addressed (Domegan et al., 2016). In some instances, there is a clear corporate social marketing agenda (e.g., selling condoms and soap in developing countries) directly embedded into the marketing campaign, whereas, in the latter instances (e.g., home solar cells and car sharing) there is a secondary social marketing agenda, as environmental savings may never be mentioned in marketing messages. However, even in the latter cases, effective for-profit messages result in positive behaviour changes benefiting the individual, society **and** the firm and, thus, should be classified as corporate social marketing.

To assess the balance between corporate and social impacts one can use a two-by-two matrix which categorises the positive and negative impacts of corporate marketing on the firm/industry and society (see Figure 1). In the ideal win-win situation (Cell 1.1) corporate marketing activities benefit both the firm and society, such as the marketing of soap for handwashing in developing countries, or focused corporate activities such as promoting home solar cells. In Cell 1.3, there is a benefit to society but harm to the firm or the industry. While rarer, these instances do occur occasionally, such as private water corporations promoting water savings in droughts, whereby they sell less water but assist in conserving water use. Demarketing activities could also fall

within this area, such as encouraging consumers to purchase goods less frequently (Varadarajan, 2014).

Figure 1: The Corporate-Society Marketing Interface

		Society	
		Positive	Negative
Corporates/industry	Positive	1.1 Marketing soaps/sanitation in developing countries	1.2 New forms of products harm existing markets (new generation mobile phones)
	Negative	1.3 Water corporations promoting water savings	1.4 Unethical behaviours

For-profit marketing is criticised where firms are seen to do things that benefit themselves but harm society directly or indirectly (i.e., Cell 1.2). For example, the introduction of flavoured alcoholic soft drinks (alcopops) to target new consumers would likely exacerbate drinking problems with younger legal and under-age drinkers (Metzner and Kraus, 2008). The introduction of new models of goods (e.g., mobile phones) might increase product churn and also increase the negative impact associated with additional production and disposal of older goods (Paiano et al., 2013).

Cell 1.2 is also where ‘distortive’ corporate social marketing would occur, that is, activities undertaken under the guise of social marketing but which are, in fact, designed not to reduce the targeted negative behaviour (Barry and Goodson, 2010). As suggested earlier, such activities may also further affect the trust associated with corporate intentions. Identifying examples for the final cell (Cell 1.4) is hardest, as few firms would choose to undertake activities that harm themselves and harm society, but might include unethical corporate activities. For example, Volkswagen’s promotion of increased fuel efficiency while, at the same time, designing and implementing product software that produced inaccurate emission readings. This action has not only harmed Volkswagen’s brand

(and possibly the image of diesel cars more generally), but also misled consumers and increased carbon production, or, in other words, harmed society (Oldenkamp et al., 2016).

The Consumer-Society Perspective

Given that the goal of social marketing is “to benefit individuals and communities for the greater social good” (Tapp et al., 2013, p. 1), it is possibly better that, when evaluating activities, we ignore the messenger and focus on the social outcome of the activities. This section of the paper focuses on how corporate social marketing activities benefit individuals and society. It is recognised that all consumer action will have some aggregate impact on society and calculation of overall benefits to the society of individual actions are difficult and beyond the scope of this paper to debate. The examples provided are designed to highlight the types of approaches that might be used, however as reviewers have pointed out, some of the benefits of impacts are potentially contestable in aggregate. The goal of each example is to identify the types of social issues and social marketing that might fall within domains and the interventions that might be better suited to corporate social marketing or require joint for-profit/governmental initiatives. Figure 2 further refines the identified Cells 1.1 and 1.3 in Figure 1 above - those that bring about a benefit.

Cell 2.1 in Figure 2 contains actions that benefit both the individual and society, which might include promoting nicotine patches to stop smoking, condom use to prevent STDs or handwashing in developing countries to reduce dysentery. In all cases, these initiatives frequently have a combined governmental and corporate approach (Curtis et al., 2007), but may also succeed when using traditional social marketing undertaken individually by governments or corporates (Beard et al., 2013). In many instances, the social marketing initiatives in Cell 2.1 in Figure 2 have relatively low costs to consumers. In the case of smoking cessation, there is a monetary benefit from stopping smoking (Giné et al., 2010), but one usually needs to purchase products supporting cessation, whereas, in the other two instances - condom use (MacDonald et al., 2016) and handwashing (Biran et al., 2014) - the financial costs are minimal, as are the required changes to behaviour. Demarketing

activities would possibly also fall within this domain. For example, food manufacturers promoting healthier eating and not overconsuming their goods, benefits consumers' health and reduces the health burden on governments and society.

Cell 2.2 contains activities where there is a high benefit to the individual but a low benefit to society. One example might be purchasing home solar cells, which reduce an individual's energy costs, but require significant numbers of people to participate to create a social benefit (i.e., lower coal-fired energy is produced, reducing carbon production). Effective implementation might require a combined intervention (i.e., drawing on multiple actors) because of the high sunk costs associated with the initial investment. For example, governmental tax incentives in the form of rebates or higher energy repurchase tariffs (Sarzynski et al., 2012), create an advantage for consumers adopting the behaviours and, thus, assist firms in promoting the adoption of home solar cells.

Figure 2: Social Marketing to Achieve Consumer-Society Benefits

		Societal Benefit	
		High	Low
Individual benefit	High	2.1 Smoking patches; Condoms (for STD prevention)	2.2 Solar Cells
	Low	2.3 Controlling pests and noxious weeds	2.4 Elimination of plastic bags

In some instances, changes are mandated to promote more socially responsible behaviour. For example, local government areas may require various solar initiatives for all new homes, forcing consumers to change behaviour, which is potentially similar to Rothschild's (1999) legal tool for motivating behaviour change (Oreizi, 2016). As the cost of solar systems reduce and products become more efficient there may be more focus on corporate marketing of these goods. Thus, in the longer term the value proposition may become more significant, even without governmental subsidies or support.

Cell 2.3 contains actions with low individual benefits but high societal benefits. These activities might relate to problems beyond the control of any one individual consumer. For example, in Australia the government has undertaken a range of social marketing initiatives with farmers to encourage them to actively eradicate noxious weeds and pests (Polonsky et al., 2004). The effects of controlling these species will benefit farmers in aggregate, and it is only through mass participation that effective results can be achieved. That is, if one farmer does not participate, the species will continue to spread to neighbouring farms, and controls may have limited success. In these instances, system-wide initiatives are needed and may require a high degree of governmental coordination, given the benefits that would arise in the broader community. Initiatives may of course be supported by for-profits (marketing the solutions) and NGOs also concerned with land-related issues (i.e., education).

Cell 2.4 contains activities which have a low benefit to the individual and low societal benefit. The limited individual benefit means that more active drivers might be required to facilitate behaviour change, although voluntary actions may also be used (Muthu et al., 2012). There are, in fact, fewer of these examples and, given the low benefits to individuals and society, it may be that social marketing initiatives targeting these sorts of issues would be rarely undertaken as there would be limited return on any investments (corporate or governments). For example, promoting manners might be something that would make society more civil in aggregate, but would possibly not be considered as a pressing social issue. At the individual level, there would be a required change in behaviour which also might not be considered as significant.

Discussion, Implications and Future Research

Addressing complex social issues requires an integrated approach and needs to leverage all potential resources available, including corporate resources. It is, therefore, important to identify where corporate social marketing can be most effectively applied. Focusing on social marketing's benefits to individuals and society, Figure 2 gives an indication of the types of corporate-focused social

marketing activities that can be undertaken. There is clearly no reason why for-profit organisations cannot be involved in these actions and firms may, in fact, possibly lead the social marketing initiatives. Yes, there are situations where firms might distort social activities, or be more interested in issues that assist firm performance than social outcomes (Du et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2016). However, one could possibly argue that the same is true for governments who sometimes undertake counterproductive activities in regard to the network of harm associated with social issues (Polonsky et al., 2003). For example, tobacco growers are still subsidised in many countries (for economic reasons), while, at the same time, governments advocate and support smoking cessation because of the associated health costs arising from smoking (public health reasons). The underlying rationale for governments to undertake conflicting activities is that they have competing policy goals - economic and public health. Yet, there seems to be less of a public (or academic) outcry when these policy inconsistencies arise. Are corporate social marketing activities any different? While it may seem that corporate social marketing is consistent with research proposing that firms should undertake strategic philanthropy (Du et al., 2010; Thorne McAlister and Ferrell, 2002), in most cases strategic philanthropy is too narrow in regards to the benefits to society to be considered corporate social responsibility.

This work has sought to argue that social marketers should embrace corporate social marketing that seeks to benefit society. In fact, the more that firms are able to profit from these activities (directly or indirectly), the more likely they are to participate **and**, more importantly, the greater the likelihood that social issues are effectively addressed. At the same time it is essential that we do not simply see all corporate marketing in social marketing as positive, as there are many instances where for-profits may seek to minimise the impact of positive behaviour change through creating ineffectual social marketing initiatives (Barry and Goodson, 2010; Landman, Ling and Glantz, 2002). Additional research needs to identify what types of strategies and actions can be undertaken to identify and limit this sort of distortive corporate action. The main argument of this paper has been that that for-profit firm participation in social marketing is not inherently bad, but some firms

may seek to impede positive social change by participating in social marketing initiatives. Thus, there will be instances where corporate social marketing can produce the elusive win-win outcome, and can do so more effectively than governmental/non-profit action alone. Thus, social marketers should focus on the social outcomes, not who is sending the message or delivering programs.

Future research into the effectiveness of corporate social marketing is, therefore, essential, both from a social marketing and a for-profit marketing perspective. Research could examine a range of issues. For example, might there be something about the products that makes corporate social marketing seem to be more acceptable in some contexts, such as soap manufacturers promoting handwashing as compared to alcohol companies promoting responsible drinking? Might the issue of acceptability be related to where the benefit is occurring or the degree to which the firm is responsible for the harm being addressed?

Research also needs to examine whether the way that corporate and social benefits are communicated in corporate social marketing campaigns impacts their effectiveness. Would a campaign that articulates the social benefits help the firm and consumer be more effective? How might the combination of alternative partners in corporate social marketing affect effectiveness? That is, would consumers respond positively to two corporations working together, or two non-profits (where non-profit-government could be yet another option) working together, or a mix of for-profit and non-profit alliances? The social issue being addressed could also be looked at. For example, would it be appropriate to link programs promoting less binge drinking with alcohol manufacturers?

This of course leads directly to research into exploitative corporate social marketing which also needs to be undertaken. This is especially important when these distortive actions are taken under the guise of fulfilling governmental requirements placed on harmful sectors (i.e., drinking, smoking, gambling, etc.). The question might be whether the problem arises in regards to the

communication styles, the social issues being addressed, or whether there is an interaction between these two dimensions?

If corporate social marketing is effective, even in a subsection of domains, it is important to understand it and seek to identify ways it can be used to maximum social benefit. Given firms are often involved in creating harm, getting them to address harm is equally critical. Thus corporate social marketing is not necessarily inherently good, nor is inherently bad. The ultimate question should be how effectively does it bring about positive changes in behaviour.

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