

**THE POWER OF THE MESSAGE – THE KEY TO SUCCESS IN SOCIAL  
MARKETING CAMPAIGN  
AN ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MARKETING IN ROMANIA**

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**Abstract**

*The success of a social marketing campaign does not depend mainly on its budget but rather on the message that is sent. This article emphasize the importance of the message for successful social marketing campaigns and makes an analysis of the messages' type/structure of leading social marketing campaigns in Romania, as a defining element contributing to the success of social marketing campaigns.*

*Being aware of the importance of the message for a successful social marketing campaign, we propose, in this article, some ideas for improving the message structure transmitted in social marketing campaigns.*

*Although, social marketing campaigns are run with significant funds, small importance is being given to evaluating campaign's effectiveness and the extent to which the social behaviour of the targeted segments is truly changed. Research was conducted in order to identify the ways in which the use of other types of messages would increase the impact of social marketing campaigns.*

**Key-words:** *social marketing, behaviour change, effectiveness*

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**Introduction**

The message is the result of a creative idea that advertising agencies is develop, capable of producing enough to be a message delivered to consumers by the media (Epure M., Vasilescu R., 2009)

A creative idea may be defined as an original and creative thought conceived to generate advertisements that reach targets directly and to resolve problems. According to others, a creative idea must draw attention and should work as a catalyst in the sense that it should create a chemical reaction to immediately understand the position of the market (De Pelsmacker P., Geuens M., Van den Bergh J., 2005). Imagination is more than is just different. Making the simple complicated is common, making the complicated simple, impressively simple, it is creative (Centlivre L., 1988). In essence, a creative idea seems to be reduced to a proposal whereby it is possible to communicate brand position in an

original way that attracts attention. Several researchers argue about the subject that imagination is probably the key of advertising, and we agree with this argument. Why? Because it is simple: look at Volkswagen Beetle with its “think small” – turning the small into a size advantage in competition. Besides the need for a creative idea to develop effective advertising, it is questionable how creative the ad itself must be. Two different types of calls can be creatively distinguished: calls with rational and emotional appeals. Rational appeals consist of: before speaking, demonstration, problem solving, testimonials, slice of life adaptation, and comparative ads. Uses of emotional appeals include: humour, fear, warmth, eroticism, music, etc. to influence, persuade consumers to buy.

From an ethical standpoint, but in a radical way of thinking, emotional appeals are difficult to keep within reasonable ethical boundaries, which are so easy to cross! We present in our case studies the main aspects of the use of emotional words, signs and images that end up being unconvincing, not relevant or even inefficient. The advertising message mainly contains information such as: price, quality, execution, components, availability, special offers, taste, nutrition, packaging, safeguards, security, independent research, corporate research and even new ideas.

The media is the vehicle through which the message is transmitted to the audience. Ads are everywhere: on TV, radio, newspapers, pop-ups from the Internet, brochures, advertisements postcards, and we feel most of the time suffocated by them. So we end up being very selective.

The impact of advertising depends on past experience and education of an individual and, therefore, it may go beyond simple commercial purposes, and may be used in the public interest. The advertising is, after all, an educational tool capable of reaching and motivating large audiences.

### **Social marketing – introducing concepts and perceptions**

The term *social marketing* was first introduced by Philip Kotler and Gerald Zaltman, in the Journal of marketing, to describe “the use of marketing principles and techniques to advance a social cause, idea or behavior” (Kotler, P. and Zaltman G., 1971), launching the discipline formally in 1971.

Social marketing is the use of marketing principles and techniques to influence a target audience to voluntarily accept, reject, modify or abandon a behaviour for the benefit of individuals, groups or society as a whole (improving health, preventing injuries, protecting the environment or contributing to the community). In fact, social marketing has been viewed by a significant number of practitioners as a systematic application of marketing alongside other concepts and techniques to achieve specific behavioural goals, for a social or public good (Tulchinsky TH, Varavikova E, 2009). It aims to achieve a measurable impact on what people actually do. It does not just focus on achieving changes in behaviour, but takes a much wider approach to focus on how to promote, establish and sustain changes over time.

Social marketers utilize in “selling” behaviour change the same techniques that commercial sector marketers use to sell products or services: a focus on its consumers, market research, and a systematic process for developing a marketing program. The key characteristic that distinguishes social marketing from commercial marketing is its purpose (Weinreich N.K., 1999); that is, the benefits accrue to the individual or society rather than to the marketer’s organizations. Usually, social marketers cannot promise a direct benefit or immediate payback in return for a proposed behaviour change.

### **Using the messages in Romanian social marketing campaign**

In Romania, dozens of campaigns presenting the dangers of drugs consumption have been developed formally. It is unclear whether these campaigns have achieved their targets because the campaigns have not had a precise purpose, have not measured the effects and no database was created in which to record the campaign’s main features and proposals for improvement, in order to improve the campaign’s results.

Some campaigns have used propaganda messages, focusing on the negative effects of drugs, cigarette, child maltreatment, etc., based on the idea that fear is what will keep them away from harmful behaviour. These campaigns are not effective on anyone other than on those who do not plan to use drugs, do not want to smoke, etc, while those who are at risk are not affected by this kind of message. These campaigns have only served to provoke fear in the population with direct effect in stigmatizing drug users, smokers, people with AIDS and override behaviour in children, seen as innocent beings who can fall prey to the white death.

Most times, the messages that reach the public through these campaigns are verdicts such as: drugs kill, white death, drugs ruin everything, drugs steal dreams, drugs consumers go to jail. If we consider the effect of slogans that can be found on packs of cigarettes, we can say that these kinds of messages, which appeal to hard feelings, did not stop the effect of drugs. A solution would be to use rational messages to communicate the positive action that the target should adopt, and to address the targeted person with possible alternatives to chose from, rather than to stigmatize him/her.

It often happens that agencies put too much emphasis on the creative side, trying to send messages through wordplay or using words, images, music, characters, etc. that can sometimes generate exaggerated emotions. Consequently, a person who hears the message for the first time may not wish to hear it again. Unfortunately, few messages succeed to traverse the entire process, from awareness to behavioural change. Therefore, whatever the message is, it should be defined *a priori* by the organization initiating the campaign because it knows exactly what the objectives and characteristics of the project are. Representatives of all stakeholders should be invited to a debate session, whereas each contributor is expected to promote the aim of an intervention in terms of a specific behaviour. Unfortunately, this type of co-operation is not a common procedure in Romania –

the beneficiary representatives are often exactly the ones who are missing. However, the role of the advertising agency is particularly important.

The initiators of the social marketing campaigns and the advertising agencies are facing the following challenges (Koetler P., Keller K. L., 2008): What to say (message content)? How to say it logically (message structure)? How to say it in a symbolic way (as message)? in order to attract attention through the message, to establish a direct link between the message's content and the social campaign initiators purposes and to match the message's perception with the core of the message that they want to be sent.

A social marketing specialist's job is to teach people different behaviours, seen as beneficial for society as a whole. In some situations we talk about learning new behaviours (such as healthy eating), in others increasing the frequency of exhibiting good behaviour (such as reading, playing sports) or removing a certain type of behavior that is considered harmful to society (such as to quit smoking, not to be drugged, etc.).

A variety of methods must be applied for each of these behaviours, which in turn would have to prove their effectiveness. If social marketing has failed to make certain methods efficient, one may adapt methods from other fields such as education. Ultimately, the purpose of social marketing campaigns is to develop specific types of behaviour, to teach and to train individuals to accept these behavioural changes. In fact, the behaviour is the result of a learning process.

Analyzing several campaigns, we can conclude that the most common method used for learning or changing a certain type of behaviour is providing information. In almost all spots or posters one may find sentences like: "Stop human trafficking", "Violence against children must stop", "Listen to their rights and defend them", "Donate blood", "Vote!", etc. How effective do you think these slogans are? Did the messages really change behaviour? If anyone says to you "smoking kills" or "do not smoke!", will you quit smoking tomorrow? It seems that if people continue to smoke (and the number of smokers is increasing) these campaigns clearly had no effect on a large scale. Simple assertions of desire or need do not make individuals change their behaviour. We can also provide examples of campaigns that use messages like "do not drive drunk" or "do not beat your child". The reality of life shows us that none of these messages are successful. Why is this happening? A first explanation, which psychology gives us, is that information alone does not change the behaviour. No matter how much we tell someone *what to do* or *what not to do*, that person will continue to behave in the same way. What can we do about it?

A very simple method that we think would be successful is promoting discipline, or rather teaching it (Petrovai D.). Discipline teaches children to be responsible for their own behaviour, to have self-control and self-discipline, to prevent the development, or the maintenance, of behavioural problems. Teaching discipline can be done at any age. After all, the behavioural problems that social marketing is trying to solve are due to ignorance, lack of information or lack of responsibility. The behavioural problems are those which occur not only in childhood, but also in adulthood. Perhaps problems, such as

obesity or drug use, are the result of the individual's lack of discipline in the childhood age. Discipline is a learning method not a punitive one! (Petrovai D.).

Psychologists say that the individual's self-confidence development is the background of any particular learning process and learned behaviours. Then, we suggest that messages used in social marketing campaigns should promote or sustain the idea of trust (and not to condemn or punish, as it often happens).

It provides the individuals that the campaign is addressing with the opportunity to choose between two or more options. This can be a very useful and efficient way to improve the decision –taking process. Instead of saying “NO” (not X or not Y) it will be more useful to provide an alternative: *Tell him what to do!* When you tell someone what NOT to do, it becomes difficult for him to search and to choose a better behavioural alternative.

So instead of saying “no smoking” or “stop using drugs” we can rephrase the message content as follows: *“it is better to be healthy and to enjoy life: do sports, play music, make friends, etc., find the activity that you enjoy and that keeps you healthy”*. *Discover your inner potential and enjoy the results!* We believe that it is more important to transmit positive messages in the sense that any behavioural problem is just an opportunity for the individuals to explore themselves and to learn new behaviours – the positive ones. A mistake is just an opportunity to learn. Instead of putting drug addicts against the wall and blaming them, it is more desirable to send messages to the effect that a mistake is an opportunity to learn and to grow as a person, and to identify at least one alternative to solve the drug problem without hiding the problem or blaming others for it. *What options do I have to solve my problem?*

The marketing manager should pay particular attention to coding and decoding the advert. The importance of these actions comes out of the risk of not being correctly understood. An erroneous example is: *Your money enriches the organized crime! Your Money kills souls!* This message wants to convey that human trafficking should not be encouraged. According to the source, *The target group of this social marketing campaign consists of customers of any kind, especially men, who use sexual services of women who may be the victims of trafficking. These are customers who undertake work without a contract, for cheap wages, and those who give money to beggars that may be required to do so.* ([anitp.mai.gov.ro/ro/campanii/banii\\_tai.php](http://anitp.mai.gov.ro/ro/campanii/banii_tai.php)). Evidently, even the stated intention of the message is difficult to comprehend. Furthermore, according to the information posted on the agency's website, one of the strategies discussed was to inform students about human trafficking, to raise awareness of the phenomenon and also to make sure that the members of high risk groups (such as families with low living standards, children at risk of dropping out of school, young people coming from orphanages) have access to this information. The message might be misunderstood by the people who received it. In addition, can we talk about “your money” when we are addressing children? People who hear the slogan for the first time may even feel attacked or offended.

Indeed the message is a very important element of the marketing strategy when it has to persuade individuals to adopt a certain behaviour, no matter the

kind: consumer behaviour or social behaviour. Words help us to identify a product and a certain brand and even to learn right from wrong.

To answer the question: „what to communicate?“ the advertiser must know and understand the target group composition and to find the right way to address it. The message cannot concentrate only on the objectives of the social campaign; it must be based on understanding the reasons of the real individual's motivation and to reveal the real drivers of social behaviour. Knowing the problems, preferences and expectations of the target group is essential for selecting the correct message.

### **Conclusion**

What sort of symbols and words should be chosen for Romanians to convey the right message in a decent manner, ethically correct and which can lead to a certain desired behavioural change? It is not an easy to answer question. We are still looking for the optimum. Will we be able to design it? Not sure yet, but certainly we will raise interesting debates on this subject, and maybe we will instigate a deeper reflection among social marketing campaign initiators. Social marketing messages should emphasis what is being offered to the targeted audience. The message is a powerful instrument in the service of social marketing and helps social marketing to achieve its goals, but the message's power can be sustained only if the conduct learning activities are considered beneficial to the entire organization and society.

Using observation-based research methods and conducting a comparative analysis of social marketing initiatives, we conclude that there is generally a lack of a clear long-term “offer”. If the audience cannot clearly and easily identify the benefits they are not motivated to follow the advices circulated through the social marketing campaign. Sometimes, the “artistic” presentation of the message hides the message's core and the language and semiotics confuse the main audience. Emotional impact is supposed to be rich not in an artistic way, but mainly in a direct and powerful way: common language with great impact (such as *Smoking kills*).

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