NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Bill Smith

SAME QUESTIONS, SAME ANSWERS

I get a lot of calls for help. I get a lot of the same questions, over and over. They are the right questions and they deserve good answers. This column will seem a little repetitive to some of you. Sorry, but some things deserve to be repeated. I got a call from an eye surgeon in a small southern community last month. She was writing a grant proposal to promote community eye care, and she said she had heard about me from a friend and that she wanted to include social marketing in her proposal. I naturally expected her to ask me to join her team – but no. She said, and I quote:

“Dr. Smith, I have to get this submitted by tomorrow. Could you tell me all I need to know so I can use social marketing effectively?”

I told her how glad I was she had called – because I had just been asked to do some eye surgery at a friend’s house this afternoon. And if she would teach me eye surgery I would teach her social marketing.

There is something crazy about what we are doing. So many of us have no training in social marketing at all and yet we have grants to use social marketing to change the world. We are using it in many different communities, on widely differing problems, and with a range of resources that goes from vast to pathetic. But hey, if we were not all a little crazy, we wouldn’t be trying to make the world a better place.

The most common question is still:

“What is social marketing – and how is it different from advertising, from health education, and from media communication?”

Simple answer. All those other guys usually start where many of you start – with the question, “How do I sell my product?” That is, how do I sell my underage drinking program, my economic health program to Native Americans, my HIV prevention program?

Marketing starts by asking whether or not anybody wants your product. And how do you know they want it? And do they want it the way you are offering it? How sure are you? Does everyone you want to want it, want it? And how do you know?

The next time you go to the grocery store, ask yourself how many of the products in your shopping basket have an ad associated with them. I’ll guess anywhere from 0–3%. You buy products because you already know you have... a need you already know you have. The problem with most social marketing campaigns is that they attempt to sell a need people do not have. This simply will not succeed. We have to find something people already know they need and associate your product with it. We can only do this by getting to know our target audiences as people – not just as sick people, or fat people, or dying people, or parents of drinking kids.
“How do I make chronic illness awareness cool?”

You think “chronic illness awareness” is important? Why? You think it will lead to people “eating their vegetables”? That’s like a car manufacturer thinking that awareness of braking systems will sell sports cars; people who buy sports cars don’t want to brake – they want to zoom. Even closer, it’s like an automotive company publishing how much profit it makes off each sports car as a way to get you to buy it. Awareness is your “profit” – but people don’t care about your profit, they care about theirs.

Forget chronic illness awareness – you want people to eat vegetables. So, make that fun to do. Have a community vegetable-eating contest. Watch the TV show Jackass and get some ideas. Have you seen Fear Factor? They eat a quarter gallon of raw eggs – yuck... but it’s fun. Focus on the behavior – not the awareness you think leads to the behavior. This is the single most important idea in social marketing. Stop teaching people what you care about and start listening to what they care about. Focus on behavior, not awareness!

“Got milk” made the same mistake at the beginning. They thought people didn’t drink milk because milk wasn’t cool! They made milk cool – but they did not change the product, i.e., its package or availability. When they made milk actually live up to its advertising, milk sales went up.

The point of the “Got milk?” story is that advertising alone does not always work. You need a good product – you need to make eating vegetables outrageously fun!

“How do I do that?” you ask. The simplest way. Find an outrageous teen in your community, a kid who doesn’t fit in. Maybe he doodles in class. Don’t go to the “A” student, they are usually boring. Get the strange kid and then do what he tells you to do. If you haven’t got enough courage for that, then get an ad agency to help. But don’t ask them to “raise awareness about chronic illness” – ask them to “make eating vegetables outrageously fun!” Get the craziest guy on local radio and ask him or her how to do it. You’ve got to break through the clutter of bad news and serious stuff.

Oh, I forgot something... your audience. Whom do you want to eat vegetables? Old people? Young professionals? Teens? Families together at the table? Kids at school? Important questions. Why? Because you have to make it outrageously fun for them and they are different when it comes to fun. Okay, let’s go to another question.

“What’s fun about death and dying?”

Honest to God, I saw a guy at the mall here in Washington the other day with a tee shirt that said, Mark’s Funeral Home – where we put the “fun” back in funerals. Seriously – why not? But I’m not going to beat that old horse about “make it fun” anymore. Let’s try a new horse called: Make it easy to do. This principle emerges out of a lot of research that says people are lazy as can be.

“How do we define a target population when there are several?”

First, you can have multiple audiences. But realistically, on a tight budget that is tough. The best audience is the one that is ready to act but just needs a little help. Find the easy sell – the low hanging fruit – and start there. They will then become part of the your next wave of selling.
“How do we begin conversations about advance-care planning or building a program that helps in the completion of health care proxies?

You have an interesting problem here, though. I like the idea of “conversation.” People are often more willing to talk about a tough subject before they are ready to act. Where would people feel comfortable talking about proxies? Whom would they want to be there? How do they bring it up?

Notice that these are all very practical questions. People need help, so model a conversation. Make it fun by showing how tough it is. Create two radio or media characters in a program that builds suspense over time. Remember those coffee ads featuring a soap opera-style love triangle?

Focus on the conversation and make it easy to talk about by dealing with all their doubts in the ads or programs. Also, make it easy to find the paperwork and get it done.

You also wanted to know if you should base such a program on having one measurable goal. Yes, if you don’t have much money — but let the goal change over time and be with it for the long haul. If we let the goal change over time, be aware that our consumer also changes.

“How long do you need and how much does it take?”

No simple answer. Sorry. So, let’s turn quickly to another question.

“The purpose of our project is to help parents and other adults name and claim the problem of underage drinking. We want to change long-term social norms and public policies. How do you generate interest and involvement if denial is the problem? How do we avoid preaching to the choir?”

I hope you are now beginning to ask yourself, “What do we want people to do?” (Not what do we want people to think.) Are you so sure that denial is the problem? And if it is, why is that the only route to the behavior you want people to do? When people take ownership, how will you know? What will they do... keep their kid at home? Search his room? Talk to him about drinking?

Focus on behavior and then make whatever you want people to do real and, if possible, fun. Then, start with the folks who want to be in the choir but aren’t. Publicize their conversion to the new faith and make it easy for others to join.

This is a tough problem. Don’t get your hopes up. We’ve got a lot of people in America saying drinking is okay. Have you done any Christmas shopping yet? The hottest gift at places like Linens and Things is martini sets. You don’t think kids see that? Remember, we had prohibition once and it didn’t work. Find behaviors that matter and push for those behaviors. Get kids involved. Find the cool kids. Avoid “A” students at all cost on this issue. There are so many different ways to go about this, but keep these three principles in mind:

**FOCUS ON BEHAVIOR, NOT ATTITUDE.**

Behavior changes attitude easier than attitude changes behavior. Think about it, did you really love sushi before you ate it a bunch of times with cool friends?

**MAKE THE BEHAVIOR REALLY FUN.**

Keep in mind what’s fun for teens may not be so much fun for older women.

**MAKE IT AS EASY TO DO AS POSSIBLE.**

Anticipate all the reasons people won’t do it, and take the obstacles away or
laugh at them so loudly resistors won’t take them seriously.

I could be talking to you about branding and positioning and segmentation. But honestly – you can’t do eye surgery with a pair of pliers any more than I can. So how would branding and segmentation help if you first didn’t know what you want people to do? Start with basic social marketing principles:

- Stop trying to help people to ‘think’ like you;
- Start finding out what will make their lives more fun if they do something you think will help them; and then
- Make it as easy as possible for them to do it. In essence, think “exchange.”

Yes, I know I’ve written the “fun, easy, and popular” column before, and I may have to do it again. Hope it helps.