Problems faced by marketers in non-profit organisations are among the most important and interesting issues in marketing. Thus, it is not surprising that social marketing is increasingly recognised as an important field. Alan Andreasen, who once wrote the best short article on practical marketing ever written (Andreasen 1985), is now one of the leaders in social marketing, and the editor of this important volume, which examines ethics in social marketing.

For marketers in commercial organisations, ethical considerations are essentially constraints. The ultimate aim is to make profits for shareholders, and ethical considerations may limit the methods employed to achieve this aim. For social marketers the situation is different; by definition, their ultimate aims are ethical, and for them the question of whether the ends justify the means is real and challenging. For social marketers, therefore, ethical issues are fundamental.

Unfortunately, most social marketers, including the authors of the papers in this book, believe that it is important to define just what social marketing is, the different types of social marketing that exist, and how social marketing differs from commercial marketing. This concern for defining abstract entities is one of the main themes of this book. For example, Andreasen and Drumwright claim “It has been long accepted that social marketing is significantly different from commercial marketing” (page 95), and the next two pages discuss the supposedly essential differences between social and commercial marketing.

Some of these points seem quite appealing at first. For example, the authors argue that “that social marketers typically have only limited resources for achieving such impressive objectives” (page 96). However, a moment’s thought would show that this is not true of many social marketers. Some government agencies such as the New Zealand Land Safety Transport Authority, for example, have comparatively large promotional budgets that would exceed those of many commercial marketers, particularly those who work in small companies. The overlap between commercial and social marketing is arguably much greater than these authors suggest, and it would be helpful to explore common ground rather than create dubious distinctions.

Although I would argue that these authors’ concern with the nature of social marketing is misplaced, the book does discuss many important issues, although it is not at all clear that these are the exclusive domains of social marketers. The first essay begins “Thoughtful social marketing practitioners are faced all too frequently with ethical dilemmas”. This is clearly true, but the same is true of all marketers, who must make personal decisions regarding their activities and the implications these will have for others. For example, commercial marketers have to decide whether it is appropriate to market products rich in highly processed carbohydrates; social marketers have to decide whether it is appropriate to promote immunisation knowing that a very small proportion of children will suffer adverse effects to the vaccines. The authors fail to demonstrate that the ethical problems of social marketers differ in nature or intensity from those faced by marketers in general.

The challenge to think about the effects of marketing on other stakeholders or the unintended consequences of marketing is one all marketers should rise to, and this text promises much. For example, the introduction suggests that the essays will “introduce philosophical rules and practical models to guide decision making, and … focus on such complex issues as unintended consequences, ethical marketing alliances, and professional ethical codes”. However, the discussions of these topics have little empirical support and it is somewhat disappointing that the essays do not consider the need to test the assumptions made in social marketing, particularly as many of these have much in common with commercial marketing.
Andreasen and Drumwright point out that social marketers and commercial marketers have the same compelling interest, hence it is not surprising that social marketers borrow concepts first developed and applied in commercial marketing. However, it is surprising that there is little discussion of how social marketers can apply this commercial knowledge to the behavioural objectives they wish to tackle. The essays could therefore focus more directly on how social marketers can improve their decision-making: that is, how they can decide on the course of action that will bring about the desired outcomes they find acceptable.

Ultimately, marketers interested in problems that involve social behaviours want to learn more about the options available for changing or reinforcing those behaviours, and the relative effectiveness of those options. These are difficult questions, since, as Armstrong and Schultz (1993) point out, little has been empirically established. However, for social marketing to progress, these questions, as well as their ethical implications, need to be explicitly acknowledged and discussed, and actively researched.

References


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