Social Marketing: Improving the Quality of Life (2nd Edition)


Philip Kotler, Ned Roberto, Nancy Lee

Introduction

As Alan Andreasen notes in the introduction to this book, social marketing has become an increasingly important aspect of marketing in recent years, a trend Andreasen predicts will continue. This textbook presents a systematic approach to social marketing that draws on marketing theory, and provides several examples to illustrate the application of theory to practice. However, the authors follow a very traditional approach to marketing decision-making. Readers looking for a more critical evaluation of social marketing and its applications, or an analysis of the empirical evidence underpinning social marketing theory, may find this book lacks depth.

Structure and Content of the Text

The text is divided into five sections that loosely follow the pattern of Kotler’s marketing management texts. The first of these begins by presenting a definition of social marketing, which the authors suggest has a strong emphasis on voluntary behavioural modification, an explanation that has much in common with Andreasen’s (1995) definition. The authors also identify other variables that can help shape consumers’ behaviour, but they could do more to integrate social marketing with the legal, political and economic instruments available to marketers and policy makers. Rothschild (1999) discussed the role of “carrots” and “sticks” in social marketing programmes; this link with behaviour modification theory could be explored further. For example, social marketers can draw on regulation to modify and maintain behaviour in a way that commercial marketers cannot. Greater discussion of legislation prohibiting tobacco promotions, for example, would have fostered a better understanding of the regulatory environments that shape social behaviours.

The remaining chapters in the first section provide an overview of the strategic planning process that Kotler et al recommend and develop in the later sections, and illustrate this using a variety of topical cases. The authors also outline twelve elements they suggest underlie successful social marketing campaigns. However, while these elements may offer some sensible guidelines, many lack a clear empirical foundation. For example, one element recommends starting with the target markets that are most ready for action. However, this assumes target markets exist, can be identified and accessed, and respond differently to different stimuli. Moreover, it assumes programmes that follow this advice will be more successful than those that do not. Although Kotler et al use cases to illustrate the elements they outline, these cases are rather anecdotal and the lack of empirical support is one of the major weaknesses of the text - a point I discuss in more detail below.

The second section of Social Marketing analyses the environments in which social marketing activities occur and begins by discussing the type of research that can be conducted. This section opens with a very brief summary of research methods, before discussing environmental analyses. As the authors note in the first section, social marketing does not require a new set of techniques, thus this section represents a summary of key topics outlined in more detail in mainstream marketing texts. For new social marketers, the information provided might be too superficial to be of much value, though it represents a sound summary of existing practice and the case studies provided link the methods outlined to social marketing programmes.

Readers familiar with Kotler’s approach will easily recognise Section three of the text, which examines the selection and understanding of target markets. Although widely accepted as important in mainstream marketing, this approach has nevertheless attracted criticism, and the logic of segmentation remains debateable. For readers seeking a more critical review of how general marketing strategy may apply to social marketing,
recommendations to segment markets are rather unsatisfactory, and the case study presented is unconvincing as it does little to establish the effectiveness of segmentation. Although Kotler et al draw on Prochaska and diClemente’s Transtheoretical model, they do not explain how the groups identified at different stages of this model can be effectively targeted, or whether segmentation strategies based on this model meet the criteria they argue should be used to evaluate segments. Nor do the authors consider the practical difficulties researchers must address when attempting to identify groups resistant to declaring “aberrant” behaviours.

Kotler et al often note the importance of effecting behavioural change, and they link this to changes in consumers’ knowledge and beliefs, which in turn become the focus of social marketing campaigns. Though this approach has an intuitive appeal, it has proved unsuccessful in some major social marketing campaigns. For example, smokers’ awareness of the health risks of smoking is generally high, despite their behaviour. Thus, while Kotler et al provide an interesting overview of different social behaviours, their analysis of the factors that contribute to these, and the potential role of environmental factors in modifying these behaviours, could be more rigorous.

The application of marketing strategy to social marketing continues in the remaining sections of the text, and Section four applies the four Ps to social marketing. Beginning by defining the product sold in social marketing, this section emphasises the behavioural goals that are at the heart of social marketing campaigns. However, Kotler et al continue their heavily cognitive approach; some acknowledgement and discussion of operant and respondent conditioning would add a useful dimension to their discussion. Nevertheless, encouraging a focus on specific behaviours and the stimuli that can achieve these provides a useful framework for social marketing, even if the theoretical underpinning is incomplete. Unfortunately, the suggestion that social behaviours ought to be marketed as “fun, easy and popular” seems somewhat naïve, as anyone who has tried to promote cervical or prostate cancer screening can no doubt attest.

The remaining chapters in this section, which deal with price, distribution, and promotion respectively, concentrate on removal of barriers that might impede the behaviour of interest. Thus, it is argued, social marketers should decrease the costs, monetary and non-monetary, of performing the behaviour while increasing the benefits, or returns. Again, though these arguments have an appealing intuitive logic, the recommendations made have no empirical support, and Kotler et al provide no evidence that adoption of these suggestions will increase the likelihood that the relevant public will perform the behaviour.

The distribution chapter makes several important suggestions that typically involve making the behaviour easier to perform. For example, Kotler et al discuss the use of mobile breast-screening vans and dental clinics, which increase use of the service by fostering accessibility. Given that the recommendations made all involve changes to the environment, it would have been helpful if the authors had linked their suggestions to a more formal behavioural framework. The promotion chapter takes what Ehrenberg (1974) would describe as a strong theory approach, and focuses on behavioural change rather than maintenance of compliant behaviour patterns. As social marketers often rely on regulations to shape behaviours, the authors could have discussed how promotion complements regulation by demonstrating and reinforcing desirable behaviours. One chapter in Section five does address the question of reinforcement, but seems somewhat out of place in a section that deals mainly with questions of budgeting and evaluation. The final chapter in Section four deals with media selection, and highlights some interesting and innovative strategies that offer ideas relevant to community-based social marketers through to those working for international organisations.

Section five explores the evaluation and monitoring of social marketing campaigns and identifies a series of measures available to social marketers. The authors recommend Andreasen’s “Backward” research approach. This approach suggests research design should work backwards from the tables that will appear in the research report to the analyses necessary to produce the tables, and, in turn, back to the questions required to produce the variables used in the analyses, which themselves depend on the decisions to be based on the research results. However, the chapter provides only a brief overview of how this approach might work in practice, and it would have been helpful to include a case that illustrated Andreasen’s approach. The remaining chapters in Section five examine budget setting and programme maintenance, respectively. The budget methods outlined are generic, however, the section on funding offers some helpful suggestions.
The final section examines ethical issues that affect social marketing campaigns, and questions whether the ends justify the means, even when the ultimate goal is some kind of social gain. Although this chapter outlines a series of useful questions that could serve as a checklist for social marketers, the issues raised seem isolated and would be better considered as they arose throughout the text. Integration of ethical issues with the relevant decisions would seem a more effective way of alerting social marketers to the wider factors they may need to consider in their decisions, and the implications of choices they make. Alternatively, a more detailed discussion of utilitarianism and deontology would give this chapter a stronger basis.

Overall, this text provides a sound, if traditional, overview of social marketing and, for readers familiar with Kotler’s marketing management texts, much of the material will be easily recognisable. The dominance of Kotler’s philosophy is both a strength and a weakness of this text. Kotler’s work has achieved international recognition because of its accessibility and the prescriptive frameworks he provides and less experienced social marketers will almost certainly find the text very helpful. However, for advanced students or social marketers already familiar with Kotler’s work, the text does little more than apply his recipe to a new framework. The material presented offers little sense of the debate about consumer behaviour occurring in marketing more generally, or of the unique features of social marketing, and so misses an opportunity to contribute to the development of social marketing theory.

References

Philip Gendall
Massey University