

Using Research to Solve Tough Social Marketing Problems

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During the Internet boom, when new technology businesses were racing to get their venture capital and establish their presence on the Web, many of these businesses seemed to have no time for research – at least not the type of research that could test the viability of their business plans. Their motto seemed to be: “Build it and they will come.”

But too often customers didn’t come. Today, many of those firms have failed, or are failing, because of basic flaws in their business models that research could have identified.

Social marketers, by contrast, know they can’t just “build it” and hope customers “will come.” Social marketing involves asking people to do things that require considerable effort and self-discipline, sometimes breaking long-standing habits or overcoming addictions. It is intrinsically more difficult to convince people to stop smoking, eat a more healthful diet, exercise more or take transit rather than driving to work than to try a new product or to switch brands.

Case Studies in Social Marketing Research

This article will show how research has helped several social marketing efforts overcome extraordinary obstacles.

Promoting Safe Sex and Monogamy in San Francisco’s Gay Community

I first realized how powerful survey research can be in the mid-1980s when I, along with my colleagues at a San Francisco research firm, saw the results of a study tracking the success of the first-ever AIDS/HIV prevention program – a program based on

recommendations from a benchmark study we had completed nine months earlier.¹ The goal of the program was to change patterns of sexual behavior among gay and bisexual men – a difficult, if not almost impossible, task.

The research began with focus groups, led by a gay moderator. We took insights gained from the focus group discussion to formulate hypotheses to be tested in a telephone survey that included perceptual measures, as well as measures of the number of sexual partners and participation in specific types of unsafe sexual behavior. Multiple regression analysis was used to identify perceptions driving intentions to cease unsafe activities. This analysis was the basis for the communication campaign.

Early messages about AIDS/HIV had emphasized risks and preventative measures. The benchmark study, however, revealed that these traditional fear appeals did not work well among what was then the primary risk group, gay and bisexual males. Members of our target audience were already scared, and many knew that scientists were recommending safe sex and monogamy to reduce the risk of HIV infection. But many thought that taking these measures would estrange them from their friends and from San Francisco's gay community, in which promiscuity had been the norm. We needed to do nothing less than change this norm.

Fortunately, the research provided the answer. It showed that many gay and bisexual men were unhappy with the promiscuous lifestyle and yearned for more stable and meaningful relationships. Thus, the communications campaign sought to convince gays that there was growing support for safe sex, monogamy and even celibacy in San Francisco's gay community.

And it was more successful than any of us believed it could be. We conducted a longitudinal tracking study, interviewing about eight in ten of the original survey respondents, and measured changes in their perceptions and sexual behavior. This

¹ The research was funded by the San Francisco Health Department and the San Francisco AIDS Foundation. It was carried out by Research and Decisions Corporation, which is no longer in business. The principal investigator was Larry Bye, now with the Field Research Corporation.

longitudinal tracking study showed that nearly nine in ten gay and bisexual men had made profound changes in their sex lives during the nine-month campaign. It also showed that positive change – from unsafe or safer practices – was highly related to changes in the level of agreement with campaign themes. In addition, when asked why they had changed, respondents played back the campaign messages.

We wanted to be sure that these changes were the result of the communication campaign rather than an artifact of sensitization created by having been interviewed earlier. Thus, we conducted an independent survey of gay and bisexual men. It provided almost identical results, ruling out the sensitization hypothesis.

Taken together, the two tracking studies showed that the campaign had made a big difference. It was clear that gay lifestyles had changed and that promiscuity was no longer the governing social norm of San Francisco's gay community. Some years later, epidemiologists reported a drop in new HIV infections that could be traced to that time period, and we knew that our research had, indeed, helped save lives.

Getting Drivers Out of their Cars and Onto Transit

Transit ridership in the Washington D.C. area is growing at a rate that is four times the national average. From 1999 to 2000, Metrobus ridership increased by 8.4%, making it the fastest growing of the nation's large bus systems, and Metrorail ridership increased by 7.7%. While population growth and increased traffic congestion have contributed to this increase, research-based service and marketing initiatives have also had a significant effect.

Since 1994, our firm has conducted ten major surveys for the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), and we have been tracking public perceptions of transit in the Washington area since 1995. All of this research involved relatively large scale surveys, and most involved sophisticated survey analysis.

Conjoint analysis was used to identify market segments that represent new targets of opportunity for WMATA; causal attitude modeling was used to identify the advertising messages that are most likely to influence members of these groups to use transit; and conjoint analysis was used to guide the development and pricing of new services.

WMATA's current television campaign is directly drawn from the research. To counter the prevalent idea that transit – particularly bus transit – is for lower income people, television commercials feature well-dressed professionals riding transit and stress that the system is used by “millions of people like you.” The commercials also convey the idea that Metrorail and Metrobus are convenient ways to travel to popular destinations, including entertainment, sporting events and airports, countering the widely-held idea that transit is not “easy and convenient to use” and “doesn't go where you want to go.”

“The research results have been used time and time again in development of advertising and marketing campaigns, in fine tuning service planning options and in planning for future markets. Although there has been no formal evaluation, we are so confident in the research that it has guided our decisions,” said Donna Murray, WMATA Transportation Market Analyst.

Research findings have also helped the Metro system configure and price new transit services and set priorities for service improvements and new initiatives, like fare simplification and the use of smart card technologies. A study of smart cards and other technologies that make it easier for people to pay for transit suggested that they had improved the image of transit in two critical areas – ease and convenience of use and congruency with consumer transportation needs and lifestyles.

Convincing Consumers to Eat Five Servings of Fruits and Vegetables a Day

Today, most of us know that we should try to eat at least five servings of fruits and vegetables a day to reduce our risk of cancer and improve our health. However, in a 1991 benchmark survey for the “5 A Day” campaign², just 8% of U.S. adults indicated

² A collaborative effort between the National Cancer Institute and the fruit and vegetable industry

that five or more servings of fruits and vegetables were necessary for good health, and two-thirds said that two or fewer servings were sufficient.³

By 1993, just two years later, there had been a profound change: The percentage of U.S. adults who knew that they should eat five or more servings of fruits and vegetables a day had increased from 8% to 29% (more than three and one half times). There were corresponding declines in the number of Americans who believed that one or fewer servings (34% to 10%) or two servings (32% to 21%) were adequate.

These changes are particularly impressive in light of the fact that the “5 A Day” campaign used no paid advertising. Instead, it used such public relations vehicles as press conferences, interviews, a newsletter sent to 1,000 food editors, and public service announcements. Campaign planners did, however, use survey research and focus groups, along with secondary analyses of existing data, to identify target audiences and evaluate message and media strategies.

Persuading Teenagers Not to Smoke

Back in the mid 1960s, when the U.S. Surgeon General’s Report on Smoking was first released, smoking was ubiquitous in homes, workplaces, restaurants and even college classrooms. Today, even in the coldest weather, smokers gather in sad little clusters outside workplaces and on the decks and patios of homes.

This didn’t happen overnight. The mere knowledge that smoking was a big risk factor in lung cancer and other maladies did not have a large effect on smoking at first. In fact, it only began to happen as campaign planners began to fund and use research that helped them understand why people smoke and what might make them abstain. Early research revealed that social concerns – bad breath, disapproval and loss of friends – are often a

³ For more information, please see: R. Craig Lefebvre, Lynne Doner, Cecile Johnston, Kay Loughrey, George I. Balch and Sharyn M. Sutton, “Use of Database Marketing and Consumer-based Health Communication in Message Design” in *Designing Health Messages: Approaches from Communication Theory and Public Health Practices*. Edward Maibach and Roxanne Bruiselle Parrott (eds.), Sage: 1995.

more powerful reason to abstain from smoking than is fear of contracting cancer.⁴ Campaigns using these themes, along with evidence about the dangers of second hand smoke, have done much to make smokers feel like pariahs and have motivated many to either quit or not start smoking.

However, social marketers now face a growing challenge: Teenage smoking has increased nearly one-third since 1991, and more than 36% of high school students used some form of tobacco in 1997.⁵

In response, the public relations firm Porter Novelli and the advertising agency Crispin Porter & Bogusky launched the Truth Campaign, aimed at youth. This national effort began in Florida, and the Florida Truth Campaign is a well-documented success. Porter Novelli estimates that, since the campaign started two years ago, the number of youth smokers has decreased by:

- 54% among Florida youth age 11 to 14
- 24% among Florida youth age 15 to 17
- Nearly 80,000 among all Florida youth

The campaign incorporated research and evaluation at every step, with baseline survey research and three tracking surveys. The research inspired the primary campaign theme: Tuning into the natural rebelliousness of youth and empowering them to rebel against Big Tobacco.

The latest tracking surveys show that the Florida Truth Campaign has played a major role in preventing youth from starting to smoke cigarettes. Awareness of the campaign is nearly universal, and teenagers who have continued to abstain from smoking during the study period were 2.3 times more likely to agree with the campaign's primary message that "tobacco companies are just trying to use them" than were those who started to smoke during the same time period. In addition, the number of Florida youth who think

⁴ Perloff, Richard M. *The Dynamics of Persuasion*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, N.J., 1993, p. 325.

⁵ www.porternovelli.com/news/archives_story.cfm?newsId=11

“tobacco companies try to get young people to smoke because older people quit smoking or die” has increased by 24 percentage points, compared to a 2 percentage point decrease nationwide.

Refocusing the Mission of a Wildlife Conservation Organization

A recent National Wildlife Federation (NWF) membership survey conducted by our firm included a cluster Analysis that showed that there are three segments of members – Environmental Activists, who are interested in contacting public officials and the media about environmental issues; the Home-centered, who are most interested in backyard wildlife habitats and other activities that can be carried out at home or close to home; and Green Consumers, who are most interested in conserving energy and buying environmentally friendly products. When we completed the study in early 2001, NWF had programs in place to serve Environmental Activists and Home-centered members, but it had no program to serve Green Consumers, who constitute about one-third of its membership.

NWF is now developing a new set of programs and activities for Green Consumers. “This research affected our mission and the way we carry our mission to the public,” said Tom McGuire, NWF director of Marketing and Development. “It helped us see our membership in a different light.”

Setting New Priorities for America’s Roadways

During the past few years, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) has made a major investment in improving the nation’s roadways, and that effort is evident in increased satisfaction levels.

However, the most recent study⁶ showed growing dissatisfaction among residents of certain urban areas where traffic congestion is a major problem, and dissatisfaction was

⁶ Reported in *Moving Ahead: The American Public Speaks on Roadways and Transportation in Communities*, U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, 2001. QS&A Research and Strategy conducted survey research under subcontract to Science Applications International Corporation.

strongly linked to delays experienced because of roadwork, accidents and general traffic congestion. This study was based on two large-scale telephone surveys, one of which tracked the results of an earlier survey.

This research helped FHWA to focus its efforts in the areas that would have the greatest impact on traveler satisfaction. These included:

- Using intelligent transportation systems and other innovations to improve traffic flow
- Providing information to travelers so they can avoid congested roadways
- Using more efficient methods for roadwork so that it can be completed faster
- Clearing accidents more quickly.

Why Research Works in Social – and Other Types of – Marketing

When research is done right, it provides a reality check on the common wisdom. People in organizations often develop common ways of looking at the world, frequently based on a set of unquestioned assumptions. Research provides a new perspective that not only corrects faulty assumptions but also suggests new ideas and new opportunities. And the power of research is compounded when studies are designed to address strategic questions so that the results show not just what is happening but also why it is happening and what might be done to change the situation.

Author Biography

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