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Notes from the Field

Place: Where the Action Is

BY LYNNE DONER LOTENBERG

A few issues ago, Bill Smith (2009) and Mike Rothschild (2009) expressed concerns about how the marketing mix variable *product* is conceptualized in social marketing. They both noted that the increasingly common practice of defining product as the behavior we wish to change is conceptually flawed and narrows how we think about solutions. If behavior is our product, we tend to narrowly focus on how to convince individuals to engage in that behavior, which often leads to an overreliance on communication and educational approaches. We may not consider how new or improved products or services, pricing, or distribution may enable or facilitate our desired behavior change. Bill and Mike offered alternative conceptualizations of product: a tool for behavior change (Smith, 2009) or a bundle of benefits an individual receives in exchange for engaging in a behavior or series of behaviors (Rothschild, 2009).

I would like to encourage us to take an equally thoughtful look at *place*, which has long been the most overlooked and misunderstood P in social marketing. Although I continually hope we have moved beyond the days when people either dismissed place as irrelevant to social marketing or thought it referred to media channels, I still see many social marketing efforts that clearly overlooked the possibilities and constraints presented by place.

Definitions

Let’s start by considering some definitions of place. The first is from a commercial marketing text; the latter two from social marketing texts.

Place includes company activities that make the product available to target consumers.

(Kotler & Armstrong, 2004, p. 56)
Place is where and when the target market will perform the desired behavior, acquire any related tangible objects, and receive any associated services.

(Kotler & Lee, 2008, p. 247)

Place is “the channel(s) through which products are distributed – or situations in which behavior can or does occur.”

(Siegel & Lotenberg, 2007, p. 223)

So, place refers to where people are (or could be) engaging in your desired behavior. It also refers to channels of distribution, the network of organizations between your institution and the people you want to reach. This column focuses mostly on the former. Place is a powerful force in behavior change: It can provide an opportunity to take action, increase (or decrease) the convenience of taking that action, and differentiate competitors’ offerings by delivering different bundles of benefits (e.g., consider the different benefits obtained by going to McDonald’s versus Starbucks for coffee). In fact, place is so influential that I recommend you consider it first. Why?

- It widens your focus beyond the individual.
- It forces you outside the all-too-common “our target market will make a rational decision to do what’s best for them” mindset.
- It can take some of the burden off motivation.

By looking at behavior and the environment in which it occurs, you’re more likely to identify critical problems – and possible solutions.

Widening Your Focus
Sometimes when we consider behavior change, we focus too closely on the individual and neglect to consider the physical, social, and cultural environments in which that behavior occurs. This may happen if we conceptualize product as the behavior we want to change (Smith, 2009) or it may happen because we start where we are comfortable or where we believe our mandate is. For example, a communications office might decide to tackle a problem with a communication campaign directed toward the group that needs to make the behavior change or a group that influences them. This is an imminently reasonable idea, except: what if the problem can’t be solved by communications? Or if communication is part of the solution, but not all of it?
Starting with place can help you systematically look at the factors that influence whether an individual takes a particular action – including the factors external to the individual that can facilitate or prohibit a behavior. As a practitioner, I find it easiest to understand what’s going on and then develop the full range of appropriate strategies if I consider three questions in turn:

1. Does the target group have the **opportunity** to engage in the desired behavior?
2. Does the target group have the **motivation** to engage in the desired behavior?
3. Does the target group have the **ability** to engage in the desired behavior?

These questions reflect the three variables that, across many commonly used theories and models, have been shown to be necessary and sufficient to produce any behavior: “A person must have a strong **positive intention** to perform the behavior in question; the individual must have the **skills necessary** to carry out the behavior; and the **environment must provide a context of opportunity, or be free from constraints**, such that the behavior can occur” (Fishbein et al., 2001, p. 5; italics added).

Thinking of these three factors as opportunity, motivation, and ability comes from Mike Rothschild (1999) who uses the framework and then delineates whether marketing, education, and/or legal and regulatory approaches will be useful for each possible combination of motivation, opportunity, and ability.

It’s critically important to consider how place can influence each factor. I look at opportunity first for because it **must** be present for the behavior to occur; without it, addressing motivation or ability is pointless. For example, if you want a target group to make healthier food choices, even if you manage to motivate members and give them the skills to choose appropriately, they can’t do it if the choices aren’t available where they purchase food. Sometimes a marketing approach can create or improve opportunity (through, for example, food purveyors offering new products). At other times, it can be created or improved through regulatory approaches (e.g., a school district or federal government might mandate the availability of certain foods in school cafeterias). Yet there are plenty of programs calling themselves social marketing that attempt to increase motivation or ability rather than address lack of opportunity.

Place can also impact motivation and ability. Target groups may be more motivated to take a particular action in some situations and less motivated in others, as different situations can alter the costs and benefits associated with a behavior in many ways. Perceived normative pressure, emotional reactions (whether taking the action would feel good or bad), time pressures, availability
of competitive offerings, and habit are just a few of the many factors that can differ. Consider how a person might choose food and drink for lunch when making it at home, when ordering at a fast-food drive-thru while on the way to a meeting, and when going to a nice restaurant for a special celebration. Similarly, a target group may have the ability to perform a behavior in one situation but not in others. For example, a new mother may have the skills to breastfeed at home, but she may need to develop self-advocacy or some other skillset to successfully transfer this behavior to the workplace.

**Limits of Viewing Behavior as Rational and Consistent**

Social and commercial marketing – and many theories and models of behavior and behavior change – are based on the traditional economic theory of exchange: Individuals will engage in a behavior or series of behaviors to receive something they value. For a long time, the underlying premise was that individuals considered costs and the benefits and then made a rational decision to act in their best interest. But – and this is a big but – humans often act in seemingly irrational ways and their decisions can vary greatly depending on context. If we look only at the exchange, we develop tunnel vision and fail to explicitly consider the myriad variables that impact decisions or that may cause that decision to change over time. In particular, we may not adequately address factors that affect individuals’ behavior without their conscious awareness. Behavioral economists are teaching us that in many instances it is more effective to change some aspect of place rather than rely on individuals to make rational choices.

For example, let us consider a local school system trying to prevent or reduce obesity. One option is to motivate students to exercise more or make healthier choices at lunch (and give them the opportunities and abilities to do both). However, many factors impact what and how much we eat without our conscious awareness: default meal combinations, portion sizes, container sizes, glass shape, salience (how visible or easy to reach something is), and the number of tempting, less healthful menu options, to name a few. Using this information, the local school system could design a place strategy that does not involve directly motivating students or increasing their abilities and expect it to have some success: They could arrange cafeteria lines so healthier, lower calorie foods were most visible and easiest to access; serve lower calorie beverages in short, wide glasses and higher calorie ones in tall, thin glasses; use larger bowls or plates for servings of fruits and vegetables and small plates for desserts and other less nutritious foods; and offer fewer tempting but less healthful foods. These ideas and many others are explored in more detail by Just, Mancino, and Wansink (2007) and Thaler and Sunstein (2008).
To develop successful social marketing efforts, we can and should start by considering costs and benefits associated with the behavior. But we need to look beyond the individual and the moment of decision to identify the forces acting on the person when he or she engages in or forgoes the behavior.

**Increasing Convenience and Appeal**

Many times people are not sufficiently motivated to make the behavior change we want them to make. We can use place strategies to increase motivation by making the experience deliver benefits they value – for example, a mammography center might offer a pleasant, comfortable waiting room, snacks and beverages, and adequate privacy. We can also use place strategies to reduce costs by making the desirable behavior easier – ideally easier than any of the alternatives – so target groups won’t need as much motivation. Some of the “nudges” described in the previous section work this way, particularly making the desired behavior the default choice or organizing the physical environment in a particular way.

At other times, it may be necessary to develop a new product or service to sufficiently improve place. Sometimes people technically have the opportunity to engage in the behavior, but they do not because associated costs are too high. For example, recycling didn’t really catch on in the United States until communities started offering curbside pickup. Few people were motivated enough to load their recyclables into a car and drive them to a recycling center; far more were willing to recycle when it fit into their existing take-out-the-trash routine. There are many other instances where the costs – in travel time, making arrangements for child care, or forgoing a pleasurable activity, etc. – are simply too high and target groups won’t engage in the behavior unless we reduce the costs by developing a new product or service that brings place to them (mammography vans, workplace flu shots, etc.) or otherwise increase convenience, typically by fitting more easily into their existing routines.

**Summary**

If you begin your planning process by considering place, you are more likely to identify the best intervention points. Plus, you will automatically use all those marketing principles we all talk about. Start with place and you’ll first step into your target group members’ shoes and look through their eyes (customer focus/audience orientation). You’ll identify what they are doing now and what their other choices are (competition), and how each choice fulfills their wants or needs (benefits and self-interest). You’ll see where they are when they can or do engage in the behavior and what could make it easier or harder to do so.
Along the way, you will likely discover that these factors vary for different groups of people and so what you need to change to facilitate the desired behavior also varies (segmentation). When it is time to develop strategies, considering place will give you ideas about how to best create, communicate about, and deliver a product that the target market will value. Place is, indeed, where the action is.

References


