Identifying Appropriate Motivations to Encourage People to Adopt Healthy Nutrition and Physical Activity Behaviours

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ABSTRACT

Many social marketing campaigns use threat (or fear) appeals to promote healthy behaviours, for example, 'Quit smoking. You'll soon stop dying for a cigarette', and 'Speed kills'. These messages use the emotion of fear to persuade consumers to try to avoid problems such as lung cancer or injury from a car accident. This study explored people's motivations for adopting healthy nutrition and physical activity behaviours. Four motivations were particularly salient: a) Problem removal: managing illness and injury; b) Problem avoidance: avoiding illness, injury, premature death, harm to unborn baby; c) Self approval: feeling better about self; and d) Sensory gratification: mood elevation. The results suggest that, while problem avoidance is an appropriate motivation it is not the only one. Consumers may be motivated by a range of factors, some of them positive, that may be equally effective. In the same way that consumers assess marketing messages relating to goods and services, consumers of social marketing messages can choose to pay attention to the sorts of messages that work for them, and decide to disregard others that may be less helpful.

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Introduction

Social marketers attempt to persuade people to 'buy' ideas rather than products or services, such as the idea of adopting a healthy behaviour (e.g., quitting smoking). Many social marketing campaigns use threat (or fear) appeals to promote healthy behaviours, for example, 'Quit smoking. You'll soon stop dying for a cigarette', 'Slip! Slop! Slap! Don't die in the sun this summer', and

'Speed kills'. These messages appeal to the negative motivation of problem avoidance and use fear arousal to persuade. However, for some health behaviours positive appeals may also be effective. The study described in this article explored what people said were the main motivators for eating healthy foods and taking up physical activity, and what they said had influenced them in the past. Participants in four focus groups who had already been screened for healthy behaviours were asked to talk about their reasons for making a change to either their diet or their physical activity in the past year.

Results

Generally people believed that they respond better to positive rather than negative appeals. The most salient positive motivations were self approval, that is, feeling better about oneself, raising self-esteem, and sensory gratification, that is, feeling better generally, improving mood. The negative motivation that is most frequently used in social marketing health campaigns is problem avoidance. This was acknowledged as an important motivator. However, another negative motivation that is less frequently used also appeared to be salient: problem removal (managing pain, illness). People reported using healthy behaviours to improve existing medical conditions. Perhaps marketers have intuitively felt that physical symptoms such as pain or feeling ill would act as a persistent reminder for people with an existing condition and there would be no need of a campaign appealing to the motivation of problem removal. However, we know that some conditions such as obesity affect people, sometimes quite severely, but they still engage in unhealthy behaviours that contribute to the condition.

Many people want to make lifestyle changes and actively seek information about health issues, demonstrating an openness to being motivated to change. People may benefit from reflecting on their own responses to social marketing messages regarding nutrition and physical activity. Some individuals may discover that when they are exposed to fear-arousing messages they feel an urge to protect themselves from harm and make lifestyle changes, while positive messages fail to make much impression. Other people may experience an increase in anxiety and feelings of helplessness after hearing fear-arousing messages, leading to less motivation to make changes. These people may feel more hopeful and encouraged by positive messages emphasising the positive benefits of change. In the same way that consumers assess marketing messages relating to goods and services, consumers of social marketing messages can choose to pay attention to the sorts of messages that work for them, and decide to disregard others that may be less helpful.

Conclusion

People in our focus groups who had made healthy behaviour decisions said they were motivated by more than just fear. Problem avoidance is an appropriate motivation but it is not the only one. Social marketing practitioners could use a range of other motivations that may be equally effective. First, appealing to positive motivations of self approval and sensory gratification may be effective. Second, the negative motivation of problem removal could be considered for some campaigns. We suggest that there may be three benefits in using a range of stimulus factors where it is appropriate to do so. First, we increase the opportunity for innovative and creative campaigns based on alternative appeals that can more easily cut through advertising 'clutter'. Second, we reserve maximising the effective use of fear in other contexts, such as road safety, where it is difficult to see how to use positive appeals. Third, we may avoid reaching a cumulative saturation effect with so many fear appeals on so many diverse topics.