

Your Quick Guide to Community-Based Social Marketing

Introduction

What is **Community-Based Social Marketing (CBSM)**? The CBSM method is based in social psychology and draws from the idea that sustainable behavior change is most effective when it involves direct contact with people and is carried out at the community level. This guide provides a “crash course” in the CBSM method, providing essential knowledge from Doug McKenzie-Mohr’s *Fostering Sustainable Behavior: An Introduction to Community-Based Social Marketing*. Mohr has pioneered the use of CBSM to promote sustainable behavior change. His book is available free online on [this page](#).

“The emergence of community-based social marketing can be traced to a growing understanding that programs that rely heavily or exclusively on media or informational advertising can be effective in creating public awareness and understanding of issues related to sustainability, but are limited in their ability to foster behavior change.”

Why do people use information-based campaigns? It’s relatively easy to print and distribute materials. One may expect that by increasing knowledge and building support for a subject, behavior change will occur; after all, media ads and distributing flyers are common methods of promoting certain behaviors. However, studies repeatedly show that information by itself has little to no effect on behavior. Advertising is normally only effective for getting consumers to choose one brand over another, not creating or changing behaviors. In some cases, information-based campaigns can even draw attention to and increase the frequency of an undesirable behavior.

Community-based Social Marketing has been proven to be effective at fostering sustainable behavior change. Its practical approach includes five major steps that are discussed in this guide.

STEP 1: Select Behaviors

Identify a specific, **indivisible behavior** you want to change. Divisible behaviors are actions that can be divided into further behaviors. For example, you might want to change your coworker’s waste disposal behaviors so as to minimize waste. This broad behavior is divisible, and can be divided into small, more specific behaviors, such as “properly recycling,” “properly disposing of landfill trash,” or “properly composting.” Each of these has its own barriers so it is important to consider them separately. When selecting behaviors to target, make sure they are indivisible. Behaviors also should be “end-state.” **End-state behaviors** are actions that actually produce the desired environmental outcome. For example, the purchase of compact fluorescent light bulbs is not an end-state behavior. The installation of these bulbs is an end-state behavior because it will produce the desired outcome of reducing the use of electricity.

STEP 2: Identify Behaviors & Benefits

Barriers inhibit individuals from engaging in a desired behavior while benefits are motivating factors. In order to implement effective behavior-change campaigns, you will need to identify the barriers and benefits affecting your situation. There are four key steps to identifying barriers and benefits to a behavior: research, observe, conduct a focus group, and conduct a survey.

STEP 2: Identify Behaviors & Benefits

Research. See if anyone has attempted to change this behavior before. Review relevant articles and reports.

Observe people engaging in the behavior you wish to promote as well as the behavior you are trying to discourage. But, make sure not observe in an intrusive way that could influence the people you are observing.

Conduct a focus group. Focus groups are a small group of people from your target audience that you can invite to discuss the behavior and issues you have identified. Make sure to provide some kind of incentive (such as food) for the focus group participants. People who are currently engaging in the behavior should be in one group, while those who are not engaging in the behavior should be in a separate group. The goal of the focus group is to learn from participants about why or why not they practice the desired behavior.

Conduct a survey on a random sample of your target audience to build on information from the focus group.

1. Clarify your objective by describing what your survey is meant to accomplish.
2. Write the survey using closed-ended questions and aim for the survey to take less than 10 minutes. It is ideal to use six or seven point scales because they allow for a broader range of answers; however, make sure to provide endpoints on the ends of your scale (1 = never, 6 = always).
3. When evaluating your own questions you should be sure that the questions are answerable, that they will mean the same thing to everyone, and that people will be willing to answer.
4. Conduct the survey. Make sure to minimize the time period in which you conduct the survey to reduce the chances that a real-world event occurs and changes the perception of the topic.

For a comprehensive guide to conducting a survey, read the survey section of Mackenzie-Mohr's book under sections "determining impact, probability, and penetration." Additionally, look at [this quick resource](#) from Harvard University's Program on Survey Research.

STEP 3: Identify Behaviors & Benefits

When developing strategy principles, it's important to (1) select tools based on barriers and benefits (2) scrutinize your design with focus group feedback and (3) pilot test your strategy. To achieve behavior change there are 7 areas in which you can focus:

Commitment

Getting people to commit to one particular action can often lead to larger behavioral changes. Research has shown that when people commit to an action either personally or publicly, they are more likely to follow through on that behavior into the future. This ties into people's innate desire to appear trustworthy to their peers and consistent with their own internal commitments.

To help utilize commitment strategies as a way to foster sustainable behavior, use tactics including **verbal, group, or public pledges**. An example of a verbal commitment is asking a group of registered voters prior to an election, "Do you expect you will vote or not?" In this particular study, all subjects agreed they would vote, and compared to voters who were not asked the same question, their likelihood of voting increased by 41%.

The "**foot-in-the-door**" technique also uses commitment strategies by getting someone to agree to a small action, so the individual is more likely to perform to a larger action within the same theme. For example, individuals who agree to post signage about recycling would be more likely to support additional initiatives like shoe or light bulb recycling in their office building.

Social Norms

Individuals tend to adopt the behavior of others. This is true even in low-stakes situations, such as a person deciding whether to take the escalator or the stairs. To use social norms to support sustainable behaviors, the norm must be noticeable and presented when the targeted behavior is going to occur. For example, an entrance display in a supermarket that conveys the percentage of shoppers who intentionally purchase local or organic products will encourage other shoppers to act similarly.

It is more effective to emphasize desirable actions positively, rather than discourage harmful actions. For example, in an attempt to stop visitors from taking petrified wood pieces, the staff at Petrified Forest National Park issued a warning to stop the behavior. The result was a greater number of people taking wood because it seemed like a common action. A replacement sign could have encouraged visitors to take pictures, with no mention of removing wood.

Social Diffusion

Social Diffusion is important for behavior change because it involves how quickly the desired behavior is adopted and how widespread the behavior becomes. Important factors of social diffusion are visibility, and durability. For example, when multiple households in a neighborhood placed stickers on their recycling bins that said, “we compost too!” their commitment to composting was taken up by other neighbors. Without the sticker, the action would have been invisible. With the sticker, the behavior became visible and appeared to be a norm.

Prompts

The use of visual or auditory prompts can greatly increase engagement in a sustainable behavior. Because there are many environmentally-friendly behaviors that people simply forget, reminders are often helpful. To be effective, the prompt must be noticeable, self-explanatory, and displayed as close as possible to the targeted behavior. Similar to social norms, prompts should be used to encourage engagement in positive behaviors rather than to discourage harmful actions. Unlike social norms or commitment, the purpose of a prompt is to remind us to engage in a behavior that we are already predisposed to do, not to change attitudes. For example, waste receptacles serve as a prompt for the proper disposal of garbage. Simply making a litter receptacle more visually interesting can more than double the amount of litter deposited.

Communication

Communication is also key to achieving behavior change. We use persuasive communication in our day-to-day interactions with others, but how do we strengthen communication to foster sustainability specifically? First, look into and understand the behaviors and attitudes of your intended audience before developing your message. Second, messages need to be “vivid, personal, and concrete” as well as easy to remember and specific. The individual or organization that is the messenger needs to be credible to the target audience and the message should be delivered in person whenever possible.

It is important to always have suggestions following a threatening message so there is a path of action to work to fix the situation. For instance, if you are using the threat of global warming and its consequences, you should provide your audience with information on using alternative transportation, or increasing the energy efficiency of their homes.

Finally, remember to frame your message as what is lost by neglecting to act versus what you are saving by acting. A loss by inaction is more persuasive to people than taking action to achieve savings. It is more effective to say, “If you don’t compost you’ll lose money by having to pay more to have your garbage collected” than, “you should compost because you’ll save money on garbage collection fees.”

Incentives

Appropriate incentives can work wonders in boosting individuals' motivation to adopt new behaviors. Incentives can encourage people to perform current actions more effectively, or to begin an activity in which they otherwise would not engage. However, incentives need to be visible and large enough to be taken seriously. Incentives are most effective when presented at the time the behavior should occur; for example, charging for the use of plastic shopping bags at checkout brings attention to the cost of using disposable bags and increases motivation to bring reusable bags. Incentives should be used to reward positive behavior, as disincentives (punishments) do not directly lead to a positive alternative action. Finally, be cautious about removing incentives, when a reward is taken away there may be less motivation for the action than there previously was with no reward.

Convenience

Making sustainable actions more convenient, or unsustainable action less convenient and more expensive, can lead to behavior change. In fact, no matter how well you address other internal barriers (using the 6 other areas discussed above) if the behavior is time-consuming or seems troublesome, people will be unlikely to adopt it. Convenience involves changing people's perception or increasing familiarity with the action. For example, commuters often think mass transit is an inconvenient option compared to driving to work. However, an employer can make mass transit more convenient by providing financial subsidies and discounts and ensuring that mass transit-users have an emergency ride home as a safety net in the event of a personal or family emergency.

STEP 4: Pilot the Strategy

Think of piloting as a "test run" or opportunity to work out the bugs before committing to carrying out a strategy broadly. Although piloting is important, it takes a lot of time and resources. Here are some abbreviated tips for any piloting you do.

- Try to use a minimum of two groups to conduct your pilot when possible and make sure the changes you observe are a result of your intervention, not coincidental.
- Make sure to accurately measure the behavior change outcomes when evaluating the success of a pilot.
- Carefully examine numbers and records that denote a change in behavior.
- Confirm that you are actually able to the change a behavior before you implement it across your community.

STEP 5: Broad Scale Implementation

Before this step, collect baseline information on the present level of adoption for the desired behavior. This includes observations or reliable records.. Once you begin implementation, make sure to collect information to determine the long-term impact. Finally, get the word out! Communicating the outcomes is an important way to gain trust and share your results.

Take-Aways

- Behavior change is the cornerstone of sustainability
- Information-based campaigns are convenient, but they do not have a great effect on changing behaviors
- Community-based social marketing is a better alternative to ineffective information-based campaigns
- One must overcome resistance in themselves and colleagues and meet challenges head-on to be effective