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Upstream social marketing strategy: An integrated marketing communications approach

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Abstract   This article provides an organized approach for managers to develop social marketing strategies that target upstream decision and policy makers. A conceptual application model and five-stage process is presented for an upstream social marketing strategy based on integrated marketing communications (IMC). IMC concepts are described in the context of social marketing, as well as specific stages for creating an IMC social marketing strategy; these include target audience research and determination, channel selection and integration, strategic message creation, and measurement and control. A central and novel feature of the IMC social marketing strategy model is the simultaneous targeting of an upstream decision maker and influential peripheral (upstream) audiences in order to triangulate and increase campaign effectiveness. An IMC approach to upstream social marketing ensures consistent, persuasive messages specifically crafted for the selected target audiences and coordinated through precise channels to maximize impact. This multi-channel, multi-audience approach to message creation and channel selection produces synergies that increase the potential to influence an upstream decision/ policy maker.
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1. Upstream without a paddle . . . or a strategy

There are currently more ways of reaching a target audience than ever before. Print, radio, television, face-to-face, Facebook, blogs, Twitter, YouTube, websites—the list goes on and on. The pressure to make the right marketing decisions, whether choosing the most appropriate channels to use or identifying which messages will be most effective, can be daunting. Indeed, audiences use multiple channels at the same time and the same message often does not translate across channels. This complexity often means that the majority of social marketing communication efforts are not

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integrated. Instead, a disparate and dispersed group of activities is the norm.

Small and medium-sized organizations, in particular, tend to focus on just one or two promotional elements. It is not uncommon for the marketing efforts of a small organization to consist of a website and some print ads. The Advertising Research Foundation recently conducted a study of 5,000 advertising campaigns for 1,000 brands and found that 60% of these campaigns relied on two or fewer mediums (Neff, 2016). Larger organizations are often characterized by a lack of integration as well. Companies tend to hire one agency to help with direct marketing efforts, another for public relations, another for sales promotions, and yet another for digital/internet marketing. In many cases, physical or virtual walls separate these promotional elements; the end result is a morass of activities (see Figure 1) that are loosely coordinated. Poorly coordinated, nonintegrated marketing results from diverse marketing messaging; multiple versions of logos and slogans; various colors, shapes, and images; and different positioning approaches. Organizations that do not consider a coordinated and integrated strategy to social marketing risk wasting their time and resources on activities that fall short of desired goals and objectives.

Applying an integrated marketing communications (IMC) foundation for the design and execution of an upstream social marketing strategy is a robust solution to navigate today's complex communications landscape effectively. This is accomplished through a systematic process that begins with detailed research on target audiences, the right channel selections, and effective messaging. The term upstream refers to "those who shape the structural and environmental conditions within society, including politicians, policy makers, civil servants, decision makers, regulators, managers, educators, and the media" (Gordon, 2013, p. 1529).

This audience can be difficult to target because the members are themselves a source of influence through their ability to make decisions and/or create policies. This can mean that there are various

barriers and gatekeepers not associated with downstream audiences. Downstream audiences are individuals directly targeted for impact. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) targets smokers in hopes of influencing them to quit smoking and/or refrain from smoking around children. Conversely, if the CDC targeted a state lawmaker in hopes of increasing the legal smoking age, the agency would be going after an upstream audience, which may be much more difficult to reach and influence. Part of the challenge of changing impressions in the minds of those who have the power to make changes is their reluctance to make decisions that may negatively affect their position and/or popularity with constituents. In addition to constituents, large donors representing various industry interests or political party affiliations play a role in the influencing of an upstream audience. A strategic approach for an upstream social marketing endeavor means that marketers are focused on a long-term, well-researched approach that will inherently bring with it more realistic expectations and effectiveness.

Central to this approach is the development of communications tailored to individuals who themselves hold significance and persuasion for upstream targets and may share in the desire for behavioral change. In this way, messages are focused simultaneously on upstream audiences from multiple peripheral targets and channels. This provides a multi-tier messaging approach to ensure upstream social marketing audiences receive a consistent message from not only a segment that may hold little influence (e.g., an activist base), but also from ones that may hold significant influence (e.g., their own voter district). Leveraging synergy is an essential part of multimedia communications (Naik & Raman, 2003). One of the core premises of IMC-based message design and channel selection is the understanding that the messages reinforce each other and create a larger impact together than they would otherwise.

1.1. IMC and social marketing design

Synergy implies that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. By having one overall promotional strategy and closely coordinating all six elements of IMC—(1) advertising, (2) direct marketing, (3) sales promotions, (4) public relations, (5) digital/internet marketing, and (6) personal selling—social marketers can hope to achieve a multiplicative impact from individual promotional efforts. By carefully managing the six elements of IMC, social marketers can also expect to improve perceptions of trustworthiness. Figure 2 illustrates the synergy of IMC as the solution to nonintegrated social marketing efforts.

Figure 1.   Typical nonintegrated approach to social marketing communications
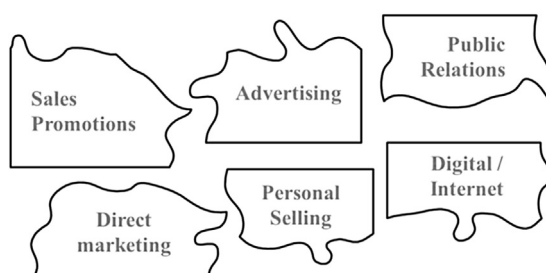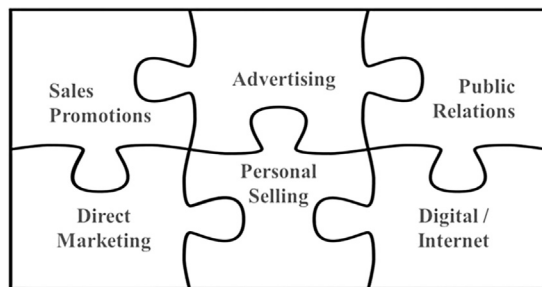
Figure 2. Integrated approach to social marketing communications

Having consistent marketing messaging, one logo, one slogan, and one positioning approach also contributes to a unified communications strategy that can work in all mediums and promotional elements. Moreover, these coordinated activities improve the prospect of behavior change by increasing the effectiveness as understood through the response process.

1.2. IMC activities for producing responses

Marketing objectives—sales volume, market share, return on investment, and profitability—are different than IMC objectives, which work in favor of both upstream and downstream social marketing objectives. The heart of IMC promotions is communication. Appropriate communication objectives are awareness, knowledge, liking, preference, conviction, and behavior. This is often called a hierarchy of effects model, which maps out the response process a receiver of a message goes through before actual behavior. This is the goal of upstream social marketing efforts.

One premise of the response process is that communications take time to produce results. In addition, this model presumes that awareness and knowledge require some cognitive processing. An affective process is involved in terms of liking and preferring a particular message or point of view and that action results from both the cognitive and affective. Another aspect of this model is that different elements of IMC can be very effective and specifically targeted at integral steps in the response process. For example, advertising is an excellent tool for raising awareness and conveying knowledge about a social issue. Public relations is an excellent tool for building liking and preference. Personal selling (necessitating face-to-face interaction) is best used to convert preference and conviction into behavior. Thus, a closer look at the six IMC elements and their potential application for upstream social marketing will help address

Gordon's (2013, p. 1525) lament: "examples and guidance on how upstream social marketing can be effectively employed . . . is lacking."

2. The IMC toolkit

2.1. Advertising

Advertising is a nonpersonal communication that is paid for and identified by a specific sponsor. Advertising by definition requires a message to communicate and some type of media platform to deliver the message. Marketing messaging is required for all promotional elements, which is why the process of creating advertising is an essential first step in IMC. Effectively, advertising is the 'C' in IMC.

Good advertising begins with a clear identification of the target audience. Both upstream and downstream social marketing aim to change behavior (Hastings, MacFadyen, & Anderson, 2000). The key differences are in target audience and the approach used to reach the target audience. Upstream social marketing targets policy makers (e.g., legislators, regulators), educators, and the media. The approach developed also identifies periphery targets that hold potential influence on the primary upstream target. In this way, multiple targeted advertising appeals may be useful for upstream social marketing. Popularity appeals can be effective with policy makers, in addition to the conducting of polling or the use of existing polling to show that a large portion of a policy maker's constituents favors a particular regulation. For example, higher taxes on cigarette products have proven to be very effective in reducing smoking behavior. The movement for states to increase tobacco taxes involved graphic counter-marketing advertisements that helped to sway public opinion about tobacco usage. Society as a whole has deemed smoking a public health hazard, which helped provide a majority of legislators to act.

Integrating this approach with multiple, well-researched targets might involve the inclusion of local media. Leveraging news reports on scientific findings, such as the causal connection between higher cigarette taxes and a reduction in smoking, provides additional pressure on the decision makers and affords valuable content that can be redirected through messages via periphery influencers.

2.2. Direct marketing

While advertising is comprised of nonpersonal communications, direct marketing seeks to create a

one-to-one personal relationship with the target audience. Again, the goal is to generate a response. The engine behind direct marketing is a sophisticated database. The era of big data allows social marketers to know more than ever before about a target audience, which can make social marketing messaging more effective. The company Epsilon boasts that it has 1,500 pieces of information on over 200 million Americans (Kroft, 2016). While data typically is purchased for downstream audiences, it could be used to target upstream audiences. Social marketers can also supplement their own data. For example, a database of policy makers friendly to a particular social marketing perspective can be generated based on voting records and news articles.

Direct marketing can also play a role in an influence-the-influencer strategy (Hein, 2007). A database of constituents friendly to a social marketing cause can be leveraged by asking them to personally contact an upstream target audience in order to reinforce existing efforts. For example, the president of Arizona State University recently sent out a letter to alumni, encouraging them to contact Arizona lawmakers about the funding of higher education. The direct marketing letter included contact information and the messaging to use when contacting the policy makers on behalf of the university.

2.3. Sales promotions

Sales promotions are marketing activities that provide an extra incentive designed to stimulate immediate action or to speed up the implementation of an action that is already planned. There are two types of sales promotions: consumer-oriented and trade-oriented, which correspond to a downstream and upstream social marketing application. Consumer-oriented sales promotions are aimed downstream at so-called end customers. Consumer-oriented sales promotions can be considered a pull strategy that creates demand at a grassroots level. Conversely, and more suited for upstream application, trade-oriented sales promotions are aimed at intermediaries that can include key decision and policy makers. Trade-oriented promotions can be used to incentivize an intermediary to push the social marketing program to the intended audience(s). This type of promotion can also take the form of an influence-the-influencer strategy. An upstream social marketing campaign may have a very difficult time reaching the desired audience given various gatekeeper roles. In these cases, campaigns to influence those who can get access would be valuable.

The most applicable trade-oriented applications for upstream social marketing are trade shows and other event marketing. There are many conferences and events that media managers attend. Likewise, educators have a wide variety of conferences where social marketers can gain access and influence. Trade show/event marketing involves the creation of an attractive and welcoming booth, paying for booth space that will get maximum traffic and attention, training personnel on interacting with upstream audiences one-on-one, and generally providing exposure to the social marketing agenda. In a political context, there are many ways to gain influence with policy makers and lawmakers. Hosting parties at political conventions has long been used by corporations seeking influence. Social causes such as alternative energy can use the trade-oriented approach to get their messages upstream.

2.4. Public relations/MPR

Public relations is certainly not new to social marketing (McKie & Toledano, 2008). In recent years, much has been written about the traditional perspective of public relations as compared to its new role (Ries & Ries, 2004; Scott, 2007). The traditional perspective is about building mutually beneficial relationships and earning public understanding and acceptance. The traditional role views public relations as a function that is separate and distinct from marketing. The new role of public relations includes the traditional view, but is also much broader and market-oriented (see Kohli & Jaworski, 1990). This new approach is sometimes referred to as marketing public relations (MPR) (Moriarty, 1994; Papasolomou et al., 2014). MPR is not distinct from marketing, but instead works closely with the other elements of the promotions mix in an integrated manner. Rather than being a distinct department, MPR works inside the marketing department and often reports to the marketing director.

Upstream social marketing can benefit from MPR. A core part of marketing public relations is corporate advertising, which involves image advertising, event sponsorships, advocacy advertising, and cause-related advertising. Image advertising can strengthen the image of the social marketing organization and potentially dissuade negative attributes of the social marketing organization in order to lessen mental resistance from upstream target audiences. Event sponsorships can also be an excellent way to get a social marketing message in front of difficult-to-reach audiences. For example, sponsoring nonprofit and charity events with similar worldviews on a social marketing topic (e.g., breast

cancer and lung cancer awareness) provides an effective opportunity to cross audiences who otherwise may not have been exposed to the other's message.

Advocacy advertising is a powerful social marketing tool that is used by both for-profit and nonprofit organizations. In 2000, the Italian apparel company Benneton ran a campaign in the U.S. called We, On Death Row. The advertisements humanized people on death row with the intent of swaying public opinion against the death penalty. The intent was clearly to ignite a national debate and ultimately influence policy and lawmakers. Likewise, nonprofits such as zoos have long run advocacy advertisements to raise awareness and move people to action toward preserving animal habitats.

Cause-related advertising is a form of marketing public relations that often ties donations for a particular social cause to a for-profit company's sales or profits. Ben and Jerry's is a classic example of cause-related advertising. The original promotion told customers that a portion of profits went to save the rain forests, to support Vermont dairy farmers, and to provide higher-than-average pay for Ben & Jerry's employees. The so-called linked prosperity gained much attention in college classrooms and the company became an early poster-child for social marketing.

2.5. Digital/internet marketing

The internet has become a significant and multifaceted tool of IMC. One of the most noteworthy advantages of utilizing digital assets (e.g., websites, blogs, micro-blogs) is the two-way, interactive nature of digital communications. Inherent in digital platforms' facilitation of two-way engagement is the reality that the social marketer must give up some control. Internet users can choose what content they wish to be exposed to, respond to, and share. In addition, social marketers who design websites and social media platforms that are primarily used for downstream audiences must also consider that upstream audiences can use the same resource. This creates the potential to target upstream, downstream, and peripheral targets (potentially from both upstream and downstream) for increased coordinated influence.

In recent years, the White House created We The People, a program via which citizens can directly petition government. If any petition receives 100,000 signatures, the presidential administration vowed to respond to the issue raised by the petition (Gruber, 2014). This is a powerful upstream tactic to focus attention on a social marketing issue and gain consideration at the highest levels of government.

Social media is also a much-relied upon channel for IMC. Most recent estimates state that half of all adults in the U.S. have a Facebook account and check it at least once per month (Perrin, 2015). That user group encompasses millions of adults who cross every conceivable combination of downstream, upstream, and peripheral targets. Moreover, it has never been easier to track, measure, and analyze these highly targeted online advertisements for increased effect.
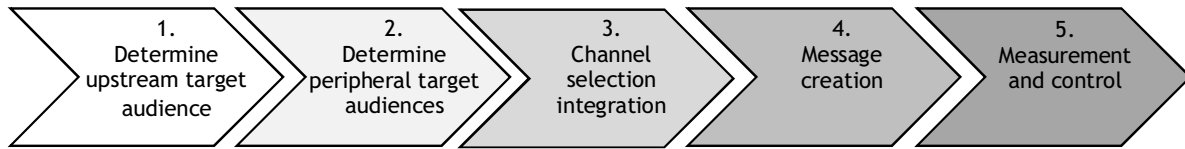
2.6. Personal selling

Personal selling involves person-to-person communication. Because this element of IMC is usually very expensive on a per-contact basis, all of the other elements of the promotions mix must be used to support the personal selling effort. Personal selling is best used to convert preference and conviction into behavior and relies heavily on the other elements of the promotions mix. For example, without direct marketing and database support, personal selling efforts cannot be optimized. Without advertising that creates awareness and knowledge about a social marketing issue, personal selling likely is wasted. Without MPR that creates likability, personal selling is not as effective as it could be. In addition, personal selling is essential for trade-oriented sales promotions to work. Trade show and conference marketing requires a strong personal selling effort, making the person-to-person communications effective. A very useful application of this IMC element in social marketing is lobbyist activity. However, a great deal of marketing messaging and marketing collateral must be created before lobbyist activity can be effective.

3. Five stages for upstream social marketing strategy

Figure 3 depicts a five-stage process for preparing and executing an IMC and multi-target approach to upstream social marketing. This process is supplemented by Figure 4, which is an application model that allows a visual representation of the various coordinated messages for the main upstream audience and peripheral audiences. The model begins with the IMC social marketer, an individual who has followed the five-stage process (see Figure 3) for creating an IMC upstream social marketing strategy. Each arrow originating from the IMC social marketer represents a well-researched, coordinated message communicated through a specific channel best suited for reaching that audience. Each message is specifically designed using an IMC element most

Figure 3.   Upstream social marketing process

appropriate for the target audience, which includes a primary decision maker and two peripheral target audiences that were chosen for their potential influence. We will apply the hypothetical example of an IMC social marketing campaign to promote drug rehabilitation versus incarceration as a practical way to discuss each stage of the strategy.

3.1. Stage one: Determine the upstream target audience

Often, the upstream target audience will be an obvious choice, depending on the overall decision/policy change in question. It is important at this stage to understand outside influences that may affect this choice. For example, researching
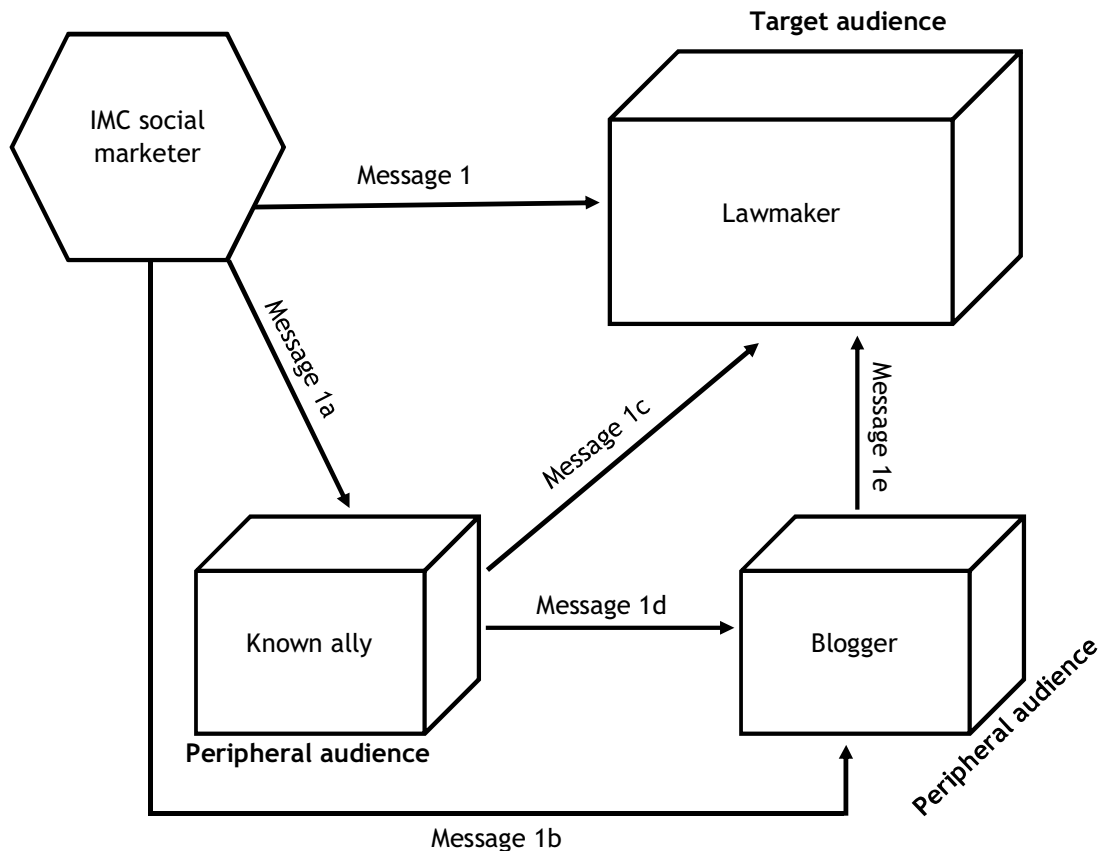
whether or not a lobbyist group (which in this case would be the private prison industry that profits from incarceration) is working against the movement in question (drug rehabilitation), which can hinder message effectiveness.

It is possible to use the application model with multiple upstream and peripheral targets coinciding with multiple complementary and coordinated messages (e.g., Message 1, 1a, 2, 2a). For the present example, the upstream target is a lawmaker at the state level.

3.2. Stage two: Determine peripheral target audiences

This stage will possibly take more time, thought, and insight than stage one because it is necessary to

Figure 4.   Upstream social marketing application example

have a deeper, more detailed understanding of individuals who may have more potential influence on the upstream target audience. This requires an individual who not only has potential sway with the upstream target audience, but who also has either an existing relationship or access to create a relationship. It is very possible that peripheral target audiences may themselves be upstream in nature. The first peripheral target in Figure 4 is a known ally of the lawmaker. Research has shown that the lawmakers have worked together on past bills. The known ally has an interest in reducing incarceration costs in the state and may be interested in rehabilitation as an alternative to incarceration. For the second peripheral target, the decision was made to target a local blogger with a strong following via digital/internet marketing. This individual is active politically and sympathetic to policy change in the area of drug rehabilitation.

Research cannot be emphasized enough at this stage, especially given the potential loss of messaging control that a social marketing manager must risk when dealing with social media channels (see Section 2.5). The reality is that a poor decision here can quickly spiral into a full-fledged media crisis. If a blogger turns out to be overly committed to the social marketing movement, he/she may take it upon him/herself to continue to produce messages that are perhaps inflammatory, discriminatory, or militant, which will ultimately reflect poorly on the movement itself and on the social marketer working for the desired change. A solid understanding of past blog posts as well as the temperament and personality of the chosen peripheral audience is important.

3.3. Stage three: Channel selection and integration

Part and parcel of a richly detailed target audience selection is an understanding of the best ways to get the intended message to the recipients. Figure 4 illustrates an approach that requires multiple messages and channels. This element of the IMC process can be tricky if not taken seriously. For example, a common channel for reaching lawmakers is a face-to-face meeting (other contexts may warrant the decision whether a personal or nonpersonal channel would be most effective). A personal meeting is a likely choice for message 1 to reach the targeted lawmaker. However, there are built-in barriers to scheduling a meeting with most lawmakers that may make it very difficult. If the target audience is aware of previous work done on behalf of the social marketing campaign with which they do not agree, they may choose not to meet at all. It may be

necessary to speak to peripheral audiences first in order to gauge whether a face-to-face meeting with the primary upstream audience will be advantageous or even possible.

Message 1a for the known ally could also be scheduled as a face-to-face meeting and followed up with a direct mailing or series of emails (pulling together both direct and digital marketing tactics). Message 1b, targeted to the blogger, may be best communicated through email and followed up with a direct phone call if possible.

At this point, the known ally may be encouraged to create and share his/her own message 1c—which still captures the core content of message 1a—directly with the upstream target audience, the lawmaker. One way to accomplish this would be to explicitly secure buy-in and the known ally's commitment to cooperate. Ideally, the known ally is willing to reinforce message 1b with his/her message 1d directly to the blogger. Once the blogger has created his/her message 1e, a blog post about the importance of drug rehabilitation rather than incarceration could potentially reach and influence other upstream, as well as downstream, supporters.

3.4. Stage four: Message creation

A messaging strategy that follows an IMC approach requires the same deliberate process as channel selection. Messages must be tailored for the specific purpose of conveying the required information in the most compelling way possible, through the most efficient and appropriate channel(s), without contradicting existing messages, and with as little potential for distortion and clutter as possible. One of the chief challenges in message creation is the potential for noise, which is sometimes referred to as clutter. This may require the IMC social marketer to experiment with various styles and voices of messages in order to find the best way to communicate with his/her target audiences and not get lost in the sea of competing messages and distractions faced in everyday life.

Emotional appeals, such as fear and empathy, are an often-used and affective device for message creation. The choice to use fear appeals (LaTour & Zahra, 1989) should require the IMC social marketer understand that the level of severity of the fear appeal can affect persuasion (Sternthal & Craig, 1974). However, recent research into the use of fear-based messaging in social marketing has pointed to methodological shortcomings and ethical considerations—especially those messages that are threat-driven (Hastings, Stead, & Webb, 2004). Research has also shown that other negative

appeals such as guilt and shame have a tendency to promote inaction rather than compliance in response to social marketing messages (Brennan & Binney, 2010).

Empathy appeals are effective in provoking audiences to make the decision to engage. The use of emotional versus rational messages contributes to feelings of empathy and a desire to take action (Bagozzi & Moore, 1994). However, the use of emotional messaging must be carefully pretested in order to navigate ethically questionable and negative emotion-based messages successfully. In particular, negative emotional messages used to generate empathy need to be applied in a specific context where help can be offered by the audience. In the context of Figure 4, this may require personalizing the communication by giving a name and back story to a specific individual who is incarcerated for drug charges and the potential for hope through the opportunity of rehabilitation.

3.5. Stage five: Measurement and control

Central to the strategic nature involved in an IMC approach to social marketing is the need for course correction and iterative message/channel/target design. All aspects of the first four stages will have to be tested, analyzed, and improved, either in real-world execution or in pilot tests. This is the context in which having goals, objectives, baseline measures, and field metrics is crucial to refine existing and future endeavors. This is especially true in the case of nonprofits and other organizations that value campaigns for the good of individuals and society at large, but have very limited funds and/or rely on donations.

Realistic and achievable campaign objectives should be decided prior to the implementation of the campaign with milestones throughout the timeline of the campaign. The use of a bottom-up budgeting approach entails setting objectives for the upstream social marketing campaign first and then calculating the tasks needed to achieve those objectives. If the cost is too high, the objectives will need to be revisited and brought into alignment with available funding. This iterative approach keeps expectations in line with the investments being made for a campaign.

4. Reaching an upstream audience

This article outlines a practical, five-stage approach for addressing an overlooked and critical issue in the area of social marketing, namely, targeting upstream decision and policy makers. This IMC approach is suited perfectly to guide managers through the process of designing more effective social marketing campaigns that target upstream audiences. It is possible that the effective design and execution of an upstream social marketing campaign will create simultaneous impact on downstream audiences as well. This is true in the digital environment where bloggers and well-known advocates have created enormous followings and can wield far-reaching influence. The use of IMC in designing social marketing strategies can increase effectiveness and efficiency, and hopefully help in the difficult process of influencing the influencers.

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