

*Interdisciplinary Perspective*

# Recreating Communities to Support Active Living: A New Role for Social Marketing

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## Synopsis

*The lack of routine physical activity has become an all too pervasive health threat in the United States. Social marketing can be used directly to promote increased physical activity among people who have access to active living options (e.g., safe and convenient sidewalks or bike paths). A second, albeit indirect, use of social marketing to promote physical activity — and the focus of this article — involves promoting behaviors that influence the built environment for the purpose of increasing people's access to active living options. This use of social marketing involves changing the behavior of consumers, developers, distribution channels (e.g., real estate agents) and policy makers. The approach offers public health and other organizations a disciplined, consumer-focused means of mobilizing their available resources in a manner that maximizes the odds of creating active living communities. These means include understanding the competition, understanding target markets, creating mutually beneficial exchanges, segmenting markets and targeting them based on anticipated return. This article identifies specific opportunities for applying the social marketing approach to create active living communities, and identifies opportunities at the state and national level that will enhance the effectiveness of local efforts. (Am J Health Promot 2003;18[1]:114–119.)*

## INTRODUCTION

The design of the built environment can have substantial impact on human health, both beneficial and deleterious.<sup>1</sup> Although little recognized until recently, one now pervasive harmful impact of the built environment in the United States involves community development that “may deter or entirely prevent individuals from making choices that promote healthy behaviors, especially routine physical

activity.”<sup>2</sup> Unlike many lesser risks that have captivated the public's attention in the current postmodern era,<sup>3</sup> the negative impact of the built environment on our ability to live actively has thus far gone largely unnoticed by citizens and policy makers alike. This may reflect, in large measure, the fact that the health community has only recently awakened to the issue and its associated risks.<sup>4</sup> The lack of public outcry may also reflect inherent biases in both human information processing<sup>5</sup> and in media reporting patterns<sup>6</sup> that predispose the public to attend to risks that are novel and externally imposed (e.g., vaccine safety, food safety, potentially tainted mail), rather than risks that appear mundane and of our own creation (e.g., lack of physical activity).

Public outcry or not, changes can be made in the built environment to better support active living. *The Guide to Community Preventive Services* (Community Guide), for example, strongly recommends creating or improving access to places for physical activity (e.g., sidewalks, walking and biking trails, community exercise facilities), in combination with informational outreach to make people aware of these resources.<sup>7,8</sup> Researchers with the Community Guide are also currently developing recommendations regarding transportation policy and infrastructure changes to promote nonmotorized transit, as well urban planning approaches such as zoning and land use. In specific terms, these recommendations are likely to include the following:

- Enabling active transportation, ideally walking or bicycling, alone or in combination with mass transit;
- Encouraging attractive medium- and high-density residential development options in mixed-use neighborhoods; and
- Increasing readily accessible greenspace that encourages recreational physical activity.

At the heart of each of these active-living community objectives is the need to influence and support people's behavior—including consumers, developers, policy makers, and others. Therefore, our ability to change the built environment for the purpose of promoting active living is intimately tied to our ability to influence behavior.

## Continuum of Behavior Management Options

Rothschild<sup>9</sup> articulated a continuum of options through which to pursue population-based behavior change goals

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**Table 1**  
**Continuum of Education, Marketing, and Law\***

Use Educational Approaches to Manage Behavior When	Use Social Marketing Approaches to Manage Behavior When	Use Law-based Approaches to Manage Behavior When
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Target market is prone to behave as desired</li> <li>● Self-interest and benefits of the behavior are easily conveyed to target market.</li> <li>● There is no or weak competition.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Target market is neither prone nor resistant to the behavior being promoted</li> <li>● Self-interest and benefits can be conveyed to target market by enhancing and managing the offer.</li> <li>● The competition is active.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Target market is resistant to behave as desired.</li> <li>● Self-interest and benefits cannot be conveyed to target market.</li> <li>● The competition is unmanageable.</li> </ul>
Active-living examples	Active-living examples	Active-living examples
Consumers Inform motivated audiences about opportunities they were not previously aware of, or had not considered (e.g., the ability to take a bike onto the subway).	Consumers Enhance motivation by improving (e.g., installing bike carriers on the front of public buses) and promoting the available options (e.g., offering incentives to use bike carriers).	Developers Require the development of improved options (e.g., sidewalks and bike paths).
Policy makers Inform local officials of innovative approaches being used in other communities.	Policy makers Provide language for model policies based on an analysis of benefits and barriers as perceived by the targeted policy makers.	

\* Adapted from Reference 9, Rothchild 1999.<sup>9</sup>

(Table 1). At one end of the continuum are people who are prone to adopt a recommended behavior because of their willingness to see it as being in their self-interest. Educational campaigns alone are generally sufficient to create behavior change among members of populations at this end of the continuum. In the middle of the continuum are those populations who are neither prone nor resistant to the recommended behavior. Social marketing can be used to elicit behavior change in these populations by increasing the perceived benefits, reducing the perceived barriers, or in other ways improving the opportunities to adopt the recommended behavior, thereby enhancing the perceived value of the recommended behavior. Populations at the far end of the continuum are resistant to the recommended behavior because they do not see it as being in their self-interest. To create behavior change in these latter populations, law- or policy-based approaches may be required (e.g., mandating seat belt use in automobiles).

Rothschild's<sup>9</sup> continuum assumes that the recommended behavior is a freely available option to consumers. This assumption is only partly true in the case of active living. Specifically, active-living options are not freely available when the built environment "deter(s) or entirely prevent(s) individuals from making choices that promote . . . routine physical activity."<sup>2</sup> Selecting a home that offers safe and convenient access to sidewalks, bikeways, trails, and mass transportation is a case in point: only 4% of the nation's roads are served by transit, and fewer than 50% of Americans live within a quarter mile of a transit stop.<sup>10</sup> This may explain why nearly 75% of all excursions less than 1 mile are made in an automobile.<sup>11</sup>

This situation—that active-living options are not freely available to many Americans—necessitates that we consider two distinct uses of social marketing. Through the first approach, social marketing programs can be used to *directly* promote active-living behaviors among consumers who have access to these options. This traditional use of social marketing has been described by many authors<sup>9,12,13</sup> and is not the focus of this article. The second approach to social marketing involves *indirectly* promoting active living by promoting behaviors that shape the built environment in a manner that increases access to active-living options. This latter use of social marketing—changing behaviors that positively shape the built environment—is the principal focus of this article. It is the more challenging of the two approaches to promoting active living through social marketing in that it requires eliciting behavior changes from consumers (with regard to where to live, how to commute and shop, and how to spend recreational time); critical segments of the business community (including real estate developers and transportation operators); and public officials (for example, to create incentives for active commuting and mixed-used residential development). It may also, however, be the approach with the greatest potential to promote active living over the long-term.

#### Social Marketing Defined

A clear understanding of the social marketing concept is essential to grasping its potential for creating active-living communities. Maibach et al.<sup>12</sup> operationally define social marketing as

. . . a process that attempts to create voluntary exchange

between a marketing organization and members of a target market based on mutual fulfillment of self-interest. The marketing organization uses its resources to understand the perceived interests of target market members, to enhance and deliver the package of benefits associated with a product, service, or idea, and to reduce barriers that interfere with its adoption or maintenance. Target market members, in turn, expend their resources (e.g., money, time, effort) in exchange for the offer when it provides clear advantages over alternative behaviors.

Social marketing is generally used as a means of eliciting behavior change from consumers (e.g., people with suboptimal levels of physical activity); however, the approach has no such inherent limitations.<sup>14</sup> The target market in social marketing can also be policy makers, real estate developers, transportation planners, and others who influence the active-living options available to the public.

The role of the marketing organization invoked in the definition above can be played by any organization working in the public's interest, such as a local health department, transportation authority, community hospital, or even community members themselves. Doing so, however, may require the marketing organization to plan and execute programs in unfamiliar ways.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, adopting a marketing approach to promote active-living communities will also require public health organizations to work with a new group of partners including urban planners, transportation planners, architects, and real estate developers.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Critical Attributes of a Social Marketing Approach**

To promote active-living communities through a social marketing approach, marketing organizations must become facile with the following critical steps.

**Understanding the Competition.** Offers to the consumer are never made in a vacuum. The competition consists of the myriad offers being made to a target market (e.g., “buy our SUV and you will be safe and feel secure”), as well as their preference for the status quo (e.g., “I’ve always lived in a single family home in the suburbs.”). To effectively offer an option that shapes the built environment in a beneficial manner (e.g., higher density mixed-use housing or mass transit choices), the marketing organization must understand not only the perceived benefits and barriers associated with the recommended option, but also the benefits and barriers associated with competing options, as perceived by members of the target market. With regard to policy change, the competition is other policies—and their supporters—that preempt or undermine the recommended policy.

**Understanding Target Markets.** Consumer research is a critical part of social marketing in that it enables the marketing organization to understand how best to use its resources—and those of its partners—to make an attractive offer to members of a target market. Through consumer research, the marketing organization can identify

- The bundle of benefits associated with a given offer

that is most attractive, and therefore motivating, to target market members;

- The costs (i.e., money, time, effort, self-concept) and other barriers to adoption or maintenance of the behavior that are most important to target market members, and how these costs might be reduced; and
- How best to communicate about, or promote, the offer so that target market members become aware of and interested in it.

**Creating Mutually Beneficial Exchanges.** Marketing transactions are entirely voluntary on the part of all involved parties. For consumers, producers, and distribution channels (i.e., individuals or organizations who facilitate the transaction between the marketing organization and the target market) to have sufficient motivation to participate in the transaction, they must perceive the benefits to them to outweigh the costs. To effectively create active-living community options, marketing organizations must consider and accommodate both the wants and needs of the end consumer, the developer (if applicable), and key distribution channels. Consider, for example, expanding market demand for walkable, mass transit accessible communities in a metropolitan area where workers are becoming tired of long commutes on congested highways. Consumer demand can be thwarted, or redirected, without the active support of developers and members of the distribution channel. Home builders, for example, may prefer to build properties in low density suburban developments for a variety of reasons including fewer zoning restrictions, larger return on investment, and their perception of consumer preferences. Similarly, real estate agents may be reluctant to recommend nontraditional properties for fear that buyer satisfaction will be low. To harness home builders’ and real estate agents’ considerable enabling potential, their motivations must be understood and accommodated.

**Segmenting Markets and Targeting Based on Anticipated Return.** Segmentation is the process of using consumer research to identify groups of people (i.e., target markets stratified by age, income, geography, etc.) who share certain relevant attributes such that they are likely to respond to a given offer in a similar manner. Psycho-behavioral segmentation—segmenting audiences based on *what they are doing* (i.e., their current behavior) and *why* (i.e., the relevant psychosocial and environmental antecedents)—may offer a viable approach for marketing organizations seeking to promote offers that shape the built environment in an activity-friendly manner.<sup>15,16</sup> When a marketing organization conducts segmentation research, it can make informed decisions about how best to focus its resources on one or more of the identified target markets. Segmenting developers, distribution channel members, and policy makers can also help marketing organizations identify opportunities that are likely to have a high return on investment. For example, based on their advertisements that promote walking more and using the car less, Volvo, an automobile manufacturer, may be willing to collaborate with the public health community to share marketing insights and cross-promoting active living of

fers. Bicycle manufacturers, walking shoe manufacturers, and other companies in the recreation industry may also be prime prospects for comarketing initiatives.

### **Applying Social Marketing to Create Active-living Communities**

Unfortunately, the published literature has few examples of social marketing programs intended to create active-living communities. McKenzie-Mohr<sup>17,18</sup> has published a number of excellent conceptual overviews on the potential to apply social marketing for sustainability, but there is little published empirical literature on the topic. Web-published case studies demonstrate that social marketing has been applied to promote active-living and sustainability objectives in a variety of municipalities with promising results,<sup>19–21</sup> including reductions in vehicle engine idling<sup>22</sup>; increased walking, cycling, and bus usage<sup>23</sup>; and reduction of single-occupant vehicle use.<sup>24,25</sup> For the potential of social marketing to promote active-living communities to be realized, however, it is critical to move beyond good case studies in selected (usually favorable) policy environments to develop marketing-based models that can be generalized and mainstreamed.

A number of major opportunities are ripe for immediate pursuit by the public health community. These include competitive analyses, segmentation analyses, developing target market profiles, and creating demand and reducing barriers for active living offers among consumers and policy makers.

**Conduct Competitive Analyses.** For any given active-living community objective (e.g., promoting mixed-use medium density developments), the competitive set must be identified and assessed. What are the competing options, and how do consumers see the benefits and costs associated with each? How did consumers reconcile benefits vs. costs to make the decision to pursue their current behavior? How do developers and distribution channel members (e.g., real estate agents) influence consumers' decisions?

**Conduct Segmentation Analyses.** For each market (i.e., individual home buyers, renters of commercial space, policy makers) and each potential group of distribution channel members (e.g., city planners, transportation planners, real estate agents, architects), who are the prime prospects for a given active-living community offering (e.g., a transit system, a mixed-use housing development, a network of sidewalks and bicycle trails)? In other words, which target markets are likely to yield the greatest return? Do certain target markets have a high propensity to adopt a spectrum of active-living community options, or must each objective be pursued through an objective-specific approach to segmentation?

**Profile Target Markets.** Once target markets are identified, their perceptions and predispositions regarding the full spectrum of active-living community objectives should be clearly described. Which health, leisure, financial, social, and other benefits do consumers most want? Which costs (e.g., time, money, effort) and other barriers serve as the

most important impediments to motivation and action? Which incentives will most encourage consumers to adopt the behavior on a trial basis? How can convenience of the offer be improved? How should promotional efforts (e.g., advertising, news media, one-on-one conversations with intermediaries) be used to increase awareness of, and interest in, active-living options?

**Create Demand.** When there is consumer demand for a product, producers compete to bring that product to the market efficiently and effectively. As consumer demand grows, so grows the number of producers willing to invest resources to meet the demand. A recent national survey of home developers and builders indicates that producers perceive significant consumer demand for homes consistent with active living and “smart growth” objectives: 40% of the producers believed that 10% to 24.9% of the households in their market are interested in “alternative development,” and 37% of producers believed that 25% or more of the households in their market are interested.<sup>26</sup> Social marketing techniques (e.g., promotional campaigns) can be used to increase consumer demand beyond current rates; as demand increases, there will be increased incentive for developers to respond with appropriate active living-compatible home offerings.

Targeting policy makers is a second demand creation strategy wholly compatible with consumer demand creation initiatives. Social marketing techniques (e.g., polling, letter writing/call-in campaigns) can be used to make the benefits of supporting active-living community policies more salient to policy makers, thereby enhancing demand for such policies among relevant decision-makers. A simultaneous demand creation initiative that targets the public and policy makers (i.e., a push-pull marketing strategy) may offer the most expeditious path to change in the built environment because of multiple potential synergistic effects including the reduction of policy-related barriers (see below).

**Reduce Barriers (or Costs).** Understanding the barriers to creating active-living communities, and how to reduce them, is a final important area of opportunity for social marketing approaches. For example, the survey of home developers and builders identified two critical barriers: local regulations (e.g., zoning ordinances, subdivision regulations, parking standards, or street width requirements) and neighborhood opposition. As described above, consumer demand can be used as a strategy to encourage policy makers to change prohibitive regulations. Targeting local zoning and ordinance officials with information on active-living community policies, and the benefits associated with those policies, is a second and more direct means of reducing barriers associated with local regulations. Neutralizing the opposition of neighbors can be accomplished by determining how best to demonstrate the self-interest (i.e., a compelling package of benefits) associated with active-living community offerings (such as transit stops, mixed-income housing, and sidewalks) in established neighborhoods.

## **Leadership Opportunities for State and National Organizations**

Because most land use and transportation decisions are ultimately local decisions, the opportunities and burdens of creating active-living communities fall mostly on municipalities, local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and others at the local level. To adopt a social marketing approach, however, these organizations must be able to generate, or in some other manner have access to, the types of competitive and consumer research described above. Unfortunately, the time and dollar costs associated with conducting these analyses can be a critical barrier for municipalities and local NGOs that are otherwise willing to apply social marketing approaches to promote active-living communities.

This potentially pervasive local-level barrier, however, creates a substantial opportunity for federal and state agencies, philanthropic foundations, and national NGOs seeking to promote active-living communities. They can invest their financial resources in conducting and actively disseminating consumer and competitive research that will enable myriad local organizations to adopt a marketing-based approach to planning and creating active-living communities. This type of investment at the state and national level can create enormous economies of scale for local program planning.

Creating demand for active-living options, and reducing neighborhood opposition to such options, is a second area in which state and national organizations can focus their investments to expedite progress by local organizations. Public awareness and promotion campaigns of this type, such as promoting the benefits of physical activity, have been the most visible manifestation of social marketing in the health arena to date.

Barrier reduction at the local public policy level represents a third promising area for investment by state and national organizations. Certain local barriers—for example, zoning and other development ordinances—are likely to be similar from community to community. Large-scale campaigns targeting the public officials responsible for these ordinances may therefore offer a highly cost-effective means of reducing a critical set of barriers in numerous communities and in an expeditious manner.

## **Learning From Other Successful Initiatives**

Two highly visible campaigns—one primarily targeting the public and health care professionals, and the other primarily targeting policy makers—can serve as useful case studies and provide direction on how to harness social marketing to create active-living communities.

The National High Blood Pressure Education Program, a program coordinated by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI), provides an especially apt analogy for the consumer behavior change challenges associated with active living.<sup>27</sup> For 3 decades, NHLBI has invested in consumer research (with high blood pressure sufferers, family members, and health care professionals) and has shared this research and corresponding behavior change strategies widely with other health care organizations in the public, nonprofit, and for-profit sectors. In addition,

NHLBI developed and implemented a series of national public education campaigns to stimulate public demand for blood pressure screening and for behaviors associated with blood pressure control. This sustained social marketing initiative significantly contributed to national improvements in blood pressure control and subsequent reductions in associated morbidity and mortality, largely because NHLBI's investments paved the way for synergistic investments in hypertension control on the part of myriad program partners.

The Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids provides an excellent example of using social marketing approaches to create behavior change among policy makers. The campaign has focused relentlessly on the competition (i.e., the tobacco industry) and taken aggressive action to increase the cost to policy makers of supporting policies friendly to the competition. Through its actions, and by mobilizing the community of activists, the campaign also seeks to create benefits for pivotal policy makers who are willing to support critical antitobacco policies. Although little has been published on the campaign's strategies and tactics, internal documents,<sup>28</sup> reviews by funders,<sup>29</sup> and conversations with current and former staff (W. Novelli, personal communication, 2002) indicate that members of the public health community interested in active-living communities can learn much by making the effort to study the campaign's methods.

## **CONCLUSION**

Killingsworth and Schmid<sup>30</sup> have argued that small changes in community design and transportation policies can lead to big changes in the amount of physical activity achieved by members of a population. Social marketing approaches can contribute to this effort both directly, by helping to enhance the perceived value associated with currently available active-living options, and indirectly, by helping to reshape communities so that more (rather than fewer) active-living options are available to every member of the community, regardless of socioeconomic status.

Adopting a marketing-based approach to program planning will not come easily for many organizations that currently plan their programs using other approaches. Social marketing, however, is neither mysterious nor counterintuitive once it becomes clear that the approach is based on developing programs that help all parties involved advance their own self-interests.

Any organization can use the concepts described above to conduct competitive and segmentation analyses, profile target markets, create demand, and reduce barriers. Although social marketing is admittedly a research-intensive planning and program-development process, even organizations with few financial resources can benefit by applying the processes within their financial constraints.<sup>13</sup>

Hopefully, however, state and national organizations interested in promoting active-living communities will recognize their direct self-interests in the three recommendations made above. By conducting competitive and consumer research that can be applied at the local level, and

by conducting large-scale demand creation and barrier reduction campaigns, state and national organizations may leverage their own resources, as well as the modest resources to be found in many local governments and NGOs, into large system-wide benefits for our citizens and our communities. In this manner, the potential of social marketing to create active-living communities can be fully realized.

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