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Cleaning Up Dirty Politics: A Social Marketing Perspective on New Jersey's Clean Elections Program

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Abstract - This paper reviews the outcome of a state electoral reform initiative in terms of the four-stage behavior change process used by social marketers to gauge the effectiveness of their techniques. While the Clean Elections initiative was moderately successful in its Action and Contemplation stages, the author argues that realization of its full potential could be significantly hastened by utilizing the social marketing tools of segmentation, communications research and pretesting.

Key Words - social marketing; political marketing

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Practitioners - While the Clean Elections initiative was moderately successful in its Action and Contemplation stages, the author argues that realization of its full potential could be significantly hastened by utilizing the social marketing tools of segmentation, communications research

Introduction

Marketing is about facilitating exchange between at least two parties, both of whom must perceive that the benefits of participation outweigh the costs. In commercial marketing, a successful exchange results in profit for the marketer. In social marketing, success is defined in terms of measurable behavior change that helps solve a social problem, improve a social condition, or otherwise aid society at large.

New Jersey's 2007 pilot program of public financing for legislative campaigns, known as Clean Elections, can be viewed as a social marketing effort that met with moderate success. But a number of challenges were exposed in the course of the effort that help explain why efforts in 2009 to renew it were unsuccessful. Analyzing these challenges from a social marketing perspective may help advocates to overcome them, not only in relation to Clean Elections,

but also in the interests of other ambitious and well-meaning social change initiatives.

Background

To the extent that policy planners have heard of social marketing, it is frequently understood as little more than public service advertising. This is not surprising in view of early scholarship in the field, most of which characterized it simply as a tool to promote and enhance the appeal of a social idea (Kotler and Roberto 1989).

But to equate social marketing with advertising alone is to both oversimplify it, and to seriously underestimate its potential to achieve the more ambitious goal of behavior change. Indeed, its strongest contemporary advocates take the position that there is no social marketing success without action. A seminal paper by Kotler and Zaltman (1979), generally credited with launching social marketing as a distinct discipline, explicitly called for active implementation and control of its programs in the marketplace. As defined by Andreasen 2002, 7): “What makes social marketing potentially unique is that it (1) holds behavior change as its ‘bottom line,’ (2) therefore is fanatically customer-driven, and (3) emphasizes creating attractive exchanges that encourage behavior.” Importantly, he and other contemporary scholars also stress that effective social marketing focuses not only on the benefit side of the proposed exchange – convincing the target audience that the transaction will improve their lives – but also on minimizing its real or perceived costs.

As currently and comprehensively defined, a social marketing campaign should encompass certain tactics and techniques that are common to commercial marketing campaigns. These include doing consumer research and pretesting to help develop communication materials; segmenting target audiences; customizing the four P’s (product, price, promotion, place) as much as possible; and attending to competing behaviors. Social marketing can also be implemented simultaneously with other change strategies. For example, social marketing can complement programs of structural change, which target laws and institutions instead of (or in addition to) individuals. Its messages can be effectively targeted not only to individuals or segments of citizens, but also to policy makers and other stakeholders (Hastings et.al. 2000).

Both in planning the campaign and evaluating outcomes, it is helpful to think of the behavior change sought in social marketing not as a single occurrence but as a process. The four stages of this process include:

- (1) Precontemplation – initial consideration of the behavior
- (2) Contemplation – evaluation of the behavior
- (3) Action – engaging in the behavior
- (4) Maintenance – reinforcing and continuing the behavior

Clean Elections in New Jersey

In the last decade, New Jersey has been plagued by a wave of public corruption. Some of the criminal behavior has been linked to the high cost of running for office in the state; because of its location, New Jersey candidates are largely dependent on the expensive New York and Philadelphia media markets. To raise campaign cash, public officials have been caught engaging in thievery, bribery, extortion and kickback schemes. Voter anger and disgust with the political process have been manifested, in part, by electoral turnouts well below 40% in legislative races.

On common practice is known as “pay to play.” It is technically legal though generally perceived as unethical. Candidates take outside campaign contributions from companies and professionals who seek public contracts, then deliver those contracts in a quid pro quo that is usually difficult to prove but believed to exist at every level of government. Most experts agree that “pay to play” ultimately burdens taxpayers with subpar, overly expensive public services, an outcome dubbed New Jersey’s “corruption tax.”

Clean Elections, a program of public financing for legislative campaigns, grew out of public clamor for an end to “pay to play.” The idea is that participating candidates receive a fixed, predictable amount of money to run their races, in return for rejecting all contributions from businesses or lobbyists and any amount greater than \$10 from individual donors.

Three other states have recently mounted legislative Clean Elections programs: Arizona, Maine and Connecticut. Vermont has a program, but it is limited to gubernatorial candidates. In 2012, New Mexico and North Carolina offered public funding in campaigns for the judiciary and for certain statewide offices (National Conference of State Legislatures 2012). While cross-state comparisons are difficult because of wide variations in structure and funding, New Jersey’s effort was, on most measures, the most complex and expensive at the time (New Jersey Citizens Clean Elections Commission 2007; Levin 2006).

New Jersey’s first trial run of Clean Elections took place in 2005, in two election districts. To qualify for public funding, candidates were required to obtain 1500 contributions of either \$5 or \$30 in less than three months. There were a myriad of restrictions on the collection process, plus a set of reporting and disclosure rules so unwieldy that almost no one in the program could follow them. In the absence of adequate publicity, voters were ill informed and confused. In the end, only two of ten prospective candidates met the requirements to participate, and the experiment was generally judged a failure.

A vastly simplified Clean Elections pilot was tried again in 2007, in three districts. Candidates were required to obtain only 800 contributions, all in the amount of \$10. A \$600,000 public education program was mounted. This time, all nine prospective clean candidates qualified for the funding.

Voter attitudes in the Clean Elections districts were assessed via a public opinion poll, fielded by independent university pollsters during the two months preceding the election. Results indicated that voters in these districts had higher levels of awareness and information about the legislative campaigns than voters elsewhere in the state. Additionally, they were more likely than other voters to cite issues, rather than personalities, as the focus of the campaigns (Woolley and Vercellotti 2007).

A Social Marketing Perspective on Clean Elections

From a social marketing perspective, the program's goals were doubly challenging. This is because its advocates sought not just one but two kinds of behavior change.

- (1) For the candidates to qualify for public funding, it was necessary for 800 voters in each candidate's district to come forward with \$10 donations. (Traditional campaign fundraising relies on much larger donations from a small pool of donors, many of whom live outside the candidate's district.)
- (2) For the program to show that it helped restore faith in the political system, it was necessary – or at least highly desirable – for voter turnout to improve in the clean districts, as compared to same-district turnouts in comparable elections

On the first criterion, the 2007 program can be judged a success. All nine prospective candidates were able to collect enough small donations to qualify.

But on the second criterion, the program fell short. As compared to 2003 (the most recent comparable election, with no gubernatorial or federal candidates on the ballot), turnout went up in one clean district, but either declined or stayed the same in the other two clean districts. In one of the clean districts, turnout fell below the 2007 average across all districts in the state.

With only fragmentary attitudinal and outcomes assessment – there were, for example, no exit interviews with voters or longitudinal measures of attitude change – it is difficult to analyze and compare the various influences on Clean Elections. But it is possible to suggest at least a rough picture of what happened.

Results: Implementation of Social Marketing Tactics and Techniques

In two ways, the 2007 Clean Elections pilot made effective use of social marketing tactics and techniques.

First, the program effectively managed the 4 P's to maximize the benefits and minimize the costs of the desired behavior changes among voters.

- **Product:** Publicly funded legislative campaigns were associated with a bundle of benefits compelling to a corruption-weary electorate. These included more honesty in politics and government; less tax money siphoned off by public corruption; and more power vested in the individual voter to influence an election and be taken seriously by candidates.
- **Price:** The costs of participation were minimized. Donations to the candidates were capped at \$10. Paperwork was greatly simplified as compared to the 2005 pilot.
- **Promotion:** Promotional materials included direct mail; print, radio, television and internet banner ads; and a new "Clean Candidate" ballot designation for participants – arguably, a form of distinctive, attention-getting packaging.
- **Place:** Virtually no effort was necessary to learn about or contact the clean campaigns, as information was mailed to registered voters, posted on a state government website, reported in local news media and publicized by all nine participating candidates.

Second, attention was paid to competing behaviors. The target audience was reminded, often and in multiple venues, that public nonparticipation would mean a continuation of "dirty politics" as usual. More specifically, Clean Elections was consistently described as a pilot program which would not be repeated if it failed to show promising results.

However, some fundamental social marketing tools were not used. There was no effort to segment target audiences; to use consumer research in the development of communication materials; or to conduct any form of either pretesting or post-testing.

Discussion: Issues and Outcomes by Stages of the

Behavior Change Process

Precontemplation: An inherent weakness at this early stage was the fact that the 2007 clean districts were different from the 2005 clean districts. Had they been the same, there might have been some carryover in awareness and

comprehension of at least the goals of the program. Instead, advocates were starting from scratch in their efforts to encourage initial consideration.

Contemplation: Evaluation was facilitated by a public education effort far more extensive than in 2005. There were advertisements, direct mail to voters, and in-depth website information, designed and managed by the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission. In addition, because nine candidates qualified for the funding – and did so early in the election season – these candidates themselves generated much publicity and offered many opportunities for people to ask questions about Clean Elections. However, in the absence of any communications research, it is impossible to gauge whether the materials were maximally effective -- and if not, whether the shortcomings were in comprehension, retention, believability or overall message strategy.

The failure to segment target audiences was a still more fundamental stumbling block. This is for a reason obvious to marketers but not necessarily clear to government agencies: some voters are likely to be significantly more aware of and interested in political reform than others. Even among those who are aware, many citizens may be too cynical to believe that Clean Elections can make a difference. There is little point in one-size-fits-all promotional materials that will motivate a few voter segments but be dismissed or ignored by others. Had an effort been made to identify the most receptive audience, it may have been more cost-effective and productive to target extra mailings and other communications to that smaller group than to spread the available promotional resources thinly across the entire universe of registered voters.

Action(s): Regarding Action #1, enough \$10 donors came forward for all the prospective candidates to qualify. This was a critical improvement over 2005, when such action was seriously hampered by its costs: specifically, the difficulty of obtaining forms and deciphering the rules for participation. In 2007, these costs were minimized with downloadable, shorter forms and other simplifications. For example, while the 2005 program allowed donations of either \$5 or \$30 and required personal bank checks, 2007 donations were solely in the amount of \$10 and could be paid in cash or by credit card. Regarding Action #2, voter turnout in the clean districts did not markedly improve. In social marketing terms, this suggests that few people (relative to the total population of registered voters) perceived a greater benefit or increased efficacy in going to the polls in a clean election than in a traditional election. It is reasonable to conjecture that all voters in the clean districts felt better about participating than they might otherwise have felt, but there is no data to quantify such an effect.

Maintenance: Reinforcement and continuation of Clean Elections is dependent on future structural change by the New Jersey Legislature. But public enthusiasm – or lack thereof – is one factor that can sway legislative decision-making.

Implications for Social Marketing

While social marketing approaches have spread to a wide range of government agencies and non-for-profit organizations (Andreasen 2002), the Clean Elections experience suggests that policy planners on the state level still have limited understanding of its principles and potential. There is appreciation of the need to translate program characteristics into consumer/voter benefits, and to reduce the costs/inconveniences of participation. But the absence of communications research or audience segmentation may impede behavior change on a broader scale. As noted by Hornik (2002), this is not a new problem; in the public health field, a wide range of social marketing campaigns have fallen short because of insufficient attention to implementational detail. The challenge for social marketers: to make explicit and compelling for non-marketers the connection between analysis and action.

On the positive side, the experience shows that it is possible to induce significant progress in one stage of the behavior change process even while falling short or encountering unforeseen obstacles in another. On one Action measure – participation of \$10 donors – there was clear success in 2007 compared to 2005. During the Contemplation stage, too, polling evidence of heightened awareness among voters indicates that the 2007 public education materials and message had some effect, however imperfectly that effectiveness was tracked.

More broadly, the failure of Clean Elections to boost electoral turnout should remind social marketers in all spheres that, as pointed out by (Rothschild 1999, 28), “Free choice, apathy and inertia are powerful competitive forces that often are ignored...For every choice there is an alternative. In a free-choice society, many laws are not followed if the target cannot discern the reward in doing so.” Even when laws, education and marketing are jointly and deliberately brought to bear on the high-profile problem of political corruption, there is no guarantee the public will be easily or rapidly motivated to switch its longtime “brand” of behavior.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Reviewing Clean Elections in terms of stages of behavior change suggests that desired outcomes – heightened voter turnout, restoration of faith in the political process – could be hastened by bolstering the program during Contemplation and Maintenance. In a period of fiscal crisis and state budgetary cutbacks, it is unrealistic for advocates to expect the New Jersey legislature to immediately reauthorize Clean Elections; in particular, there is little chance that allocations to the program would be increased solely for marketing purposes. In the future, however, when the program expands across the state, some promotional funds

may become available from clean candidates who collect more than the required 800 small donations and are willing to turn those funds back to the program.

To enhance the number of people who contemplate participation in Clean Elections – as donors, voters, or both – segmentation research could be designed to identify voter subgroups most responsive to electoral reform. Promotional messages could then be pretested to determine how the benefits of Clean Elections are perceived by those segments most likely to act on the messages.

In a social marketing analysis of disaster preparedness and lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina (Guion et.al.2007, 7), the authors note: “Successful marketing communications campaigns emphasize the importance of frequency in creating knowledge. Thus, attention should be paid to programmatic dissemination of messages and the identification of opportunities for reminders.” This point is equally relevant to Clean Elections. Instead of waiting until a few months before any given election to promote the program’s benefits and urge participation, reminder messages and educational materials could be bundled with other government communications and made available year-round in libraries and state offices. They may also be disseminated by such independent advocates as the League of Women Voters, Citizen Action and Public Interest Research Group.

Maintenance of Clean Elections is largely a function of legislative decision-making, but social marketing techniques can help to build relationships between program proponents and legislators. Indeed, some social marketing scholars explicitly cite relationship-building as a legitimate goal and a form of behavior change in itself (Hastings, forthcoming). Moreover, the clean candidates elected in 2007 can present themselves and their legislative records, both to their colleagues and to the public, as tangible “products” of the program. To the extent they are perceived as effective champions of the cause of ethics reform, an argument can reasonably be made that in the long term, Clean Elections has real potential to improve government as well as politics.

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