

An Overview of Community-Based Social Marketing

When members of a community use resources wisely – by turning off idling engines, for example – it moves toward sustainability. To promote a more sustainable future, it is essential to know how to encourage individuals and organizations to adopt activities that collectively promote sustainability.

Increasingly, those who develop and deliver programs to promote sustainability are turning to community-based social marketing for assistance. This kind of marketing emphasizes direct, personal contact among community members and the removal of barriers (i.e., "roadblocks" to more sustainable actions and behaviours) since research suggests that such approaches are often most likely to bring about behavioural change.

Community-based social marketing also uses tools that have been identified as being particularly effective in fostering change. Although each of these tools on its own is capable of promoting sustainable behaviour, the tools can often be particularly effective when used together. Key community-based social marketing tools include:

- prompts – remind people to engage in sustainable activities (e.g., a vehicle window sticker indicating that the driver does not idle);
- commitments – have people commit or pledge to engage in sustainable activities (e.g., signing a pledge card to avoid unnecessary idling);
- norms – develop community norms that a particular behaviour is the right thing to do; and
- vivid communications tools with engaging messaging and images.

Community-based social marketing is also pragmatic. It involves:

- identifying the barriers to a behaviour;
- developing and piloting a program to overcome these barriers;
- implementing the program across a community; and
- evaluating the effectiveness of the program.

To promote activities that support sustainability, barriers to these activities must first be identified. Community-based social marketers therefore begin by conducting the research that will help them identify these barriers. It is not unusual for this research to uncover multiple barriers that are quite specific to the activity being promoted. For example, barrier research on the issue of vehicle idling suggests that an effective social marketing strategy would:

- remind drivers to turn their engines off;
- clarify the brief length of time that a vehicle should be idled before being turned off (10 seconds);
- address the myths about vehicle idling;

- develop community norms that support turning off an engine as "the right thing to do"; and
- be delivered during the warmer months, since comfort and safety are important reasons why idling occurs in colder months.

Once the barriers have been identified, community-based social marketers develop a program that addresses each of them. Personal contact, the removal of barriers and the use of proven tools of change are emphasized in the program.

To ensure that the program will be successful, it should be piloted in a small segment of the community and refined until it is effective. The program is then implemented throughout the community, and procedures are put in place to continually monitor its effectiveness.

The steps that make up community-based social marketing are simple but effective. When barriers are identified and appropriate programs are designed to address these barriers, the frequent result is that individuals and organizations adopt more sustainable activities, which is the cornerstone of healthier, more sustainable communities.

To learn more about community-based social marketing, visit the "Fostering Sustainable Behavior" Web site at www.cbsm.com.