



# Three things that will make an impact on Social Marketing in India, on the road to 2010

As you look around you at India and Indians circa 2007, do you sense we are at a historical tipping point? Just beyond the neon signs advertising the glitzy baubles of our newfound consumerism, can you already see social disharmony and fragmentation flashing angrily? Social marketing in its myriad forms – everything from bottom-of-the-pyramid businesses to slapdash State schemes, all claiming to mitigate the effects of increasing disparity and defuse, or at least postpone, outright class warfare – seems to be everywhere.

Just like the mind-boggling range of goods and services now available to us, social marketers come in every shape, size and colour. The child with her face pressed up against your car window at the traffic signal. The multinational corporation urging you to do your bit for society by buying its latest product. Countless celebrities, each espousing their favourite cause. TV channels seeking your opinion and support by SMS. Government departments encouraging you to pay your taxes, switch off your air-conditioner or vaccinate your children. Billboards suggesting you stop smoking or greeting a politician on his birthday. Online petitions filling your inbox. Editorials extolling micro-credit ventures, voucher schemes, neighbourhood welfare groups, charity galas, corporate social responsibility initiatives and RTI success stories. Even the gunfire and explosions that shatter the silence of our forests daily and occasionally spill onto our city streets. It's hard not to be overwhelmed by the proliferation of 'social' messages.

Are there any discernible trends in the clutter? Clearly, we are going to see even more causes, issues and solutions advocated. The new technologies, new media, global connectivity and long-tail marketing approaches permit smaller interest groups and faraway causes to find their niche wherever they may be located. Clearly, every form of technology can and will be harnessed to social ends. Social marketers, from religious groups to politicians, in increasing numbers, are harnessing mobile phones, e-mail, direct selling agencies, blogs, flash mobs, widgets, social networks and interactive video to find and build their constituencies. Clearly, we are going to see more consumer-generated content and more interactive messaging. Those of us with access to media, traditional and non-traditional, and networks, on and offline, can already have our say on any issue we feel strongly about. Equally clearly, though, the added clamour isn't adding to our cumulative knowledge, compassion or cohesion as a society. Quite the contrary. The proliferation of social messaging seems instead to increase our confusion, our scepticism and our divisions.

Success amidst the proliferation of messages, media and perspectives will, in my opinion, require exactly the same ingredients as regular 'un-social' marketing does.

**Simple ideas that appeal across demographics and culture to inspire ordinary people to action by their**

**authenticity and relevance.** The idea, for instance, that we must all hang together or hang separately. That private enclaves of privilege, whether they're gated communities, air-conditioned schools or bullet-proof vehicles, provide only illusory security. That all the technology on the planet isn't going to make us comfortable if we keep plundering our seas, skies, forests and rivers indefinitely. That we cannot sleep peacefully, live happily or feel pride in our ephemeral achievements as a society as long as one in three Indians continues to live a sub-human existence.

**Strategies that offer real solutions to the real problems that bedevil us.** Social marketing approaches that focus on the root-cause of our problems – our profoundly unjust social, economic and political order – will, I believe, prevail in the long run. Not just because they didn't succumb to every passing fad, gimmick, gizmo or mantra. But because customers, donors, investors and voters are refusing to buy slogans or platitudes and seeking tangible results instead. And those results can only be achieved when they are authored, owned and driven by those whose problems they purport to solve. Voices that are currently unheard in the shaping of plans, policies and strategies.

**Beyond all these, however, is the emerging consumer-citizen.** For large and growing numbers of people - wealthy, middle-class and marginalised alike - the neat silos of their lives are blurring and merging. They are bringing their interests as professionals, consumers, voters, hobbyists, family members and community groups to bear on all the choices they make. A brand – be it a detergent, a bank, a rock group, a political party or an NGO – is evaluated not just for its performance in its own direct domain, but increasingly by its actions across domains. Brand character, credibility and preference are increasingly judged by behaviour, positive and negative, across economic, social, political, cultural and environmental spheres. News of an environmental misdemeanour, an unfortunate remark or gesture caught on camera, a poorly-judged association or a lapse in governance can and will spread at viral speed to cause lasting, sometimes terminal, damage to reputations of corporations, politicians, religious figures, activists, celebrities and causes alike.

In that threat, I believe, lies our best hope as a society. It will, I hope, drive each of us as individuals and organisations, to look beyond narrow, short-term interests and find our true purposes. To then build lives and businesses that are faithful to those ends. Where money, fame and power are the means to achieve, and the by-products of, who we are and what we do, rather than goals in themselves. Where the only worthwhile ends, and the only standards we apply, are the degree to which we leave our world better off for having been here. At that point, perhaps, all marketing will be social marketing.



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