

# THEORETICAL CAN BECOME PRACTICAL IN SOCIAL MARKETING CAMPAIGNS

RESEARCH  
THAT HAS IMPACT  
SERIES

Creators of commercial marketing campaigns look for effectiveness in persuading consumers to accept and buy their goods and services. Similarly, practitioners of social marketing want to create effective campaigns advocating for socially or individually meaningful behavioural change, such as quitting smoking, losing weight, or refraining from texting and driving. Strong campaigns that successfully change behaviours require understanding the audience among other things. This is where theory could be extremely useful. As a result of academic research, a large body of knowledge and insight has been accumulated in the form of theories and frameworks, on what works and what does not work in public communication. Yet, as Drs. Tatiana Levit and Magdalena Cismaru observe, some social campaigns could benefit from incorporating more theory. In their paper “Marketing social marketing theory to practitioners”, they present a guide to theory-based practices and provide recommendations for practitioners and researchers.

An important consideration for social marketing campaigns is determining which strategy *best* helps one reach the campaign

goal. Experience and intuition helps. However, while intuitions can help connect interventions with some psychological aspects of the behaviour change, solely relying on them can be detrimental and may produce unintended consequences like the “boomerang effect”– the opposite effect that occurs due to how the message is delivered. For instance, a campaign aimed at tackling vaccine-preventable diseases through fear can leave individuals in denial, confusion, or even anger, and thus produce no behavioural change; however, according to theory, the addition of an easy to adopt suggestion for the public on where to get a shot would increase the effectiveness of the fear-provoking message. The use of theory helps campaign developers better understand the psychology of their target audience and improve results while avoiding unintended consequences.

There are many reasons practitioners rely on intuitions and don’t engage in extensive research. They may not have the time and the resources to do it; they may not know how to properly do it; or they may not be aware of unintended effects.

To encourage more usage of theory in practice, Levit and Cismaru provide 10 recommendations for practitioners looking to integrate a theory-based approach that assists in outlining clear objectives and helps produce the desired outcome. An important first step is learning how to access available research through databases, whether academic repositories or government initiatives. For those less familiar with how to do this, collaboration with academic institutions or researchers can be valuable. Once accessed, establishing which theories fit specific needs is next. Particularly helpful during this step are meta-analyses and systematic reviews as they identify relevant studies and provide a broader understanding. Next, one has to choose which theory or theories will guide the development of several elements of the campaign and pretest messages. This will make it more likely that the campaign will produce the expected result and is capable of reaching specific goal(s). Lastly, conducting an evaluation of the campaign and sharing the results via workshops, conferences, etc. can further theoretical knowledge and assist others in the future.

## Drs. Tatiana Levit and Magdalena Cismaru

Tatiana.Levit@uregina.ca    Magdalena.Cismaru@uregina.ca

Levit, T. & Cismaru, M. (2020). Marketing social marketing theory to practitioners. *International Review on Public and Nonprofit Marketing*, 17, 237-252. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12208-020-00245-4>

