

Consumer health: The role of marketing

Nachiketas Nandakumar, Assistant Professor – Marketing, Great Lakes Institute of Management, Chennai, gives an insight on the need to understand the role of marketing in addressing social problems

MARKETING AND advertising have long been known to be the catalysts for consumption in our economy. Close to 30 years since the policy reforms and liberalisation, our economy has seen huge changes in consumption patterns from a massive influx of brands all over the world. Marketing firms have been working overtime, some of them non-stop, in their effort to deliver goods and services. The focus of these firms have been in finding solutions for core business problems; of that of driving sales and generating profits for organisations by serving consumer wants and needs. While there are many success stories of the efforts of the marketers in creating the economic value there has been very little attention paid to understanding the role of marketing in addressing social problems.

Is it not in the best interest of any nation to have their citizens have the best of healthcare, better social conditions, access to quality education and eradicating poverty? Can marketing help here?

Persuasive communications are interesting and challenging, depending on the nature of the problem and the context in which they are set in. Let's take consumer healthcare, focus of this article. In India, there are many public health issues to choose from, starting from addictions, like alcoholism, smoking, and drugs, lifestyle crop-ups like obesity, diabetes, stress, and depression, age-related break-ins like alzheimer's, cataracts, arthritis, quality of life and so on. The list can be quite lengthy and all of it quite real. Of particular interest amongst those listed and that which is urgently relevant to India, is cataracts, a medical discomfort of the eyes born out of ageing, mainly, and affects people in their mid-45s and above. Amazingly, the cure for



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treating cataracts is through surgery and only that. There are no known and approved medicines for easing the problem; glasses could help with blurry vision, a usual symptom in cataracts, but it is only a means to cope and not the cure to restoring vision.

FACT: India is home to the most number of blind people in the world.

Primary cause: Cataracts. The eye condition, seemingly benign in the beginning, could

turn itself into a potentially vision-threatening issue if left untreated and the resulting blindness, in many cases is irreversible. The prevalence of such unnecessary blindness is most rampant in the rural areas than in urban cities. Clearly, the many who have been rendered blind because of untreated cataracts is not because that surgery is dear or that it is not accessible. Prominent eye-care organisations in India (like Arvind Eye Hospitals and Sankara Nethralaya) have made tremendous innova-

tions in eye-care and made it very much affordable.

What then is the problem?

The problem, like in many health-related issues, is 'the last mile'. The mental attitude problem. Individual's attitudes towards one's health have been observed and linked to exhibited behaviours, and damaging attitudes often lead to damaging health consequences. Easy as it may sound then, that the solution is to help shape consumer attitudes to access positive health outcomes, but it is tricky. Can marketing play a role here?

Over the years, psychologists have tried to arrive at explanations that drive attitude which include things such as beliefs, past experiences, culture, social norms, etc. These existing beliefs are a result of individual and social conditioning over many years, thus making oneself think in a particular way and behave in a particular manner. To break up troublesome attitudes is therefore not an easy task and often takes repetitive attempts at good campaigning to secure a breakthrough. Repeated exposure to alternative yet compelling reasons to change is the way. **FACT:** Apathy or laziness is the confounding mental block standing between the problem and cure. Can principles of marketing help in addressing apathy? Our problem is, therefore, tackling consumer indifference to an available cure for a nagging social problem that has implications at all levels of the society.

Providing incentives to change is a nice place to start the health promotion campaign, but polite incentives don't usually work. Research has found out that, in many cases, providing dramatic examples have helped shake people out of their indifference. Such dramatic examples can be

found on cigarette labels carrying statutory textual warnings and graphic pictures, road signs carrying gory accident images, an amputated leg in the case of chronic diabetes and so on. These are attempts made to threaten people with dire consequences should individuals persist in harmful behaviour or show neglect. The idea is to make the threat seem personally relevant and to bring a proxy to an untimely death or something similar, like loss of vision in our example, as close as possible. Having said that, shaking people out of their laziness is one thing but making them move towards cure or solution is another challenge. Can marketing help nudge consumers towards a cure?

There are many not for profit organisations and NGOs in India who have made it their agenda to serve the society, but many of them, while they have the heart, seem to be still searching for ways to sell their agenda. There is no doubt that healthcare marketing is multi-faceted, moving from print and billboards campaign, now the focus has come down to social media campaigns. And, this is where the healthcare entities should try to build, engage and support their consumers based on their preference and style. It would be wise to learn from successful marketers, the good principles of marketing, the critical skills of understanding consumers, by listening to them, gaining insight about their personality types, segmenting their needs, tailoring and communicating their solutions in an effective manner.

The role of marketing is critical for consumer healthcare. If marketers can successfully shape consumer attitudes towards thirst and take a can of cola to the remotest areas in India, I am sure they can also help in delivering 'cure' to every citizen.