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Differences Between Strategic Frame Analysis and Social Marketing

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Although the two techniques are sometimes confused, Strategic Frame Analysis differs from social marketing in several important ways. This FrameByte will discuss the differences between Strategic Frame Analysis and social marketing, so that communicators can more thoughtfully choose which approach will be most effective in a given communications situation, depending on their intended outcome.

Social marketing is a communications technique that is very familiar to most public health advocates. Simply defined, social marketing is the use of marketing principles to influence human behavior in order to improve health or benefit society.¹ Social marketing focuses explicitly on mass consumer needs and behaviors, based on the process of conceiving, pricing, promoting and distributing ideas and services that satisfy individual and organizational preferences. Social marketing can use sophisticated communications techniques including focus groups, survey research and individual interviews. However, these methods are all focused on changing *individual* behavior and norms. (For a more in-depth overview of social marketing and other communications strategies, please see Bales, Susan and Gilliam, Frank. "Communications for Social Good." The Foundation Center, 2004. Available at http://foundationcenter.org/gainknowledge/research/pdf/practicematters_08_paper.pdf)

An example of a social marketing campaign is the long-term effort to lower tobacco use using social marketing techniques. The Tobacco Education Media Campaign in California was funded since 1989 through Proposition 99. The campaign is designed to offset the tobacco industry's marketing and public relations campaigns through memorable advertising that change the attitudes and beliefs of the audience. Developing anti-tobacco attitudes and beliefs is associated with more quit attempts by smokers, higher intentions to quit, and lower smoking prevalence.²

While social marketing may be effective for changing individual behavior (getting people to exercise more, stop smoking, not drink and drive, etc.) it may not be the best approach to build public support for policy change. Too often, advocates assume that what works for one works for the other, i.e. that if they can change people's individual behaviors, they are also changing their political attitudes. But a person can eat a healthy diet and exercise regularly without necessarily supporting transit alternatives and improvements in school lunch menus.

Because social issues are on very long time-lines, do not entail a “point of purchase” decision, and require acceptance of their “public” or collective nature (i.e. they are not changed by private actions alone), FrameWorks believes they require communications strategies that are particular to public policies. Strategic Frame Analysis (SFA) respects these differences in several important ways:

Focus. SFA focuses on changing underlying cultural understandings and beliefs about a social issue. It aims to change the public discussion citizens are able to have with each other by connecting a given issue to common values, offering easily understood models and new ways of thinking about a problem. In contrast, the focus of most social marketing campaigns is on individual behavior change by consumers of communications. Even when a social marketing campaign engages in agenda setting, such as the Designated Driver campaigns designed to discourage drinking and driving, it does so to change behavioral norms, not to influence policy (such as increasing penalties for drunk driving) or change environmental conditions (such as restricting two-for-one drink specials or regulating bar closing hours).

Decision-making. SFA is about identifying a problem as a public issue and prioritizing it for public policy solutions. These solutions require negotiation and compromise. Social marketing tries to influence people’s behavior choices by encouraging them to make better decisions, such as eating choices that will improve their health. Generally, the outcome is yes or no. But, for many social issues, individuals cannot make those choices; one cannot “choose” to buy cheaper insurance or to end racial discrimination in patient care. Society has already made the choices within which individual behavior is constrained.

Timeline. Changing the public discussion about a social issue takes time. It is an ongoing process to shift the public discussion and understanding of a broad social issue such as race, poverty or global climate change. Social marketing usually focuses on the more immediate timeline of changing the next behavioral decision an individual makes. SFA, in contrast, perceives individual choice as driven by, “the social worlds we create together and which create us and what we know.”³ Those social worlds change slowly on must issues, and are reflected in, and reinforced by, media and shared stories operating in the larger culture.

Social marketing is an effective and important tool for public health communicators, but it’s probably insufficient to get the job done to increase public support for health policy changes. In general, we believe that the science with which we study the communications of social issues needs to differ markedly from the science applied to electoral politics and product marketing. If you use the same principles to address food systems policy, for example, that you do to elect a president or change parents’ behavior, you are missing the potential of communications to build public will and further social change.

¹ Andreason, Alan. *Marketing Social Change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995.

² California Department of Health Services, Tobacco Control Section, 2006. *California Tobacco Control Update 2006*.

³ Roger M. Keesing, *Models, ‘Folk’ and ‘Cultural’*. In Dorothy Holland and Naomi Quinn, *Cultural Models in Language and Thought*, Cambridge University Press, 1987:372.