

Social Marketing in Communities



What is Social Marketing?

Social marketing is the application of commercial marketing principles for social good rather than for profit. Social marketing seeks to change people's knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs so that they ultimately act in a way that is consistent with the goal.

A powerful example is the National Association of Broadcasters and NAMI's "OK2TALK" campaign, which invited young people to share their personal stories about mental health online. By centering youth voices and encouraging open expression, the campaign creates a safe, relatable space that reduces stigma and normalizes help-seeking behavior.

Leaders in community health and behavioral health organizations across the country use social marketing strategies to:

- Raise awareness of mental health needs within the community,
- Create a shared vision for improving mental health outcomes through collaboration and strategic partnerships,
- Build interest and excitement about a new program that aims to address a community need, and
- Build community support to develop, expand, and sustain effective, person-centered approaches to care in local, state, tribal, and national settings.

Social marketing is the practice of using commercial marketing strategies to drive behavior change around a social issue.

Social marketing follows a strategic process. It is helpful because it encourages you to appreciate and consider the barriers and benefits to behavior change in your audience. What is keeping your audience from thinking, feeling, or acting a certain way?

Understanding Your Audience

Every community is different, so in order to avoid making any assumptions about your audience, you must talk to them. Understanding your audience is a critical part of the social marketing process. Talking to your audience and sincerely considering their views also helps to gain your audience's trust.

You can do this in communities by:

- Talking to community and agency leaders,
- Asking questions and learning about people in different roles (e.g., administrators, clinicians, service participants, funders),
- Understanding audience challenges from their perspective (not by making assumptions), and
- Asking what it will take to change attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.



Common Challenges in Social Marketing Across Communities

The most successful social marketing efforts reflect a deep understanding of the intended audience’s attitudes and beliefs. Effective social marketing also considers what is preventing an audience from certain actions (barriers) as well as what might motivate them (benefits). Communities of all sizes face barriers to effective social marketing efforts, but the nature of these challenges can vary significantly depending on geographic location, infrastructure, and local culture.

Challenges can include:

Urban and Suburban	Rural and Frontier
Navigating complex service systems	Scarcity of media and communication channels
Reaching diverse populations	Limited access to remote areas and lack of transportation
Addressing misinformation in fast-moving media environments	A wide range of cultures and beliefs across large geographic areas

Common Opportunities in Social Marketing Across Communities

While there are many challenges to reaching different audiences, there are also unique characteristics that serve as opportunities for social marketing efforts. Every community has strengths that can be leveraged to enhance outreach, engagement, and impact.

Opportunities can include:

Urban and Suburban	Rural and Frontier
Opportunities to engage audiences through public events, health fairs, and community partnerships	Tight-knit communities that understand the importance of helping neighbors
Access to a wide range of organizations	The power of word of mouth
Public transit access for advertising and mobile outreach in high-traffic areas	Natural community leaders who are easily identifiable and willing to partner
Diverse populations that allow for tailored messaging and engagement with cultural groups	Media coverage that may be more accessible because of lower competition (compared to urban areas)



Who are your natural allies?

In any community, there are natural allies who are more likely to be interested in and motivated to be champions of your work. Social marketing efforts should begin with those natural ally audiences. Every community is different, so you will want to do some research and exploration to identify who your natural allies are.

Some examples of natural allies in communities may include:

- Adults, youth, or families involved in services
- Health departments and/or clinics
- Leaders in schools and colleges
- Faith-based organizations and communities
- Government leaders or elected officials
- Business leaders or chambers of commerce
- Law enforcement or criminal/juvenile justice agencies
- Barber/beauty shops and libraries
- Community leaders/natural helpers

“Use those partnerships, and find those informal powers in the community. It doesn’t always have to be the mayor, or somebody that works at an agency. Find a grandma! Find someone who is very involved in the community and knows everything that’s going on and get them on your team.”

—Ashley Lincoln, M.S.W.,
Evidence-Based Intervention Specialist,
Cherokee Nation Hero Project

Craft Compelling Messages for Your Audience

Once you have identified and analyzed your audiences, you can craft social marketing messages that seek to change perceptions of barriers and emphasize benefits. Some types of messages that communities have successfully used to do this include:

- Messages that emphasize the importance of well-being (in place of mental health).
- Messages that promote hope, health, and wellness, such as:
 - “Recovery is possible.”
 - “Help is available.”
 - “Emotional wellness is part of overall health.”
- Messages that emphasize positive community outcomes, such as a healthy and strong workforce or reduced absences at school or work.

Tips for Effective Social Marketing from Experienced Practitioners

There is much to learn from social marketers who have worked across diverse communities! In addition to previous recommendations, these key strategies can help strengthen social marketing efforts:

1. Utilize a mix of traditional and digital media, including newspapers, bulletins, billboards, and online platforms.
2. While outreach materials are valuable, direct, person-to-person communication can be even more impactful.
3. Maximize partnerships with trusted community organizations and leaders.
4. Be present and engaged—spend time in the community to build relationships and trust.
5. Identify and collaborate with community champions who can amplify messaging.
6. Work with cultural brokers, peer messengers, and family leaders to ensure messages resonate.
7. Leverage existing networks of leaders and innovators to enhance outreach.
8. Use technology to bridge gaps and connect with hard-to-reach audiences.