



# Re-thinking and re-tooling the social marketing mix

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## ABSTRACT

This article considers the role of the four Ps marketing mix model in social marketing, arguing that given reconfiguration of the marketing mix in the mainstream marketing discipline, and the characteristics of social marketing, a re-thought and re-tooled social marketing mix is required. A brief review of the four Ps marketing mix model in the mainstream marketing and social marketing fields is presented. Criticisms of the four Ps model are then examined. It is argued that the four Ps marketing mix model is outdated for application to social marketing, and an alternative approach to the social marketing mix is proposed. It is posited that an expanded approach recognizing strategies such as relational thinking, and upstream social marketing activities would offer a more suitable approach. Using a more open minded social marketing mix less reliant on the four Ps model can help guide social marketing research and practice. © 2011 Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

The 2011 World Social Marketing Conference in Dublin featured a lively debate about the role and relevance of the four Ps in social marketing. Clive Blair-Stevens, Director at Strategic Social Marketing and Sue Nelson, Social Marketing Director of Kindred (UK) argued to abandon the four Ps, stating the view that they have lost practical application as technology and social media have evolved. Nancy Lee, President of Social Marketing Services Inc. and Mark Blayney Stuart from the Chartered Institute of Marketing defended the four Ps arguing that they provide a simple, accessible and useful framework for practitioners. Following the debate a vote was taken with a majority voting in favour of keeping the four Ps. In a democratic society, one should normally respect the wishes of voters. However, this article examines the four Ps in detail, and proposes that the marketing mix in social marketing requires a re-think. The conceptual framework offered by the four Ps is examined, and its predominance in marketing thought and practice is described. Consideration is made of how social marketing has largely mirrored mainstream marketing and used the four Ps marketing mix concept to inform interventions. Scholarly debates and criticisms of the four Ps framework, particularly given the emergence of fields such as services, business to business and relational marketing are then reviewed. The article concludes by proposing that the social marketing mix should be re-thought and re-tooled, avoiding reliance on frameworks that can quickly become obsolete, or limiting.

## 2. The four Ps of marketing

Since being first formally defined (Kotler and Zaltman, 1971) social marketing has relied heavily on its mainstream marketing progenitor to inform principles and practices. This is reflected in the majority of definitions of social marketing, which identify the adaptation and adoption of commercial marketing principles and techniques to engender social good (Dann, 2010). This is particularly true when considering the techniques used to engender behaviour change for social good. Consideration of the marketing mix in social marketing to facilitate behaviour change has traditionally centred on using the four Ps of marketing: product, price, place and promotion (for example see: [Population Services International, 1977](#)).

The concept of the marketing mix was coined by Neil Borden in his 1953 American Marketing Association presidential address and then formalised in his article 'The Concept of the Marketing Mix' (Borden, 1964). Borden considered how his associate James Culliton (1948) described the role of a marketing manager as a mixer of ingredients who sometimes follows recipes prepared by others, sometimes prepares their own recipe as they go along, sometimes adapts a recipe using immediately available ingredients, and at other times invents ingredients that no-one else has tried.

Jerome McCarthy (1960) then proposed a four Ps classification which has seen extensive use since. The elements of the marketing mix proposed by McCarthy were:

1. Product: is a tangible object or intangible service that is produced or manufactured and offered to consumers in the market.
2. Price: is the amount a consumer pays for the product or service, normally an economic cost.

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3. Place: represents the location where a product or service can be purchased, and can often be referred to as the distribution channel. This can include physical stores as well as virtual outlets online.
4. Promotion: represents the communications that marketers use in the marketplace including advertising, public relations, personal selling and sales promotion.

Alternative models of marketing were proposed around the same time. Frey suggested that marketing variables be split into two separate components, the first concerning the offering – product, packaging, brand, price and service, and the second referring to the methods and tools used – including advertising, sales promotion, publicity, personal selling and distribution channels (Frey, 1961). However, McCarthy's four Ps model has dominated marketing thought (Grönroos, 1994), particularly in the social marketing context (Hastings, 2007).

### 3. The four Ps in social marketing

The pre-dominance of the four Ps marketing mix in social marketing perhaps relates back to Kotler and Zaltman's (1971) definition, which explicitly or indirectly mentions each component "the design, implementation and control of programs calculated to influence the acceptability of social ideas and involving considerations of product planning, pricing, communication, distribution and marketing research" (p5). Early social marketing interventions such as sexual and reproductive health initiatives in the developing world, tended to follow this model quite closely. Much of the extant social marketing literature reflects this reliance on the marketing mix model (Kotler and Lee, 2008). In 2002 Andreasen devised a set of six benchmark criteria for what constitutes a social marketing intervention. His fifth benchmark stated that social marketing should "use all four Ps of the traditional marketing mix" (Andreasen, 2002, p7). Social marketers therefore have long sought to adapt the established marketing mix model to the social marketing domain. This is illustrated in Table 1, which describes the four Ps of the social marketing mix.

However, a systematic review of social marketing effectiveness demonstrated that many interventions that could be described as social marketing used other strategies such as training people or policy change (Stead et al., 2007). This suggests that despite the dominance of the four Ps marketing mix model, its explanatory power over the features of social marketing interventions is incomplete. As social marketing developed during the 1980s and 1990s, the field was influenced by several other disciplines and streams of thought. The application of social marketing has been predomi-

nantly in the public health sphere, and this introduced ideas from the health behavioural sciences to the field, such as the use of theories and models including the health belief model and the theory of planned behaviour (Rosenstock, 1966; Ajzen, 1991). Other fields such as psychology, sociology and anthropology also began to permeate the field. Although mainstream marketing similarly borrows ideas and concepts from other disciplines, a divergence began to develop during this period. Furthermore, many social marketing practitioners were not, and are not, marketers. People engaging in the field can come from many different perspectives and starting points including other social sciences, public health, environmental issues, community politics and social justice and international development, as well as marketing. Given the influx of ideas to inform social marketing, and the use of techniques and intervention approaches that do not fall under the four Ps marketing mix classification, the utility of the model is open to scrutiny.

This situation has been acknowledged by the UK National Social Marketing Centre (NSMC) in their definition of social marketing as "the systematic application of marketing, alongside other concepts and techniques, to achieve specific behavioural goals for a social good" (NSMC, 2007, p32). As well as recognising that social marketing is informed by more than just ideas from mainstream marketing, the NSMC also considered the issue of the social marketing mix. The expanded eight benchmark criteria devised by the NSMC employs a broader concept of the methods mix advocating use of a range of methods and intervention approaches, including the traditional marketing mix (NSMC, 2007).

Indeed, despite the apparent dominance of the use of the four Ps marketing mix in social marketing, scholars in the field have recognised some of its limitations (Hastings, 2007). Furthermore, Peattie and Peattie (2003) have guarded against the unwitting transference of the four Ps to the social marketing paradigm and trying to force-fit ideas and practices borrowed from commercial marketing. Yet, even within mainstream marketing, the predominance of the four Ps marketing mix model has been challenged.

### 4. The four Ps re-thought

For many within the marketing discipline the four Ps represent the core tools of marketing that need to be combined carefully and utilised to produce the most viable mix (Zineldin and Philipson, 2007). Yet the marketing literature has been replete with vituperative criticisms of the framework in recent years, for being too simplistic and naive for application to complex marketing problems such as service provision, business to business networking or social marketing.

One of the main weaknesses with the marketing mix model is that it encourages focus on the short term, sales and transactions, and under-values the importance of strategic, long term relational thinking and brand equity (Rafiq and Ahmed, 1995). Marketing mix models cause budgets to be focused towards efficiency and measurement of the short term effects of marketing, usually sales. Longer term effects of marketing are reflected in brand equity, but this information is not usually captured by marketing mix models. For instance, although sales of a product or service may drop due to economic or social conditions, brand equity may actually increase. This limitation of the marketing mix model is particularly relevant to social marketing, as behaviour change involves making long term commitments, and maintenance and re-lapse, and long-term relational thinking and brand equity are important concepts (Evans and Hastings, 2008).

In terms of media mix optimisation the dominant marketing mix model displays bias to time specific medial channels such as TV advertising compared to less time specific media such as

**Table 1**  
The four Ps social marketing mix.

Product	In social marketing represents the behavioural offer made to target adopters and often involves intangibles such as adoption of an idea or behaviour. Tangible product offerings such as condoms to encourage safe sex can also be present
Price	In social marketing price relates to the costs that the target audience have to pay and the barriers they have to overcome to adopt the desired behaviour, and these costs can be psychological (e.g. loss of de-stressing effect from smoking), cultural, social (e.g. peer pressure to drink), temporal, practical (e.g. cancelling the school run to reduce car use), physical and financial (e.g. cost of joining a gym to get fit)
Place	Place in social marketing are the channels by which behaviour change is promoted and the places in which change is encouraged and supported
Promotion	In the social marketing context promotion is the means by which behaviour change is promoted to the target audience, for example advertising, media relations, direct mail and interpersonal

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