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[Social Marketing to the Economically Disadvantaged](#)

By Ann Voorhees Baker

Social marketing uses a combination of traditional marketing concepts and culture-driven communication techniques to sell awareness, attitudes, and lifestyle choices to one or more target audiences. When a target audience is an economically disadvantaged group, the challenges are varied.

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Defining the target audiences

A well-conceived social [marketing campaign](#) for the economically disadvantaged employs two phases in defining the target audiences. The initial phase is concerned with typical demographic information such as age, income, and level of education. The second phase involves direct, human, interpersonal contact with members of the audience. This is akin to visiting a foreign country, where the traveler first reads an informative guidebook, and then actually visits the country in question, not to see the sights, but to interact with people in situations and environments that are as close to daily life as possible. As with foreign travel, often an interpreter is needed. A social marketing campaign frequently needs the involvement of culturally bilingual interpreters, people who come from a background similar to that of the audience but who have obtained a higher education than the group average and who possess a greater understanding of academic, corporate, or social service endeavors.

The second phase can be broken down further into three areas of study: the culture, educational level, and sophistication of the target audience.

Culturally, for example, certain modes of speech and facial expressions will affect an audience's response to a message. Depicting an African-American male with downcast eyes will offend some audiences—or using last year's slang for this year's campaign will make a message fall flat. In the Hispanic community, for example, messages concerning healthy prenatal care often are best directed at soon-to-be grandmothers rather than the pregnant women themselves. In that culture, grandmothers are typically the arbiters of knowledge concerning prenatal and baby care and wield considerable influence over the choices made concerning nutrition, healthcare, and parenting practices.

The educational level of the audience is important for the social marketer to understand, acknowledge, and respect as well. Respect is the key word here. It is one thing to understand the audience's level of familiarity with mathematical and scientific concepts and its facility with the language. It is another thing to achieve consistency in organizing,



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packaging, and presenting information such that it will be intellectually understood by the audience. But most important, it is necessary to demonstrate a level of cultural sensitivity such that the social marketer allows for the limitations that the audience brings to the message and at the same time believes in the dignity of the audience and the inherent desire of that audience to learn and to benefit from new knowledge. Communicating at a level that is understandable to an audience is a far different thing than talking down to an audience. This distinction is often lost, however, in the execution of a social marketing plan directed to the economically disadvantaged.

Finally, the sophistication of the audience must be accorded its due, and here is the downfall of many an otherwise effective social marketing campaign. For the audience, while possibly undereducated in the traditional academic sense, most likely has an extraordinarily high level of sophistication as a consumer of marketing messages. Cheaply made materials won't do. Out-of-date clip art is unacceptable. Single-color or two-color pieces do not attract attention. Plodding, lecture-style videos or presentations are ignored. It is essential that the best and most current marketing techniques, styles, and trends be employed in order to reach, be seen, and be heard by the target audience.

Sophistication versus authenticity

An additional and seemingly conflicting consideration comes into play here: the essential need to meld sophistication with authenticity. While the better social marketing campaigns use the most sophisticated marketing materials and techniques, often they still fall short of being fully effective because they employ inauthentic images and inappropriate people as models and spokespersons. An African-American model, for example, might be outfitted in "street clothes" and placed in front of the camera to depict a resident of a low-income neighborhood. Subtle and not-so-subtle mismatches with the audience could identify the model as an imposter. The clothing might be overdone or might include pieces that are going out of style. The teeth might be too even. Even the facial expression might be off—too open and squared off with the camera, for example—when a certain oblique angle of the face and guardedness of expression is the norm. An imposter is not believable. The delivery of an otherwise well-crafted message is ruined.

Many times the best-received marketing materials use imagery, artwork styles, and real people literally extracted from the group to which the message is being pitched. Thus, background images, language, grooming, posture, and so on might be intentionally poorly staged and executed according to traditional standards, but by dint of this be more believable to the target audience. When delivered to the audience in a sophisticated manner using high-quality materials and technology, they can be well received and tremendously effective.

Three products to sell

Many social marketing campaigns become muddled because the conceivers of the campaign do not grasp the fact that most social marketing campaigns have three products to sell:

1. Awareness of the program.
2. The content message or raw information that the program seeks to deliver.
3. The lifestyle choices that the program seeks to encourage in the audience.

In the case of a health education program for residents of public housing, for example, a social marketing campaign first will need to make the residents aware of the health program itself: its name, its whereabouts, its purpose, and the people who are administering it. Second, the campaign will need to impart the actual health and medical information that the program is teaching, such as warning signs of medical conditions, nutrition facts, and the need for medical screenings. And third, the campaign will need to sell the activities and services offered by the health education program, such as free health screenings, exercise sessions, cooking classes, and walking clubs.

Which audience, which style, which message?

In sum, distinct target groups must be determined. For each target group, a particular style of presentation must be carefully designed. The overall "product" must be broken down into several distinct messages. Finally, it must be decided which message or messages will be sold to which audiences. Not all messages are needed or appropriate for all target groups. For example, in an anti-bullying campaign launched by a school district, four separate audiences might be identified: students, parents, teachers, and the community at large. Different styles of delivery and channels of communication will be appropriate for each, and a different "product" must be identified and matched to each audience. One or two, but not all, of the following might be promoted to each distinct group: awareness of the program, rejection of bullying behavior, procedures for identifying and referring bullies, participation in after-school programs, and appreciation of the efforts of the school district to embrace and deal with the bullying problem.

The total audience for a cause or mission marketing campaign must be broken down into distinct targeted groups. The culture, educational level, and sophistication of each group must be studied, understood, and respected. The mission or cause must be teased apart into three or more products. Finally, the products must be properly matched to the targeted subgroups.

If all of these steps are executed, the mission will be marketed effectively, and the action or change that is the goal of the cause or program being marketed will be measurable.

Social marketing provides a fertile field in which to apply the best of technology, creativity, art, and mass communication to causes for the common good. If done well, it's an elegant combination of capitalist and socialist ideals. A product is being sold by individual groups, not the government, through marketing at the most sophisticated level developed by a capitalist system. But the goal is socialist in nature: not to make an audience buy a tangible product that puts profit in the pockets of a few individuals, but rather to give an ethereal product—knowledge, opportunity, hope, a desire to help—that profits the group as a whole.

About the Author

Ann Voorhees Baker is a marketing and public relations consultant with more than 18 years of experience, specializing in causes for the betterment of the environment, education, health care, parenting, and social justice. She's executed a wide range of both traditional and nontraditional communication strategies for [private companies](#) and social agencies alike and has done extensive work in community outreach and engagement involving factionalized groups in diverse communities.

Baker founded the Women's Crew Team at UCLA, was the first female coxswain on UCLA's Varsity Men's Crew, and served as editor of UCLA's *Together Magazine* in the 70s. She earned her J.D. at Case Western Reserve University School of Law, prosecuted violators of the Clean Water Act for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and published legal

articles on transnational radiation pollution in the 80s. She then launched the award-winning *Cleveland Family Magazine* and headed the successful public interest communications firm, Hearth Marketing & Media, Inc. in the 90s. During that time, she served on the Board of Directors and as President of Earth Day Coalition — Cleveland's nonprofit environmental advocacy and education organization serving Northeast Ohio. Before relocating to her native Los Angeles, she served as Director of Communication and Marketing for an inner ring public school district in Cleveland Heights, Ohio.

Current and former clients include Lexus Environmental Projects, Sharp Electronics Solar Energy Division (U.S.), the Better World Club, The Nature Conservancy, Dragon Pearl Tea, Unity Church, HealthStyles LLC, the Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority, Beech Brook, the Cuyahoga Public Library System, Kaeden Books, the Early Childhood Initiative of Cuyahoga County, and the Prenatal Initiative of Cuyahoga County.

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