Marketing’s Potential for Traffic Safety: Under or Over Stated?

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ABSTRACT

In 1993 the OECD released a scientific expert report on the *Marketing of Traffic Safety*. In 1994, a conference in South Africa pursued the topic further. What is marketing’s potential to prevent unsafe road user behaviour? This paper draws upon the author’s honours masters thesis (Social Marketing) and two decades experience in attempting to induce voluntary compliance to traffic safety laws. Marketing will be presented as a technology to be applied, a unique approach to persuasion, a form of analysis. Differences between marketing products and services versus changing fundamental behaviours will be examined. Marketing’s unique approach to persuasion will be contrasted with social advocacy. Marketing’s contribution will be seen to be its disciplined approach to activating behaviour. Marketing has potential for prevention but not what or as much as some of its promoters advocate.

INTRODUCTION

The writer, as a member of the OECD Scientific Expert Group which prepared the report *Marketing of Traffic Safety* (OECD 1993) was unable to find a single documented case study where marketing principles or a complete marketing approach had been applied to traffic safety. To demonstrate what a marketing approach might involve the writer prepared a post hoc case study for the OECD report on Bicycle Helmet Wearing.

Can traffic safety be sold like soap? Many advertising professionals intuitively believe advertising traffic safety is no different to advertising any other product or service. Some advertising and marketing professionals who have experience in promoting or advocating social behaviours such as traffic safety would suggest that maybe it is possible, but it is much more difficult (Bloom & Novelli 1981, Elliott 1987, Rothschild 1974). Why is it that the seemingly successful technology used by marketing professionals appears not to be readily adapted to traffic safety? What potential does marketing offer when promoting traffic safety and safe behaviours? What are the limits?

Marketing’s most visible and tangible element is paid mass media advertising. It is this aspect of marketing which, all too often, is believed to be the critical ingredient in marketing. “It pays to advertise” is an industry maxim. A growing disquiet exists amongst serious marketing analysts as to just how effective or powerful advertising really is (McGuire 1986; Elliott 1989, 1991, 1992, 1993; Weilbacher 1987; Bell 1988; Jones 1990, 1991). An example of the pessimism was clearly evidenced at a joint conference of academics and industry professionals sponsored by the Marketing Science Institute (MSI) (Bell 1988) considering the topic “Evaluating the Effects of Consumer Advertising on Market Position
Over Time: How to Tell Whether Advertising Ever Works.” Marketing does not start and end with paid mass media advertising. One of the myths of marketing is that advertising can solve all marketing problems (Weilbacher 1993). The potential contribution of marketing for promoting traffic safety can only be established if the true nature of marketing is understood.

MARKETING: A TECHNOLOGY TO BE UNIVERSALLY APPLIED

Practitioners, and marketing academics in general, hold the view that marketing is fundamentally a set of technologies and principles which can be universally applied to products, services and social behaviours with great success. Just how successful is marketing and can it be applied equally across a broad range of activities? One of the most respected practitioner/academics reminds traffic authorities about marketers’ inability to bring about change even in relation to the purchase of low cost, frequently purchased, packaged goods.

“1. The effective use of marketing tools in changing consumer behaviour is very difficult ... most marketing change has slight or no effect on consumer behaviour, no matter what its sponsors expect.

2. Most marketing change is ineffective in causing brand sales to increase and brand profits to rise. It follows that most marketing work aimed at including changes in consumer behaviour is, at best, mediocre, and that its expected results reflect much wishful thinking and little else.” (Weilbacher 1987, p63)

MARKETING: A UNIQUE APPROACH TO PERSUASION

Identifying marketing’s potential, and its limits, for traffic safety requires an understanding of the “essence” of marketing. Marketing is a unique approach to persuasion. Marketing’s dictum is: make what the targeted customers want and will buy or would make if they had the marketer’s knowledge and resources. This is known as the “marketing concept” and it is fundamental to marketing. It is frequently referred to as “a customer orientation”.

The marketer asks: “what can we produce that people will want to buy?” Marketers depend for success on identifying wants, tailoring an offering, exposing identified wanters to messages about the product’s existence and attributes and making the product readily available. The tailoring of the offering includes competitive price, attractive packaging, appealing product attributes - image and function, etc.

Marketing begins by taking people as they are, looking at ongoing behaviour, and tailoring an offering around existing wants. It starts with the potential customer and builds an offering around the wishes of the customer. Rather than trying to change people, the marketer attempts to effect successful counterchange, ie., “choose ours” rather than a competitor’s, or choose ours rather than doing nothing or something else. This attempt at counterchange involves making what the customer wants.
SELLING OR ADVOCACY: AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO PERSUASION

Selling or advocacy can be contrasted to marketing. The selling/advocacy approach to persuasion is: sell what we happen to make or make what we believe we can sell or make what we believe the customer needs or make what we know is good for them.

The persuasion task is to “make people want to buy”. The seller/advocate/change agent (traffic authority) takes the cause (the product or idea) as given. It is not conceived in the market place but elsewhere by experts in traffic safety.

The persuasion task facing traffic safety promoters is making people want to buy or accept the ideas of experts who know what is good for road users. This is achieved by trying to change people or change the environment in some way to correspond with what is being advocated.

“TO MARKET” TRAFFIC SAFETY IS SELLING OR ADVOCACY, NOT MARKETING

The term “marketing” is one of the most abused in the English language. The verb “to market” as in let’s “market” road safety does not exist in the dictionary. Almost always when used as a verb it is a euphemism for let’s “sell” road safety. Practitioners, who understand the distinction between marketing and selling do not use market as a transitive verb because once the object (the product or cause) exists the opportunity to engage in marketing is severely restricted. Furthermore, there are more appropriate terms available (such as promote, advertise, publicise, sell) to refer to activities that may occur when the characteristics of an offering are regarded as fixed. Marketing is fundamentally different from selling but marketing can embrace a selling process as part of its implementation.

The word “selling” is a pejorative term as is the term “propaganda”. It is crass and manipulative. Unfortunately marketing has become the term to replace selling and in so doing it has blinded its users to the fundamental distinction. This distinction is not raised even by the writers of books purporting to be texts on public sector marketing. A widely used Australian text on public sector marketing, defines social marketing as:

“... a ‘hounding’ theory of adoption behaviour with hounding defined as pursuing relentlessly until the victim succumbs” (Roberto 1991, p80).

This statement is about selling, not marketing. Marketers would never see targets as victims, but a sales person might.

CHANGING PEOPLE OR TAKING THEM AS THEY ARE

Marketing rarely attempts to influence the activating conditions associated with change. It works with what is already available by providing better, more competitive, solutions. Marketing does not change people. It simply intervenes in people’s lives by offering a specially conceived solution - conceived with the customer (and profit) in mind. The essential persuasion task is to get the chosen targets to choose the offering. The marketer asks the chosen target to “modify” what they are now doing and to select the marketer’s specially designed offering rather than a competitors or not selecting any.
In contrast to the marketing orientation is the selling or advocacy approach to persuasion. In the advocacy approach the product is conceived elsewhere and the persuasion task is to make people buy; eg., not speed, not drive after drinking, wear a bicycle helmet. Motorists are not asking for 0.5% BAC levels or red light or speed cameras. These ideas were conceived outside the market place. Experts invented them in traffic safety. So long as traffic safety professionals are not providing a service people have to pay for, the approach to persuasion is essentially one of advocacy or selling. Traffic safety experts design the idea (the product) because they know what is best for people even if road users don’t know, or don’t like it or don’t really want it.

THE TWO OPPOSING PERSUASION PROCESSES

Marketing as persuasion versus selling/advocacy as persuasion can be contrasted schematically as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persuasion</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marketing</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Builds on existing action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tendencies/satisfy existing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wants (accepts wants as given)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Choose ours” it suits you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>better than the competitors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carry on choose ours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MODIFY slightly</td>
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To the extent that some people are already complying with what traffic authorities are advocating then the persuasion task is a marketing one: “carry on what you are doing”. However, to the extent that the behaviours or actions being advocated are not being carried out people are being asked to “stop” some actions and “start” alternative actions.

THE VARIOUS PERSUASION TASKS

1. “Modify”

The influence (marketing) agent accepts the essential thrust of what individuals are already doing or attempting to do and plans to affect the form their action takes - the message is “choose mine” it suits you best because it has been designed to suit your circumstances.
2. “Stop”

The influence (change) agent (traffic safety authority) attempts to induce individuals to stop (or not start) performing some action - the message is “don’t do this” because its consequences are harmful to you, others, or society in general.

3. “Start”

The influence (change) agent attempts to induce individuals to start (not stop) performing some action - the message is “do this” because your own, others’ or society’s good requires it.

OTHER IMPORTANT DIFFERENCES

Apart from this fundamental difference there are numerous other differences which occur in reality when a commercial marketer tries to apply marketing technology to traffic safety. These differences also in practice account for why it is not so easy to “sell brotherhood like soap”. Each of these differences have been reviewed elsewhere (Elliott 1987, 1991) and listed below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Minor Differences</th>
<th>Major Differences</th>
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<tr>
<td>Severely limited budgets</td>
<td>Public scrutiny</td>
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<td>Market analysis</td>
<td>Cultural conflict</td>
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<tr>
<td>Segmentation</td>
<td>Extravagant expectations</td>
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<td>Channels</td>
<td>An active and rejecting audience</td>
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<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>Social change</td>
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<td>Ethical concerns</td>
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**Fundamental Differences**

<table>
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<th>Long term changes</th>
<th>Highly sensitive issues</th>
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<tr>
<td>Negative demand</td>
<td>Everyone is an expert</td>
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<td>Fewer opportunities to modify the product</td>
<td>Pricing strategy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Invisible and intangible benefits</td>
<td>Marketing as “voluntary” exchange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundamental behaviours</td>
<td>Tension between mission and customer satisfaction</td>
</tr>
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OFFERING SATISFACTION (PROMISED VALUE)

The objective of marketing persuasion, at the individual level, is to influence the form an activity takes; specifically, to influence the target to select the marketer’s offering. Within the constraints of profitability, the objective is to secure repeated choice of the marketer’s brand/product/service. Marketers begin by choosing likely targets and likely target actions and assume activating conditions exist (wants, needs, internal or external environment factors) that will lead people to allocate energies in some way. What the marketer seeks to do is to channel this energy into choosing their specific offering or solution. How? By communicating promised value by announcing details of their offering - an offering devised with consumer’s desired states and action possibilities in mind.
Marketers facilitate the desired action, viz., the choice of the marketer’s particular offering. This is what marketing refers to as a “voluntary exchange” process. It achieves this by minimising the costs to the customer of obtaining the offering. Persuasion is not complete until the customer has had a chance to confirm that the value promised is actually delivered, i.e., a desired state is actually achieved. By using the product or service, the customer now assesses the marketer’s promise and delivery of value. Only if the experience is positive will repeat buying of the marketer’s offering occur. Unless marketers offer satisfaction, the same choice will not be repeated next time the activating conditions are present. Instead, a competitor’s offering will be chosen or none at all.

RECOGNISING THE REAL WORLD LIMITATIONS

When it comes to promoting traffic safety, the following questions need to be asked:

• Are the targeted road users complying with the traffic authority’s wishes?
• Do they only need to modify slightly what they are doing and choose an equally attractive alternative offered by the authority?
• Will they readily choose the offering and continue to do so because they will be satisfied?
• Has the authority conceived what they want them to do by listening to them?

If the answer is “yes” to all four questions then it is a marketing persuasion task? If the answer is “no” then marketing’s role is somewhat limited. When a traffic authority wants chosen targets to change, i.e., adopt a different action - it is essentially in an advocacy role. Marketing can still offer some very real assistance but it is not automatically a marketing or a social marketing process. It is more a selling or advocacy process. To the extent to which it can be made more like a marketing process the greater the chances of a successful outcome.

WHAT DOES MARKETING HAVE TO OFFER?

Marketing is both an approach to persuasion and also a managerial technology. Even when the approach to persuasion is clearly an advocacy task, marketing technology with its principles and techniques can still be considered and can enhance the effectiveness of any advocacy task. Some of the core concepts of marketing are worthy of consideration (Elliott 1993a), including:

• situation analysis
• segmented approach to target group selection
• willingness to change the “offer”
• recognition of a competitive environment
• focus on communication
• central role for research
• coordinated integrated program (6 P’s)
• commitment to planning
• focus on behaviour (actions)
• building in facilitators for action
• profit orientation (cost-benefit)
• evaluation and feedback at all stages
• realistic goals (change is a slow process)

CONCLUSION
Marketing traffic safety is essentially different to marketing products. In most instances the persuasion task is that of advocacy where the targets for persuasion need to change their behaviours (actions). Like traffic authorities, marketers deal with actions. Unlike traffic authorities, the marketers actions require slight modification rather than change. Marketing is not only a technology potentially available to be adopted by traffic authorities, it is also a philosophy - a way of thinking about how to influence people. In promoting traffic safety it may not be possible to alter the product or idea but the way it is packaged and promoted can be designed with the target in mind. In particular, the communication of the idea is potentially always available to be altered and given a customer focus. It is very likely that traffic authorities will need to focus also on behavioural supports (eg., enforcement) because of the very nature of the persuasion task. Finally, whilst marketing’s potential for traffic safety can so easily be overstated, the disciplines of marketing technology are available and potentially able to enhance attempts to promote safe road user behaviours.

REFERENCES


