New Product Development (NPD) in a Social Marketing and Community Development Context: A Case Study

Railton M. Hill, Swinburne University of Technology
Anne C. Hill, Focus On the Family – Australia

Abstract

We provide a case study in new product (service) development (NPD) for social marketing undertaken specifically within a ‘community development’ context. Starting Points is a highly differentiated Australian not-for-profit early childhood parent development program targeting parents/caregivers of 0 – 4 year olds. The NPD process undertaken appears to have required significant adaptation from previously recognised models derived from different contexts. We conclude that in addition to elements of some established NPD models, successful social marketing NPD of this type requires analysis and utilisation of aspects of the social dimension, such as are available within ‘markets-as-networks’ thinking and practice, from the very beginning of the NPD process.

Introduction

Starting Points (hereafter referred to as SP), a project of not-for-profit NGO Focus on the Family Australia (FOFA), is a development program targeting parents and caregivers of 0 – 4 year old children. The program development brief assumed a ‘need’ amongst parents for development in their parental roles, and that parental skill was amenable to training. Literature accessed confirmed this, for example, revealing that more than half of parents researched recently expressed a ‘lack confidence in their parenting’, while eighty percent ‘want(ed) more information and support on parenting issues’ (Tucci 2004). It uses both standard social marketing management planning and non-standard ‘peer activist facilitation’ marketing techniques. Both marketing and delivery (facilitation) of SP programs are achieved through local volunteers. With limited training, carefully selected volunteers initiate training programs within their own neighborhoods through social marketing techniques, and facilitate them. We have termed these pivotal actors ‘Peer Activist Facilitators’ (PAFs). Often parents (‘peers’) themselves, PAFs are not, even after undertaking training in facilitation of the high quality, evidence based course materials, parenting ‘experts’. Rather, they share the materials and activities with their peers, in a collegial fashion.

This can be characterized as a ‘community development’ approach to mental and social health, based in the values of the ‘primary health care’ movement (WHO, 1986; Wass, 1994; p1; Naidoo and Will, 1994) and enabled by social marketing (Egger, Spark et al. 1992). This approach was pioneered by FOFA in other successful parenting programs. Over 2000 PAFs have delivered programs with 40,000 plus Australian parents, suggesting that social marketing may be strengthened, beginning with the NPD process, by the inclusion and use of conceptual frameworks which specifically address social dimensions of the focal market. Little research attention has been paid to the process of NPD within social marketing which aims at community development. A better understanding of this should assist a wide range of social marketing practitioners as they develop programs in the future.
Conceptual Background

Social marketing was an early application of the ‘marketing concept’ (Kotler and Zaltman 1971). ‘Social marketing’ implies that marketing concepts and techniques are applied to obtain socially desirable outcomes (Lefebvre and Flora 1988). A review and analysis of ‘health promotion’ literature from the period 1982 to 1996 concluded that some health promoters have moved into very effective forms of relationship marketing (Hill, 2001).

We contend that a traditional managerial ‘marketing mix’ approach, while useful, is not optimal in community development directed social marketing, where the overall aim is enhanced capacity of a focal community to manage well its own key interests. The ‘community development’ concept, especially where a peer leadership type strategy is central, contrasts with expert driven programming, and with much ‘top down’ social marketing e.g. mass media based road trauma campaigns. Parents seem most likely to participate in parenting development activity via their involvement in relationships and broader social networks - means suited to relationship marketing (such as a strong focus on dyadic relationships, trust and customisation) and markets-as-networks approaches. The latter pays particular attention to the constituent actors, structures and exchanges within relevant social networks (Mattson, 2000).

A number of models in the literature vie to explain and guide New Product Development (NPD) processes. These were derived originally from goods marketing. The classic linear NPD conceptualisation is inadequate within the context of social marketing for community development. Typically it proposes a lock-step set of processes, often performed by different organisational departments or people: idea generation ➔ idea screening ➔ concept testing ➔ business analysis ➔ product development ➔ test marketing ➔ commercialisation ➔ monitoring and evaluation (Trott, 2005, p398). Brown and Eisenhardt (1995) delineated three main streams in research within the NPD literature, focused around issues of planning, communication and problem solving. Saren earlier (1984) offered a more detailed classification of (seven) models of the product innovation process.

Departmental and activity ‘stage’ models appear inadequate because they assume greater linearity than is actually possible within the context, and that different ‘departments’ are necessarily involved. With SP, different groups were involved, but never autonomously taking charge of the product, and always under supervision of the Program Manager. However, the ‘concurrent engineering’ concept (Trott, 2005, p. 402) whereby activities such as strategic planning, concept generation and technical development actually occur concurrently, seems highly applicable.

Of Saren’s remaining categories, the most relevant are actually called ‘network’ models, although the term ‘network’ is used more narrowly and informally than in the markets-as-networks literature. This recent thinking views the NPD process as one of accumulation of knowledge from different sources, snowball like. External linkages enhance knowledge, as do internal areas such as marketing, R&D, finance and manufacturing (Trott, 2005, p. 404, see also Cusumano and Takeushi, 1991, Kamath and Liker, 1994, and Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Further, this learning is viewed as a continually iterating process. This paper addresses how the SP experience of NPD may inform the development of models of the NPD process in such contexts.
Methodology

The methodology involved a series of approximately twenty *depth interviews*, and in some cases written responses, with key stakeholders in the *SP NPD* process. These included the Program Manager, FOFA management both in Australia and in the US, six members of the reference panel, a range of parents/caregivers, pilot program participants (both facilitators in training and parents), and potential program sponsors within community organisations. These interviews were in some cases reiterated over a period of over a year, in a longitudinal manner. A detailed written diary detailing contacts, activities, issues arising and progress, was kept by the responsible Project Manager, extending over a period of twelve months. In addition, written progress reports to particular stakeholders (e.g. to management, the reference panel) covering the full development period were accessed, as well as the relevant academic literatures. External university based consultants contributed the initial impact evaluations. Analysis was prepared from these sources. The study is essentially qualitative and interpretive in nature and intent. Findings are presented here in narrative style.

Findings

The initial *corporate brief* contained three mandatory deliverables: the program would *address the needs of parents of 0 - 4 year olds*, be *proactive* (targeting the general parent population, not only established ‘problem’ situations) and *evidence based*. The *SP NPD* process occurred over a period of 12 months from receipt of initial brief to completion of pilot programs and the commencement of national roll out. The various development phases/tasks overlapped considerably. *Primary research into consumer ‘needs’* was initiated through a set of five focus groups conducted with parents drawn from various socio-economic contexts: (two) established playgroups from contrasting socio-economic areas; a group of fathers; and (two) purpose-formed groups incorporating a cross section of married and single parents, diverse nationalities and discrete family cultures (parents from European multigenerational households, and from Asian countries). The groups addressed the broad question ‘What would parents of 0-4 year old children want from a parent development program’? Standard manual content analysis of the group discussions (Kassarjian 1977), revealed a strong desire for specific knowledge (concerning childrens’ needs, parents’ needs, options for parents etc.), a desire to feel confident, and to have specific skills, such as the setting of boundaries for behaviour, methods of correction and of positive communication with their children. These *themes* were common across all groups. Thus, exploratory qualitative research suggested the general shape of both the content which parents wanted, and program structures which may suit them.

Twenty *competitor parenting programs*, originating both in Australia and overseas, were *analyzed*. Their aims and methodologies were found to vary greatly. None specifically targeted parents/carers of the 0 – 4 age group. Virtually all targeted ‘problem’ situations, i.e. were reactive rather than proactive. None claimed or could be established to be evidence (research) based in any rigorous way. Delivery was by every means from packaged self managed ‘book’ based learning to some incorporating group work of various sorts. None claimed or could be established to operate predominantly via a ‘peer facilitator’ methodology. Rather, most appeared to approximate some variation of an ‘expert’ lead approach. Critically, a series of *contacts was initiated* with potential sponsoring community organisations, such as maternal and child health centres, playgroups, churches and the like, who contributed input
Concerning parents with whom they are associated, as well as on distribution issues. Parents also discussed their social contacts, means of learning about parenting issues, factors (especially relationship and network factors) to be considered regarding communication with parents, their likely participation, and the like. The reference panel was comprised of several Australian and US child development/parenting psychologists, two experienced educationalists with specific expertise in interactive group learning, an experienced social marketer, and a senior maternal and child health worker. This group contributed, through iterative questioning conducted mainly via email or telephone, further insights concerning parental ‘needs’. These responses were framed around a set of questions which were derived from the previous qualitative work with parents.

Clearly differentiated program/product positioning emerged from this extensive research work. The program would: be strengths based (i.e. build on parents’ existing strengths); be preventative and proactive with an early intervention focus (c.f. ‘reactive’ programs, which address already evident problems); be evidence (research) based; have rigorous evaluation built in, not added on; operate through the PAF model; and be specifically developed to conform to Australian government initiatives and priorities under the National Agenda for Early Childhood.

Immediately following the initial parent focus groups, and continuing throughout the following months until sign-off on course materials production (DVD, parent notes and facilitator guides, slides, support materials, detailed session guides etc.), curriculum design and technical development work was undertaken on content, format and materials. The program took shape as comprising four sessions, each of around 2.5 hours duration, with respective themes of: 1) Understanding your child’s temperament/personality; 2) Building your child’s self esteem; 3) Correcting your child / setting boundaries; 4) Your child’s relationships. This strongly reflected the findings from the parent focus groups, reference panel input, and literature search. Iterative refinement, especially following exposure to different groups drawn into the development process over time, was evident. These iterations were linked to a range of negotiations and sign-offs on curriculum content and presentation throughout the full 12 month period. The technical development phase was extensive. Successive alterations of text for printed materials etc. proved difficult due both to task complexity and to the number of groups required to sign-off as the coalition/network developed. Filming was necessary in several Australian states and in the US. A full publication, video and AV production schedule ran in parallel with the processes described above from about month four of the 12 month NPD period.

Formal marketing plan development commenced towards the end of the NPD process. Strategic positioning and product development had to be relatively final before pricing in particular could be seriously addressed. Planning included each element of traditional social marketing programming, including use of a fully integrated communications mix, although with minimal paid advertising. Extensive use of data bases in the manner of direct marketing was important in the development and maintenance of relationship building communications with all stakeholders within the complex SP network which was emerging. Evaluation program research design was undertaken, again in tandem with the stakeholder research, technical and other development tasks. This commenced at about the half way mark of the NPD process, accelerating with the last 30 percent of the NPD process to be ready for launch. Research with a number of stakeholders now in the network, especially government and potential sponsors, had revealed it was essential to have rigorous independent evaluation in place for roll out, directly springing from the program objectives and design, and not as an after thought. Further, the NPD process was guided at a number of points by a desire to
conform to Australian government initiatives and priorities under the National Agenda for Early Childhood. Conduct of three pilot programs marked the penultimate stage of the NPD process. There was an iterative refinement process through this piloting. Finally the DVD scripting, shooting and editing, artwork, design, slides and printed materials for both parents and facilitators were signed off for full materials production, and the rollout planned.

Discussion

An effective NPD process must at minimum result in a product which suits and is wanted by the target market(s). Critically however, the switch from piloting to roll out was only possible because of relationship and network building with a wide range of individuals and groups who had participated in the NPD process: PAFs, community sponsor organizations and parents attracted to actual programs. This encourages significant innovation in NPD model building within social marketing for community development. The social processes occurring will need to find inclusion as a continuous, expanding and dynamic element in such models. The case supports criticism of the linear models of NPD as too simplistic in this context, and lacking provision for feedback, or for concurrent activities. The reported process was highly iterative at many levels and stages. Various repetitive sign-off procedures and the like appeared while in progress as frustrating glitches. But due to the necessity of coalition and network building for successful community development, such things need to be seen as simply the nature of the task. This work requires a special set of relationship and project management skills, in addition to the more usual requisite social marketing management skills. The ‘concurrent engineering’ concept (Trott, 2005, p. 402) whereby activities such as strategic planning, concept generation and technical development occur concurrently, seems highly applicable. The percentage of each activity occurring varied as time progressed e.g. all occurred at the start, but with the highest percentage in strategic planning. By later stages of development, the percentage mix of activities altered until it was heavily ‘technical’. Finally ‘commercialisation’ (in this context, planning and roll-out) dominated. The FOFA development group worked as a ‘cross functional team’ team, and with other teams, but they were never all dedicated to the one project exclusively, and always worked directly with the Project Manager.

The NPD process which emerged also appears to resemble a traditional ‘craft’ model of manufacture, whereby a small specialist organization continues ‘the traditional method of … manufacturing … single, one-off products… to the specific requirement of the user… to dimensions given ….. All the activities …may be undertaken by one person’ (paraphrasing Trott, p. 400).

Conclusions

Recent NPD models emphasise the importance of external linkages in the NPD process, and the case supports this. A key conclusion is that the social dimension and dynamics require even stronger emphasis. Where problems have occurred during early roll out, they seem largely attributable to some deficit in network building which has occurred (due to resource limitations) during the NPD and associated marketing planning processes. The nature of the exchanges with other corporate actors, and factors which will favour the relationship and network building needed (Wilkinson, 2001; Todeva, 2006) require further detailed analysis. Many desirable social marketing tasks could benefit from the development of an improved
NPD process model, applying adequate seriousness to the ‘social’ in ‘social marketing’, while drawing on extant NPD models.
References

Bogenschneider, K., Riley, D., Morgan, K., Lundeen, S., 1994. Can government promote
competent parenting? (Wisconsin Family Impact Seminar Briefing Report 3). University of
Wisconsin Center for Excellence in Family Studies, Madison: WI.

Child Protection Clearing House, 8 (2).


Hill Book Company, Sydney.

Hill, R. M., 2001. The marketing concept and health promotion: a survey and analysis of

Community Health Studies, 13(1), pp. 66 - 73.

4 (June), 8 – 18.

Business Review, 74 (Nov-Dec), 154- 70.

Journal of Marketing, 35(July), pp. 3-12.


Nonaka, I., Takeuchi, H., 1995. The Knowledge Creating Company, Oxford University Press,
Oxford.

Saren, M., 1984. A classification of review models of the intro-firm innovation process. R&D
Management, 14 (1), 11 – 24.

London.


