

## Next Generation panel session

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### Introduction

The complexity of so many social problems means that the future of social change lies with interdisciplinarity, in fact with *trans*disciplinarity, where different disciplines focus on shared goals rather than their just getting on with their own approaches in un-integrated parallel. I am in no doubt that social marketing can play a strong part in the interdisciplinary future of behaviour change, but it will fail to do so if it keeps being dismissed – as it often is in the UK - as being a trendy but ineffectual discipline of shallow, woolly thinkers. This isn't a fair assessment, but it's worth unpicking where this opinion comes from if we're going to be part of the transdisciplinary future of social change.

**The first problem is with evidence. Word on the street is that social marketing has a poor, 'unscientific' evidence base.**

I think there are a few reasons for this. Firstly, our practice-based 'evidence' in the form of case study write ups often doesn't make it into the journals with the highest impact and so we are dismissed by disciplines which have a heritage of rigorous measurement and four star publication.

I think there's a disconnect between practice and academia in social marketing. In the UK many practitioners of social marketing have little if any academic grounding in it, so their interventions can be shallow, their evaluation flimsy and if there is a publication it tends not to be descriptive and shallow. In fact, although evaluation is built into social marketing planning processes, in reality when funding is tight and the demands for results are made too soon after launch, evaluations are often rather token. And we never talk about what went wrong.

Also, our evidence base has suffered in the credit crunch because a lot of academic social marketers I work with are being forced to accept humdrum consultancy work to pay the bills rather than pursue funding for truly innovative projects of their own. Again, the result is a lack of research published in top quality journals because there just isn't the scope to be that innovative, and isn't the scope to do proper evaluation.

Finally, our reputation as serious thinkers of behaviour change is threatened by the agencies who do very visible, fizzy and fluffy 'social' marketing, which often merely scratch the surface of complex social problems. I'm with Jeff Jordan on this, and so are the British policy makers. These agencies have creative flair which washes well with the commissioning practitioners, but is seen through by policy makers and academics.

**Secondly, we need to focus much more on innovation, and less on ringfencing our discipline – that's right, it's time to move on beyond definitions of what we've BEEN DOING, and focus on what we NEED TO DO to make a real contribution to the interdisciplinary future of social change.**

Let's stop defining and labelling. It's a distraction and makes us look paranoid and insecure.

Let's focus instead on theoretical innovations. As Craig Lefebvre put it yesterday, the solution you come up with is dependent on how you frame the problem. His focus was on the market rather than the individual. I tend to talk about culture rather than the individual. Either way, let's move on from individualism and realise that a) there's only so much you can do through persuasion; b) that as we saw from Brian Wansink, individuals don't often know what influences their behaviour; and c) there are many routes to changing society, like changing culture and changing policy.

What's important about this is that the tools marketing gives us won't necessarily be enough to make a dent in complex societal problems. But they're likely to help – so we need to team up with other disciplines for real impact. The future is transdisciplinary.

**Finally, we have to be more actively critical of commercial marketing.**

Gerard Hastings wrote that social marketing is considered a gentle herbivore, fighting against the tyrannosaurus of commercial marketing. Apart from a few vocal critics, social marketers tend to leave commercial marketers alone to get on with their manipulating, behavioural conditioning, viral infiltration of our minds and cultures. All we do is acknowledge some of their work as 'competition' to our behavioural goals, while they are busy kneecapping their commercial competitors and pulling out all the stops – well beyond exchange or voluntary behaviour change – to make yet more profit.

Jim Mintz asked yesterday 'what is so wrong with marketing?' As a discipline, nothing, but as a practice, it just provides so much of the landscape for our obese, car-obsessed, materialistic, fizzy drink guzzling, tobacco-addicted, binge-drinking friends and neighbours for it to be ignored.

**I say, less fizz more fight.**

Thank you.