Bristol Social Marketing Centre
Spotlight on Social Marketing #14: Making a difference in climate change

There are some clear steps being made in the right direction with engaging people in climate change. We now understand that, for example, knowledge on its own isn’t enough, that concern doesn’t necessarily lead to action, that shock and disaster tactics won’t work, that talking about the global picture makes little difference to people taking action in their everyday lives, and that instead we need local, tangible and achievable goals and activities.

Yet I believe we’re still making a fundamental error of judgement. A commonly used strategy, for example, is to employ ‘nudge’ tactics as a way of encouraging people to inch forward and change their behaviour. Yes, giving people something relatively easy to do and progressively moving the goal posts, in theory, can make people ready, and able, to move in the right direction – but climate change is unprecedented in the challenges it’s presenting to humanity and in its three dimensions: spatiality, temporality and uncertainty, so the strategies employed and the approaches taken also have to be fundamentally different and something ‘new’.

So are we not looking at this the wrong way round? Many of us will be familiar with one of the oldest proverbs in the English language, ‘you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink’, in that unless people develop their own motivation to act, the results of existing strategies may only ever achieve small changes. To achieve more substantial changes and, more importantly, changes that are embedded and maintained for the long term, we need to consider the starting point for many and the reasons why some people act and others don’t. Even if people are empowered to make choices and say what goals/steps are best for them, and are provided with the opportunities and capabilities to follow that through, there is still a need to understand, and in many cases change, the underlying reason why people are taking action in the first place.

It seems unlikely that we can apply an existing motivational model in the climate context, albeit adapted, as it’s been known for decades that motivation is context specific - so we can expect, can we not, that the way forward involves a previously unidentified combination of characteristics and factors? As yet, the answer is unclear. Part of the beauty of social marketing, particularly in addressing such an all-encompassing common good, is its freedom and capacity to think outside the box, to find the ‘new’, to be fit for purpose, to encourage creativity - because, after all, if the solutions were simple, straightforward and understood, some MNC would be selling them by now on the supermarket shelf next to the baked beans. Whether or not we use 4Ps, 4Cs, or a combination of T, U and Z, the results are in the change in behaviour - and not just the change, more so the long term durability of that change.

It is worth remembering that society is made up of integrated individuals and each one of us has to make a decision about how we behave in terms of sustainability, consumption, our day to day lifestyles and the impact of that on others – and realise the potential influence that we have within our personal life, social networks and at work, whether we are a CEO of a company or someone in the mailing room, and that if we are motivated to make a difference, it is possible...