

Reinforcing social marketing's role in age of austerity



By [Issa Sikiti da Silva](#)

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In a world dictated by the profit-obsessed corporate and manipulated by commercial marketing, which sometimes resort to unethical practices to achieve its goals, social marketing has a critical role to play in steering behavioural change in society.



Gerard Hastings

Addressing marketers, journalists, researchers and representatives from various government departments last week at the Sandton Sun in Johannesburg, British academic Gerard Hastings said social marketing, which uses marketing tools and ideas to improve health and society, is a solid deterrent in this world ravaged by greed and self-interest of free market capitalism.

Quoting from an eminent marketing guru, Prof Michael Thomas, said Hastings of free market capitalism: "We have unleashed a monster that no one can control, even that minority that profits from it.

"Unashamed self-interest is a vice"

"Unashamed self-interest is a vice, not a virtue. We must recognise that the usefulness of an activity is not necessarily measured by its profitability, and that what someone earns is not an indicator of their talents and abilities, still less of their moral stature."

While both social marketing and commercial marketing are about people, some observers firmly believe the latter has lost its moral stature, thanks to its new 'profit-first' role.

Hastings, of the Institute of Social Marketing at the University of Stirling in Scotland, told the masterclass audience: "We live in difficult times where the financial crisis, caused by greed of business, is biting.

"Marketing is often a dirty word - manipulation, exploitation and synthetic needs. All the more reason to think about the good it can do, recognise the problems but offer a way forward. Its extreme depredations prove its power."

Impact on health and society

When commercial marketing 'coerces' consumers into spending their hard-earned cash by all means without weighting the pros and cons of such a process, social marketing quickly steps in by critically examining the impact of commercial marketing on health and society.

"If marketing is a means of influencing consumer behaviour, social marketing is a means of influencing social and health behaviour," the audience was told.

Defining social marketing as a science that is concerned with the application of marketing knowledge, concepts, and techniques to enhance social as well as economic ends, as per Lazer and Kelley's theory, Hastings added it is also concerned with analysis of the social consequence of marketing policies, decisions and activities.

Throughout his lecture, Hastings demonstrated that, while commercial marketing dictates the rules of the game to the consumer and provides very few options, social marketing - through case studies and interactive tasks - gives consumers many options to make informed choices, which could possibly culminate in the change of societal behaviour.

Some of the tools

Partnership, lots of information, giving them a chance to make their choices and affordability, among others, are just some of the tools that could empower the consumer and lead to behaviour change - the ultimate goal of social marketing.

"You can learn more about your clients, their needs, aspirations and priorities," he advised. "You can learn more about the pressures that push in the opposite direction, and the potential of reducing these pressures, for instance: price.

"Alternatively, you may find potential for alliances. What do you do? Compete or cooperate? Above all, though, this exercise demonstrates the similarities between the two tasks and relevance of marketing to each," Hastings said, calling these methods the benefits of competitive analysis. He insisted that any intervention in attempting to change behaviour must be multifaceted, customer-oriented, based on stakeholder engagement and outcome research, and formative.

Surely, in this age of austerity and 'commercial darkness', the role of social marketing can no longer be ignored as consumers become value-conscious people.

The social marketing masterclass was organised by the [Brand Leadership Academy](#), in association with Bizcommunity.com, TNS, *Sunday Times* and *Sowetan*. It preceded the [Public Sector Excellence Awards](#) on Friday, 19 November 2010.

ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA

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