

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN COMMERCE, ECONOMICS & MANAGEMENT

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SOCIAL ENTERPRISES: INTERPRETATION AND MARKETING STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

Social enterprises are described distinctively in different parts of the world. However, on the basis of some common characteristics they are defined as businesses addressing the social needs through their products, services or by employing disadvantaged people. The main goal of a social enterprise is the sustainability of both financial and social goals. It faces significant business and social challenges because of limited funding, concern for resource opportunities etc. But, marketing a social enterprise is a stabilizing act. Differential marketing emerges out to be a successful way forward for various social enterprises. This paper looks fundamentally at what constitutes a social enterprise, moving to the examples of the same. These examples are then analyzed with regards to their marketing strategies, with an aim to extract broad learnings that could be replicated elsewhere. The paper at length describes and identifies a common set of marketing practices that could be utilized for marketing on an international level by a social enterprise.

KEYWORDS

Cause Marketing, Marketing and CSR, Marketing Social Ventures, Non-Governmental Organizations Marketing, NPO Marketing Strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Social enterprises have a long history under various kinds of names and tendencies. The term 'social enterprise' has different associations at different places. Right from having philanthropic roots in the US, social enterprises are known for their cooperative roots in the UK, Europe and Asia. In order to understand the true essence of a social enterprise, it is important to first take a glance at the meaning of a social enterprise in various parts of the world.

METHODOLOGY

The paper uses a range of recently published works along with past snapshots of marketing materials utilized by the various mentioned brands. The study makes extensive use of secondary research.

OBJECTIVES

The objective of this paper is to understand the meaning of the term 'social enterprise' and to describe and identify a common set of marketing practices that could be utilized for marketing on an international level by a social enterprise.

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Social Enterprise Alliance (SEA), U.S. defines a social enterprise as an "organization or venture that advances its primary social or environmental mission using business methods." The two characteristics which differentiate a social enterprise from other businesses, non-profits and government agencies are:

1. Addressing the social needs directly through their products and services or by employing disadvantaged people.
2. Using earned revenue schemes to pursue a double or triple bottom line, either alone or as a noteworthy party of a non-profit's mixed revenue stream including charitable contributions and public sector subsidies.

AUSTRALIA

After a research initiated in 2009 by Social Traders and Australian Centre for Philanthropy and Non-profit Studies at Queensland University of Technology to define a social enterprise, in 2010, they defined social enterprises as organizations that:

1. are led by an economic, social, cultural or environmental mission consistent with a public or community benefit;
2. trade to fulfill their mission;
3. derive a substantial portion of their income from trade; and
4. Reinvest the majority of their profits/surplus in the fulfillment of their mission.

INDIA

In the Indian subcontinent, a social enterprise may be defined as:

1. A trust registered under various Indian State Trust Act;
2. A Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), usually registered as a society under Indian Societies Registration Act, 1860;
3. A section 25 company registered under Indian Companies Act, 1956;
4. A business with an aim for making profit, although the primary aim is to alleviate poverty through a sustainable business model

In India, instead of using the term 'social enterprise', terms like NGOs and NPOs (Non-profit organizations) are more popular as such organizations are legally allowed to raise funds for non-business activities.

THE UNITED KINGDOM

In the British context, the term social enterprise includes community enterprises, credit unions, trading arms of charities, employee-owned business, co-operatives, development trusts, housing associations, social firms and leisure trusts. They are different from charities and from private sector companies with well formulated policies on corporate social responsibility.

Supported and government-backed definition of a social enterprise was given by Department of Trade and Industry Report 'Social Enterprise: a strategy for success' report as: a business with primarily social objectives whose surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose.

The three usual characteristics of social enterprises are defined by Social Enterprise London as:

1. Viable trading organizations having an operating surplus and directly involved in producing goods or services to a market;
2. Enterprises with social aims, having ethical values, dedicated to local capacity building and liable to their members and the community as a whole;
3. Autonomous organizations having governance and ownership structure based on participation by stakeholder group or trustee, distributing profits either to the stakeholders or reinvesting them for community benefit.

Thus, we see that different countries of the world have their own different ways of defining what constitutes a social enterprise. However, there are some common characteristics that run through the distinct culture of a social enterprise all across the globe. By identifying such unique characteristics, we shall be able to construct an inclusive, though not exhaustive, definition of a social enterprise. On the basis of the above definitions of social enterprises in different countries, the characteristics of a social enterprise include some, all, but are not limited to the following:

- addressing social needs through its products, services or by employing disadvantaged people
- trading to accomplish a social mission
- deriving a significant portion of their income from trade
- reinvesting a major part of their profits in the enterprise to fulfill the social mission
- having mixed revenue stream- earned + charitable contributions
- may include both voluntary and paid work
- at least 30% of the employees are disabled or long-term unemployed

In simple words, an enterprise is a business formed or created to earn profits. These businesses are often termed as for-profit organizations. Their aim is to earn maximum profits by satisfying the needs and wants of their target customers. In their attempt of being commercially successful, they sometimes forget to address the social problems prevailing in the society. So while a business might be able to address the consumer's demand for well-made cotton fabric, such organizations would fail to address the issues of hunger and unemployment in the society.

NPOs came into existence to cater to these social needs of the community, which at times remain unattended by the for-profit organizations. These not-for-profit organizations work for community upliftment. Social enterprises are the for-profit social ventures which blend the profit motive with a social objective. Thus, a social enterprise can be defined as a business which exist to help the community and to make money in order to sustain itself. They are well associated with the words- community driven that is driven by resources extracted from the community and commercially successful that is commercially viable to sustain themselves on a long term basis.

Social enterprises need to be differentiated from Not-for-profit and socially responsible ventures. While being similar in its objective to the for-profit social ventures, the not-for-profit venture differ from the former as the latter can use philanthropic funding as their start-up and on-going operations cost. Also, for-profit social ventures re-invest a major part of their earnings to further their social objectives. On the other hand, the principal aim of socially responsible ventures is to create economic value while respecting ethics and environment.

Associations with non-profits might help for-profit social ventures safeguard advantageous position without foregoing social performance. Often, activities which can't contribute to a social enterprise's profitability but can add on to its success are integrated. For e.g.: GBF (Grassroots Business Fund) NPO provides business advisory services to its clients while its private investment fund provides capital for investment in high impact businesses.

In case of a for-profit organization the primary challenge for the entrepreneur is to make the enterprise commercially viable and profitable on a long term basis. Similarly, in case of a for-profit organization, the key challenge is to work continuously and consistently towards advancing and addressing the primary issue for social upliftment. However, while building a successful organization, social entrepreneurs face the dual objective challenge- social and profit instead of having one. Certain social objectives can be converted into monetary terms but comparing financial and social objectives on similar parameters is a difficult task. Furthermore, because the social objectives are intangible and difficult to measure, it becomes difficult for social entrepreneurs to make decisions considering both social and financial impact in consideration. Thus, convincing the stakeholders about the potential benefit of a venture becomes difficult for social entrepreneurs. A for-profit social enterprise's approach should emphasize more on financial side as making more money enables them to pursue their social missions. The more successful a social enterprise is, the more successful its social impact would be. Their ultimate objective is sustainability of both financial and social goals. But often, social enterprises appear to be concentrating more on the social part without being enterprising. They must have a social impact theory with a feasible business model. A strong business model intended to make a social impact and adequate profits should be followed. Though difficult, this collaboration can be achieved by developing profitable strategies based on savings in cost, serving overlooked markets and targeting socially oriented customers.

To dive deeper into the concept, let us have a look at some successful social enterprises across the globe. Such in depth analysis will help us better understand the structure, culture and the true nature of such an enterprise.

SOME SUCCESSFUL SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

GRASSROOTS BUSINESS FUND (GBF)

GBF is a Washington DC based social enterprise with a mission to "grow viable businesses that generate sustainable earnings or savings for people with low incomes in Africa, Asia, and Latin America". It builds and supports high-impact enterprises in developing countries to capacitate large number of poor, as producers of income-generating merchandise and products, as consumers of cost-effective goods and services and as independent entrepreneurs. The idea is to enable all inclusive growth by completing the loop from producers to consumers along with an element of entrepreneurship added to augment the structure. Investment alone is not enough to help a business improve, scale and succeed. Every business faces diverse challenges on its road to profitability, sustainability and expanding social impact. These challenges become all the more crucial for businesses operating in emerging markets. In emerging markets, the business challenges grow multi-fold to the lack of various augmented services such as proper infrastructure, government policies etc. Thus, to help its clients' business grow, GBF provides them with business expertise on the basis of their needs. GBF's staff members in its headquarters and regional offices work closely with its clients, supporting them through rigorous objectives and deliverables. It provides expert services to its clients on various business challenges they might face, ranging from – financial management, operations, supply chain, strategic planning, and governance to environmental and social impacts.

It uses the blend of private investment fund and non-profit organizations. Private investment fund is used to make equity, mezzanine equity, mezzanine debt, and straight debt investments, to provide capital for investment in low income community servicing businesses. While, non-profit organizations provide business advisory services to clients.

GBF intends to invest in for-profit ventures having a strong dedication to bring about measurable and viable social and economic impact at the base of the economic pyramid.

GIVEMETAP

Edwin Broni-Mensah founded GiveMeTap in Manchester, UK. This social enterprise helps people stay hydrated on the go and help provide clean water to people in Africa. For every GiveMeTap bottle the consumers buy, they can get it refilled with the tap water, for free, from any café which has signed up as a 'provider' for the same. 70% of the money made from sale is used to provide clean water to people in Africa. It thus provides three benefits- people in Africa get clean water, people in UK get water refills for free, helps in reduction of plastic bottles in landfill.

GiveMeTap has completed various projects on providing clean and safe water to African people. In July 2013, they completed a project in Kpakpalamuni, Wa, Ghana. Before July 2013, the people of Kpakpalamuni had no source of safe and clean drinking water. The untreated water, in the community of about 850 people came from a single stream. People had to compete with wildlife for that water. With the help of Deloitte and ProNet in Ghana, GiveMeTap installed a hand pump borehole at the place providing the community people access to clean and safe water.

GiveMeTap accepts order for customized GiveMeTap bottles from organizations, as a special gift to its customers and employees. This helps GiveMeTap to tell their story about bringing clean and safe water to people in Africa to a larger audience. They use an interactive website to engage visitors and to get orders.

SERVALS AUTOMATION PRIVATE LIMITED (PVT. LTD.)

India based Servals Automation is built on a low-capital model with commitment to social values. The organization is addressing the global social problem of energy conservation by encouraging the use of alternate and renewable energy resources, with a focus on rural economic independence, particularly for people living below poverty line in the developing countries. The Servals group is in pursuit of energy solutions which are:

- Clean
- Affordable
- Sustainable
- Green
- Lead to reduction of indoor air pollution
- Lead to reduction of carbon footprints

Servals group manufactures socially relevant products like energy efficient kerosene burners and kerosene stoves, concentrating primarily on providing clean, green, affordable and sustainable energy for cooking and lightning purposes. They call themselves a “commercial organization working for profit with a social outlook” focusing to address the international problem of energy conservation. Their front-running product ‘Venus kerosene burner’ offers 30% savings on kerosene consumption. These kerosene burners are manufactured at rural areas providing employment opportunities to rural people.

The group is working with NGO's having networks with SHG (Self-Help Groups) for marketing their products. Their marketing model use SHG members as marketing partners.

TRASHY BAGS

Trashy Bag, a Ghana based social enterprise that turns plastic sachets into useful and attractive bags and other products. These plastic sachets can't be reprocessed in any way apart from cleaning. The enterprise has reprocessed approximately 20 million sachets since its founding in 2007. It is creating employment opportunities by paying people for collection of sachets, washing them and ultimately stitching them into bags. It is using this opportunity to educate people about the dangers of land pollution and encouraging them to dispose of their rubbish responsibly. The bags made by the enterprise are sold locally, online and exported.

The bags at the organization are produced based on the orders received from the management team and are filed as per the needs of Trashy Bags Showroom (located in the same building as their workshop) or from other external customers. All the products are checked for flaws and defects before being put for sale. Rejected products are kept aside for recycling and the products with minor errors are separated out and sold at discount prices in the Trashy Bags Showroom.

The organization markets its products through its showroom- chiefly to expatriate, diplomats and tourists from other countries, website and stores focusing on promoting economically and environmentally sustainable products from developing countries (like globalmamas.org). In addition, the organization also presents itself at official events or on public places.

NOVICA

NOVICA, a mission-driven crafts company with offices in Brazil, Peru, Mexico, Ghana, Indonesia, Thailand and India, was founded in 1999. By eliminating the intermediaries, NOVICA empowers the artisans to sell their products, in an international market at a premium, and protect their margins. Its partnership with several international organizations (like National Geographic, to name one) increases its visibility and diversifies its sales avenues through a wholesale channel. Their team of local experts based in every region, provide artisans with all the support they need – from product development advice to quality control assistance, to make artisan's listing process smooth. It offers 0% interest loans to artisans who wish to expand their wider communities. To date (May 12, 2015), NOVICA has sent over \$60M to artisans around the world.

In the year 2010, NOVICA launched its own micro-credit program enabling customers and the internet community at large to fund interest-free micro loans to artisans.

The organization offers products in the categories of Home Décor (including area rugs, masks, mirrors, musical instruments etc.), Jewelry and Apparels, Paintings and Unique Gifts. It also lets people send gift cards to their loved ones through mail and email. It uses interactive website interface to market its products to the customers.

MARKETING A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

During the course of its operation, a social enterprise faces significant business and social challenges. Entrepreneurs choosing this path have to have their work speak for them. Because of limited funding, investment, concern for resource opportunities, social enterprises face immense pressure to grow. In any business, marketing is an elemental function to become financially sustainable. But, in a social enterprise, marketing is a stabilizing act. Every social enterprise makes its own decision about how to market- whether to create similar marketing messages as a for-profit business or using the social aspect of the business to provide it a preferential positioning among the competitors. Marketing might seem to be a luxury for the social enterprises because of the constraints under which they perform their business operations. However, with an increase in growth, the need for systematic planning and associated information increases, bringing effective marketing into the picture.

Due to the unique conduct of business, for a social enterprise it becomes essential to introduce itself to its customers, nurture the relationships and then earn loyal and repeat clients. While goal setting, it should focus on identification of strategic approaches defining its work activities. The social message which a social enterprise wishes to convey might not excite its customers. So, it is necessary to reach out to the right people. It needs to understand that customers will demand the same quality, value and services as they would from their profit organizations. They will value the social mission, but only after their expectations about quality are satisfied. A social enterprise can start by understanding:

- What is the kind of people it is trying to reach?
- What will make them want to buy its products or services?
- Where are they?
- What attitudes or beliefs could impact their decision to buy from it?

The answers to the above questions will help a social enterprise to identify its target customer base and it can then look for the answers to the following questions to derive its marketing strategy:

- What do their customers want that their competitors aren't delivering or can't deliver?
- Who is that really buys from them?
- What do they believe about their products or services in general?
- If they were to close, who would miss them and why?
- What is their USP?

Being socially responsible can't be a social enterprise's USP as a social mission alone is not helpful in building a customer base that creates real impact. Purposes don't make business rules immaterial, it makes them more important- because it's only when you have a big, loyal customer base that any business truly makes an impact. But, if it can develop a stature for its social performance and deliver goods or services whose cost and quality are considered at par with the competitors, customers might prefer them due to their commitment to social impact. However, social entrepreneurs must be careful while assuming this. They need to focus on the economic viability and profitability of the enterprise as much as on its social offering.

Achievable goals and targets need to be set and measured for managerial decision-making. Their need to be clear and distinct goals for governing financial decision making and for evaluating the success of the social offering. A balanced internal and external measurement system is important for guiding decision-making. The important point of consideration is that these measurement systems should be effectively designed to test the elementary assumptions of the venture model, which drive the linkages between the social and economic performance.

The amount of significance attached to the social value of an enterprise needs to be considered carefully while marketing it because some customers might be interested only in the price, quality and accessibility of the products and services offered rather than the "social mission" of the enterprise. On the other hand, for some, the enterprise's "social-mission" could be a key value. The social-goal of the enterprise should be well conveyed in the ways possible for the customers to relate to it. Various potential and socially responsible customers expect the social enterprises to be capable of exhibiting the social benefits of their doings.

Once, an enterprise becomes clear with the marketing messages it wishes to communicate, it should make certain that everything it does reflects the same. This can be well explained with the example of Servals Automation Private Limited. The social enterprise is committed towards bringing appropriate technology to the bottom of the pyramid to enhance their quality of life and they use this message while marketing their products. They came up with environment friendly products using renewable and alternate energy sources- Servals Plant oil stove and lamps use non-edible plant oil instead of kerosene, Servals TLUD Gasifier wood stove accepts waste materials like twigs, dry grass, husks etc. as fuel. Their products are manufactured at rural areas providing employment opportunities to rural people. So, their marketing message blends well with everything they do.

Differential marketing emerges out to be a successful way forward for various social enterprises. Marketing to the customers without an emphasis on the social message might prove effective. The stakeholders of the social enterprise should be presented with a detailed message laying down the "social-mission" and long-term plans to enable support and funding for future.

The social enterprise should:

- Have knowledge and understanding of the market
- Have adequate marketing budgets to reach out to its customers
- Segment its market on the basis of geography, demographics, psychographics, customer behavior to identify the segment whose needs the enterprise can cater to
- Prepare a well derived strategic marketing plan on the basis of the cause the social enterprise. An enterprise with a cause having a significant social impact and giving positive financial returns should be expanded, the one with a cause having a significant social impact and negative financial results should be nurtured and the one with a cause having a minimal social impact and positive financial results should be harvested.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed about the understanding of the concept of social enterprises taking into consideration some of the social enterprises from across the world and talked about the marketing strategies of the social enterprises. On the basis of the research on the topic, the following observations regarding the marketing of the social enterprises are made:

- **MARKETING ON INNOVATION:** Social enterprises come up with unique and innovative ideas of serving the community along with earning profits for themselves. They think of diverse ways of helping the community at large and making the world a better place to live in. Developing, designing and implementing an innovative idea is different from sustaining it. An innovative and good idea alone doesn't bring buyers. Sustaining an idea without depending heavily on charitable contributions will depend on how the social enterprise is able to position its products and services to its customer base. The 'idea' behind a social enterprise is its biggest asset, it needs to market itself around that idea to gain a customer base. An innovative idea, product or service gives the organization an advantage of being the front runner in the market. If an organization comes up with an innovative idea, marketing it and making it universally accessible will offer it the greatest advantage. It is all about influencing the prospective customers to make them believe in your cause and buy your products and services.
- **DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY:** In the era of real time connectivity, the organizations need to have a digital presence to educate more and more people about their cause and to reach out to their customers and prospective customers. An explosive growth in connectivity is clearly evident and it is increasing every fraction of a second. People are connecting and communication with each other on-the go. Communication technology has witnessed an explosion with the emergence of social media and smartphone.

Besides having an interactive website, it is favourable to have a presence on social media channels like Facebook, Twitter, and Google+ etc. However, the enterprise needs to decide on the social media platform they wish to use for their enterprise. The selection of right social media platform is essential to make a lasting impact on the customers. Mobile apps and advertisements are new age marketing tools used to reach out to the prospective customer base.

- **REALIZATION OF THE SALES VALUE OF CAMPAIGNING ON ISSUES RELATED TO THEIR MISSION AND BRAND.** : Just being a social enterprise working towards a 'cause' is not enough. It is essential to become a part of, or to organize campaigns related to your brand's mission and cause. It helps the enterprise to reach out to a wider audience, making people aware about its existence and increasing its credibility. It lets the customers relate to the organization's mission closely and inculcate in them the feeling that the organization is serious about its work and social cause. Campaigning on issues related to the brand image gives the brand and its social cause visibility and in return more customers. E.g.: To encourage cafes to refill the water bottles of commuters possessing GiveMeTap's branded bottles, it ran a campaign on London's tube network, to help people stay hydrated on the go. The campaign was also promoted with the launch of a new pink bottle. This got the enterprise an increase in its Facebook followers from 1,800 to 5,800+ and their sales also witnessed an increase of 1500%.
- Promotions to any specified target group of customers must be repeated at least a half a dozen times before there is any recall among potential clients. A significant aspect in establishing a well-renowned brand is inculcating brand recall among the target audience. With the influx of a wide variety of products and services in the market, addressing the same need, it becomes important that the marketing message reaches the customer through multiple touch points. The greater the number of interactions a customer has with a brand, the more likely is he to remember the message associated with the brand.
- An enterprise should not lead solely on the basis of its social message in its marketing communications. The emphasis should be laid more on the value of the products and services that the enterprise has on offer for the customers and how they can fulfill the expectations of the customers better than their competitors or other players in the market. One should keep in mind that while buying a product, the consumer is essentially looking to derive value from the product rather than serve a social cause. The appended social cause may provide the buyer with a greater level of satisfaction but it cannot serve his purpose of buying the product in the first place.
- **PUTTING IN A CELEBRITY.** People at large, get influenced by their favorite celebrity. This precisely explains the reason why more of the celebrities are found marketing the products and services in TV, radio, print commercials than professional models. If an enterprise is successfully able to associate itself with a celebrity or celebrities it will give them more visibility and acknowledgement. At times, when a celebrity is found endorsing a campaign or cause, their fans also feel connected to the cause. This could be well explained with the example of Clothing social enterprise Rapanui organized a stunt of famous weather man Michael Fish base jumping off a building. The company generated more money in sales than it costed them to organize the stunt.
- **PROMOTING THE ORGANIZATION RATHER THAN THE CAUSE.** Many social enterprises promote themselves rather than promoting the cause they are working for. People need to understand the cause of the enterprise rather than the enterprise as a whole. The organizations with a cause have a higher recall value in the minds of the customers. It is difficult to remember and recall the names of various organizations. But, it becomes comparatively easy to recall the organization once a person is aware and clear about the cause the organization is working for. The identification of an organization is chiefly because of the products or services they offer or for the cause they work for. If the people at large have clear understanding about the 'social cause' the organization is working for, it will be easier for them to relate the cause with the organization's name. It is the 'cause' which determines the worth of a 'social enterprise', than the name of the organization. The name matters, but it comes after the cause.

Social enterprises are great organizations working for great causes but they should not let marketing take a backseat, because their marketing efforts will determine their path to success in the long run.

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