Importance of Communication to Social Movements and Social Change

I grew up during the sixties—the rebellious decade. I was drawn to key social movements, including civil rights, women’s rights, gay rights, and anti-Vietnam War.

I was committed to making a difference and righting the wrongs of my generation—much to my father’s chagrin!

Social change is a process focused on altering the social order of society. These social justice initiatives take place on a local community level or become social movements on a grander scale.

Periods of social change precipitate social movements. And, social movements strive to initiate changes in society.

Social movements are powerful forces for inclusive social change. They generate “spaces” where people can come together to raise awareness about perceived injustices and ultimately create change in their lives and the greater community. A specific social movement is usually composed of many social movement organizations that share a common goal.

Communication is critical at every stage. This begins from the moment someone shares her passion and connects with others, through the exchange of ideas. Communication provides the frame for advocacy and activism. It is central in sustaining the social movement itself, as well as in shaping how the movement influences social change. “We are one but we are many.” (Panos London http://panos.org.uk/wp-content/files/2011/03/one_but_manyYdDOuA.pdf)

Narrative communication is a way of communicating through telling stories. Narratives recount stories, express opinions, or give information about past events from the perspective of the storyteller. Narratives provide an experience people can understand and share.

Today’s social movements require narratives that can be easily shared—in person and digitally. Social movements are more challenged than ever to get to a viral communication stage so their message can rise above the noise.
Social Movements and Social Change Communication Tools

The rise of social media holds promise for increased social change communication. Social network websites provide easy ways to find and connect with people who have similar feelings. New media platforms are used to launch viral campaign and create digital waves.

Jennifer Aaka and Andy Smith, authors of *The Dragonfly Effect*, show how social media technology can support social missions. Nonprofit consultant Beth Kanter has shown how social media tools have been used to create social change, including helping children in Cambodian orphanages.

The POST Method, developed by Forrester Research, provides a framework for blending traditional and new media. It is really simple, yet profound in that it provides a user-friendly system for using traditional and emerging communications channels. The acronym refers to the four-step approach:

\[ P \text{ is People} \]

Don’t start a social strategy until you know the capabilities of your audience. If you’re targeting college students, use social networks. If you’re reaching out to business travelers, consider ratings and reviews. Forrester has great data to help with this, but you can make some estimates on your own. Just don’t start without thinking about it.

\[ O \text{ is Objectives} \]

Pick one. Are you starting an application to listen to your customers, or to talk with them? To support them, or to energize your best customers to evangelize others? Or are you trying to collaborate with them? Decide on your objective before you decide on a technology. Then figure out how you will measure it.

\[ S \text{ is Strategy} \]

Strategy here means figuring out what will be different after you’re done. Do you want a closer, two-way relationship with your best customers? Do you want to get people talking about your products? Do you want a permanent focus group for testing product ideas and generating new ones? Imagine you succeed. How will things be different afterwards? Imagine the endpoint and you’ll know where to begin.

\[ T \text{ is Technology} \]
A community. A wiki. A blog or a hundred blogs. Once you know your people, objectives, and strategy, then you can decide with confidence.

Social marketing, not to be confused with social media marketing, is the systematic application of marketing to achieve specific behavioral goals for a social good. Social marketing is said to have “two parents”—a “social parent” = social sciences and social policy, and a “marketing parent” = commercial and public sector marketing approaches.

Philip Kotler and Gerald Selman coined the phrase Social Marketing in their seminal article, “Social Marketing: An Approach to Planned Social Change,” which appeared in the Journal of Marketing (Vol. 35, pp. 3-12) in July 1971. In the article, Kotler and Zaltman discussed how “the logic of marketing [could be applied] to social goals.”

Since 1971, social marketing has been used, literally, around the world to remediate a variety of health, environmental, and societal concerns. It provides a framework to empower different behavior, shift engagement, ensure just policies, and communicate to maintain gains and not lose grounds.

Social movement and social change communication brings people together to work collectively for the betterment of their lives and communities. It provides opportunities for engagement and inclusion like never before!