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Notes From the Field

Reaching the Hard-to-Reach With Hope and Help

BY FRANÇOIS LAGARDE AND MARIE GENDRON

How do you reach hard-to-reach segments of the population? This is the question at the heart of a provincewide social marketing initiative to support early childhood development in Quebec, Canada. The Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation, which funds the initiative, challenged a social marketing team to find ways to encourage and support parents, so they provide the right stimulation for children under the age of 6 years. Special emphasis was placed on parents living in socially and economically underprivileged conditions (see fondation-chagnon.org and helpthemgrow.com). Although the team obviously needed to consider and address “upstream” factors that cause poverty and problems in the first place (Andreasen, 2006; Donovan & Henley, 2010; Kotler & Lee, 2009), we were also specifically asked to reach and serve this particular segment of parents.

In our search for effective approaches, we quickly acknowledged that these parents are not “hard to reach” but rather they can be hard *for us* to reach. The following quote was particularly enlightening (Paquet, 1989):

Too much focus on health in working-class culture takes away the meaning of life and people’s zest for living. If the medical establishment wants to modify unhealthy habits among the working classes, it needs to provide more acceptable rewards. That means that Health Services need to be attuned to the working-class lifestyle. Yet, this appears to be difficult, because as health becomes increasingly institutionalized, it also becomes the exclusive preserve of experts. They control the entire process from the basic definition of health needs right through to how to meet them. As a result, concerns about working-class culture are mostly lost amid those of health professionals. (p. 104)

As a result, we did what social marketers do. We identified and questioned our preconceptions, then conducted extensive formative research so that we could

become totally immersed in the working-class reality. We engaged in a large number and variety of research activities:

- review of the literature and of similar initiatives;
- consultations with numerous child development and ethics experts, partners, community leaders, and professionals;
- examination of consumer marketing databases, including psychographics and lifestyle data;
- systematic and informal one-on-one interviews, as well as focus groups;
- consultations with community-based and parenting media that reach this audience; and
- extensive population-wide surveys.

The purpose of this article is not to write a case, but rather to share six strikingly simple conclusions from this experience:

1. Parents living in socially and economically underprivileged conditions do not respond well to more risk communication (e.g., “children who don’t have someone read to them for at least 15 minutes a day are at risk of poorer educational outcomes”). But they will respond to opportunities to be in control of some aspects of their lives.
2. Their fundamental motivation is universal: a healthy and happy child.
3. Parents do not feel incompetent, miserable, or helpless; they want to be valued and supported. In fact, it is not the lack of self-efficacy that would be the issue but rather overconfidence that they already do what’s needed.
4. They are focused on the present, not the future.
5. They face more barriers and therefore need concrete and practical help (e.g., the life-work balance is more difficult because they work for small employers who do not have supportive policies).
6. Obvious barriers include costs, lack of time due to competing tasks, and lack of access to services. But parents being physically and psychologically tired is also a major stress.

In short, they are seeking hope and help.

Commercial marketing literature on poor consumers provides interesting insights on how they work through their own challenges. For example, Chaudhuri (2010) outlines “how poor consumers fight back”:

They are not out of control in every aspect of their lives. (...) Low-income consumers often show great skills in exploiting their environment to exert some

control within their lives. (...) As a coping mechanism poor consumers' creativity comes forth in terms of innovative use of products or innovation of new technologies using simple and widely available materials. (...) Alternative market mechanisms managed by poor consumers with unique exchange rules to suit their own needs are also seen. (p. 264)

The implications for our initiative were multiple:

- In terms of positioning, we decided to focus initially on parents themselves, rather than their children, by positioning parents as their children's greatest star (being valued).
- We focused clearly on realistic calls to action that can be adopted in daily life, with the child's immediate positive response as the benefit (e.g., joy, babbling, laughter, or smile).
- The campaign led to a slight decrease in parents' sense of self-efficacy, which was, however, followed by an increase in information-seeking, participation in blogs, and forums, etc.
- We shared learnings from our formative research and evaluation with service providers to help them improve their services and reach at the community level (to deliver more relevant benefits and address barriers).
- We invested in social media to learn from parents, while stimulating an ongoing dialog with and among them.
- We learned that the duration of an initiative is likely to be key success factor. Early results show that parents from lower socioeconomic segments are responding even more positively than other segments, but only after a year of campaign implementation. This has been evidenced by a number of indicators, such as intentions to seek information and use resources.

Careful application of social marketing principles helped us successfully reach and engage this "hard to reach" segment of the population. As with any target market, the key was to first use research to understand these parents' values and constraints and then craft an initiative that recognizes and respects both their aspirations and their impediments. As a result, it delivers benefits they want in exchange for behaviors that they can fit into their daily lives.

Join the MarketMavens and share what you have learned about reaching hard-to-reach segments of the population. Visit socialmarketingquarterly.com/market-mavens.

About the Authors

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Marie Gendron has over 20 years of marketing and communications experience. She is currently the general manager of the Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation early childhood project and plays a lead role in the Help Them Grow campaign.

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