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An Interview With Tom Beall

BY BEVERLY SCHWARTZ

I met Tom over 20 years ago when we both worked on the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) “America Responds to AIDS” campaign. He represented Ogilvy Public Relations as the lead communications/social marketing contractor and I was the social marketing specialist for the CDC. Those were crazy busy years that helped to shape both of our careers. Over the years I have followed Tom’s work (sometimes working for a competing firm!). I have consistently been impressed with how Tom’s experienced understanding of the best ways to apply the social marketing framework has benefitted a myriad of clients, causes, and communities. The breadth and depth of his social marketing portfolio is impressive – and his knowledgeable insights are well worth taking the time to examine.

Schwartz: You have worked on many diverse social marketing challenges, among them HIV and AIDS, osteoporosis, asthma, cardiovascular health, epilepsy and other neurological disorders, traffic safety, emergency preparedness, and pandemic readiness. If you could only pick one, which of the social marketing programs that you planned and implemented were you most proud of. Why? Given what you know now, what would you have done differently if you had the chance?

Beall: Without question, while I’m proud of the contributions that my Ogilvy colleagues and I have been able to make to a wide and growing range of issues, our support of the CDC’s “America Respond to AIDS” (ARTA) campaign is highest on my personal list of social marketing programs that brought great professional and personal satisfaction.

Why, you ask? There are many reasons, among them is the fact that at the time the CDC launched the effort, the United States was, to put it mildly, in a very troubled place in terms of leadership in addressing the still-emerging AIDS crisis. Fear, anxiety, prejudice prevailed, as more and more people contracted the virus, most lacked knowledge of what to do to protect themselves and those they loved, and few of us understood what did – and did not – put us at risk.

To its huge credit, the CDC and a host of partners – federal, state, and local, public sector and private – began in the earliest phases of ARTA to make a meaningful and measurable difference in the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of an entire nation. The CDC broke its traditional public health approach by leading with a large-scale social marketing campaign that, at the time, was a landmark. By putting a human face on the disease; by informing people about behaviors that put them at risk and steps they could take to reduce that risk; by segmenting and tailoring its communications to different consumer audiences; and by strengthening common purpose with those who were touched by the virus while adding to the ranks of individuals and groups who joined in the fight, the CDC made huge strides in turning around an otherwise unacceptable situation.

Even today, some 20+ years later, I still feel the excitement and satisfaction of knowing that these efforts were a catalyst for prompting widespread change and demonstrable results. Lives were saved. And my respect for those inside the CDC who led the charge has only deepened with time. I learned so much from them, including the importance of standing up to the status quo and not being hesitant to push firmly and consistently against political and social forces that stand in the way of doing the right and the necessary thing to protect the public's health.

What would I do differently, given the chance? Two things come quickly to mind. First, press even harder for public health imperatives and research data to dictate the right answers to the challenges at hand. Two, even more strongly invest in building capabilities that endure and continue to shape agendas and frame actions even after dedicated campaign funding has ceased to be. We know all too well that HIV prevention today requires the same leadership and national focus as it did then.

Schwartz: As a current or past board member of various national organizations, including the American Social Health Association, National Research Center for Women and Family, Epilepsy Foundation, and OWL: the Voice of Midlife and Older Women, do you feel that your expertise and perspective in looking at challenges from a social marketing perspective is a valuable part of your role and contribution to the board?

Beall: I do indeed!

My guess is that I am like many others working in social marketing in that I have a strong desire to somehow “make the world a better place.” I am privileged to feel that my colleagues and I do that through our work at Ogilvy. But without

question, my grounding in the process, values, and goals of social marketing has both attracted me to such boards (and boards to me, I suspect) and strengthened my contributions to their efforts. Some of the basic tenets of good social marketing planning such as “know thy audience” and have (or gain) insights into what they know, think, or feel about the issue at hand before deciding how you can most effectively communicate with them, are approaches with wide transferability and application.

Social marketing perspectives quickly enter into how I analyze a problem and help identify best routes for addressing it. On boards and in life, I’m quick to think about the need to establish relevance and salience of the issue at hand; the need to help intended audiences see that the benefits of change or action outweigh the costs; and the need to prompt, support, and reward the change desired.

On reflection, I guess I’m concluding that for me—and my hunch is for many others—social marketing is much more than just a job, it is a defining force that travels with you across your various paths in life.

Schwartz: You have an illustrious history working with government agencies on a number of domestic social issues. Are you currently noting a diminishing trend for funding issues ripe for social marketing leadership? Does this present a new opportunity (a new direction) that the field should explore?

Beall: Given the fiscal challenges facing federal and state governments over the years and decades ahead, and in view of long-term funding trends that already reflect diminishing investment in many single issue-focused campaigns, I am most concerned about future funding. I fear that the funds available for investment will become even more disproportionate to the needs they seek to address. The magnitude of the problems we face – be they fighting obesity, combating smoking and drug use, preventing and managing chronic diseases, protecting the environment, or maintaining emergency preparedness to natural and man-made disasters – simply requires resources (and reach) beyond what government alone can provide.

This means we all need to work smarter. And we need to intuitively embrace the fact that if we are going to realize behavior change of the magnitude required to truly make a difference, we need to broaden the ownership and investment in our social marketing interventions. For example, being quicker and more open to partnership and collaboration with the private sector, including businesses and corporations. In my judgment, this includes not only “white hat” businesses

(which are too few in number), but those that are stakeholders in the issue at hand – obesity, for example – and that play a role both in the cause and with our help, one hopes, the solution to the problems we face.

The benefits of carefully vetted and managed collaboration with the private sector go beyond tapping additional resources that can give our campaigns visibility. They can, as evidenced in the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute's *The Heart Truth* campaign, include the heightened ability to raise the importance attached and the supports available to our target audiences to address the issue at hand. That campaign has stimulated the active engagement of more than 100 corporate, public, and nonprofit sponsors. The net result: a huge shift in awareness, a substantial change in knowledge and attitudes, and a growing investment and array of resources available to help women prevent and manage heart disease.

Schwartz: What are the three most important lessons you've learned about social marketing over your career and how can readers apply them to their work?

Beall: I have observed three characteristics that, in my judgment, are hallmark qualities of the successful social marketing practitioner: passion, patience, and persistence.

- **Passion.** Social marketing is more than a job, it is a calling. Social marketers are, in my judgment, at their best when they care passionately about the issues they are addressing. The hard work involved in researching, planning, and implementing successful efforts seems far less onerous when your heart and mind are fully engaged and committed.
- **Patience.** Behavior change occurs slowly. Clients often must take the time to build consensus and generate support for proposed actions. Marshalling and mobilizing partners and communities can be a long and winding road. I've learned that one needs to stay the course, holding on to the belief that the sought-for outcomes are well worth the time and investment required to achieve them.
- **Persistence.** We all know that change doesn't come easily, whether it is personal, organizational, community-based, or national in scope. That said, armed with facts and insights and bolstered by solid analysis and thoughtful planning, successful social marketers are strong advocates who persist at finding and delivering answers that work, even when that means needing to learn from mistakes and missteps that occur along the way.

About Tom Beall

Tom Beall is the managing director of Social Marketing Practice at Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide. He leads agencywide efforts to apply social marketing and communications to address public health, public safety, and social issues, building on more than two decades of experience in working with such clients as the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institutes of Health, and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

About the Author

Beverly Schwartz, M.S., is vice president for global marketing at Ashoka: Innovators for the Public. She served for 12 years as an associate editor of *Social Marketing Quarterly* and is currently writing a book about social entrepreneurs entitled *Rippling, from Solutions to System Change*, forthcoming from Wiley/Jossey Bass publishers.