

# Mulling over Marketing

**M**arketing may well be part of local government language these days, but in itself, the marketing concept is like an idea out of Babylon. There are many threads to what is collectively known as 'marketing', such that different sectors and industries have their own interpretations and emphasis.

So what is local government's take on marketing? No surprises here – we have a few of our own.

## In the beginning, 1996

The word marketing was hardly a part of local government vernacular a decade ago. In 1996, Victorian councils were rejoicing the "return of local democracy" after two years of post amalgamation Commissioner management. For many, the marketing word smacked of the previous era.

Now a large number of councils in Victoria and interstate have marketing departments, or at least someone with marketing in their title, by and large paired with the word communications. This reflects a few trends.

## The rise of marketing

Firstly, acknowledgement grew that maybe marketing is a useful concept, for instance for tourism and place promotion, or to deliver the council's corporate identity and brand.

Then there was the rise of a healthy obsession with evidential approaches to policy making, monitoring and service delivery, such as community satisfaction surveys and community consultations. The former is akin to market research and the latter to opinion polling. Both are essentially marketing techniques, though not as rigorous.

More recently, a lot of marketing graduates and professionals moved into local government, making it inevitable that the word be in their titles, and infiltrate council management language.

## Government marketing

The origins of marketing as a discipline and a profession arguably lie in the 1960s hey day of sales and advertising in the USA (see “The Ps of Marketing”). The legacy of this “selfish” enterprise is the reason that the word was simply not politically correct in local government of 1996.

In the commercial world, marketing is one of the managerial functions that maximises profit and asset value (including brand value), and it's done by understanding the company's audience, i.e. the consumers who, of their own volition, part with money and time in exchange for a service or product.

So what does marketing in this sense mean to governments? We don't have much problem relating it to tourism, business development and the council brands and campaigns that attract funding or strategic regard. No prizes for guessing the connection there – if it's about money, it must be marketing.

## Social marketing

Social marketing came in vogue in the 1990s, and the word still echoes in various city halls and state department corridors. But of course, in technical terms, social marketing is nothing special. It draws from the same set of knowledge, techniques and disciplines available to any marketer.

The reason social marketing became good language for government, especially local and community services areas, was because it offered a language in line with the intent of governance and providing public and community services.

In contrast to the commercial corporation, where all considerations, even good citizenship, are essentially driven by maximising profit and asset value, local government corporations are here to represent the interests of individuals and groups of commonality, and over time be stewards of the social and environmental-physical change affecting their constituent communities.

Social marketing symbolised marketing “for the good of the community”, turning the negative connotations of the word on its head, by giving it a wholesome purpose.

## Council branding

We have a tendency to place great importance on the corporate logo. To some, a brand is marketing. In local government, we have tended to focus on the technicalities – a design, tag lines and style manuals. Interestingly, this tends to be about self-perception, rather than the community's. But another way of thinking is that branding is not about design standards at all, nor is it a thing you can entirely control. The council's brand actually lies in the experience people have of engaging with the organisation, and the reputation and public regard this evokes. It's not about the public knowing that council operates this or that truck or facility.

Councils with councillors behaving badly or staff with poor community engagement skills will not have a good reputation amongst residents. It wouldn't matter how beautiful the logo is or how catchy the tag lines and mission statements are. In fact, if people don't like you, they'll associate your logo and corporate style with something they don't like.

## The social science of marketing

If anything, we don't recognise the high value the marketing discipline places on research, empiricism and evidence about people and communities. What marketers do best is try to understand the social structure of the target audience or sector, and the personal motivations of individuals within them, from managing directors to skate-boarders, depending on what transaction you want to make.

Local government has to consider managing directors and skate-boarders alike, plus almost any other demographic you care to mention.

But the demographics we know best are confined to those we deliver human services to, seek funding or partnerships with, and those relatively small numbers of individuals who participate in local governance or become engaged in an issue or program for a while.

## Understanding communities

Commercial organisations would die for the social information and knowledge local governments have. They would then take it a step further, identify gaps in the information and fill them with research and analysis. Then they would use all of this intelligence to explore opportunities for engaging with individuals in the target demographic. Only then would they roll out a campaign or go for a sale.

If only local governments looked at things this way. The truth is, we have a lot of social and community information but it exists in professional pockets, only connected when there is a practical need.

Community and local governance services generally come from a welfare tradition, with the consequence that if there isn't a need or a community service to provide, we actually don't know much about those people.

## Community marketing

Having skimmed across some of the interpretations of marketing used in local government, and noting that terms such as social marketing are palatable because they refocus the purpose of the discipline, my conclusion is that we need a term such as community marketing – a marketing which seeks to understand the detail in our communities, especially of the sectors we seldom hear from (e.g. the affluent, non-resident workers or youth) or aren't required to service. We may not be able to avoid this approach if local government is to remain relevant to communities as they become increasingly established, and need us less and less.

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## How many Ps?

***In 1960 E. Jerome McCarthy, now at Michigan State University, coined the original 4Ps of marketing – product, pricing, promotion and placement (meaning distribution). This marriage had offspring, and these days 7P's are not uncommon in the literature, adding words such as people, process and place. And the e-marketers of the world have developed their own list of Ps, or gone for another letter altogether. What the Ps are about is a way of describing the multiple considerations an organisation must make in order to connect in with individuals in their “target audience” (we may call them publics, communities or service users). Marketing plans often use the Ps as strategic headings, and quite rightly so. Perhaps local government needs its own set of Ps, or maybe Cs if “community marketing” is a useful term.***

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