

Partnering With the Corporate Sector on Social Marketing Programmes

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Abstract

Background: This research responds to a recognised gap in the social marketing partnerships literature relating to how social marketers can initiate and maintain long-term strategic partnerships with the corporate sector to support complex social change.

Focus of the Article: This research article provides an insider perspective of how Public Health England selected strategic partners from the corporate sector and the processes involved in maintaining long-term relationships with them from initiation through on-going development across a range of social marketing programmes.

Research Question: How are partnerships with the corporate sector created and maintained to support social marketing programmes?

Program design/approach importance to the social marketing field: The proposed model provides a structured process for creating and maintaining partnerships with the corporate sector along with criteria for identifying and selecting prospective commercial partners.

Methods: Three qualitative methods were used in a longitudinal study – participant observation, documentary analysis and interviews with members of PHE's marketing team, their partnership agency and corporate partners.

Results: The findings identified specific partner selection criteria and processes designed for initiating and maintaining social marketing partnerships with partners in the corporate sector. The findings have implications for commitment-trust theory as applied to social marketing partnerships with corporate partners by identifying the need to trust a commercial organisation prior to developing a partnership and the intervening processes between trust and relationship commitment.

Recommendations for research and practice: Further research can empirically test whether the identified partnership processes can also be used by non-governmental organisations' social marketing partnerships with the commercial sector.

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Partnering with actors in the corporate sector offers the opportunity to improve the effectiveness of social marketing programmes by increasing their visibility, finance and resources (Temple et al., 2008). Partnerships can “elevate” social marketing practice to bring about systemic change in complex social problems (Duane et al., 2022, p. 49) by creating holistic approaches to system problems (Russell-Bennett et al., 2019) and helping build the environment necessary for genuine social change (Brennan et al., 2016). However, creating partnerships in social marketing is not easy, because partner relationships are multifaceted and dynamic (Duane et al., 2022). To take advantage of the opportunities offered by partnerships with the corporate sector, better understanding is needed of the practices and processes involved in developing partnerships that can improve the effectiveness of social marketing programmes. This study addresses a recognised gap in the literature (Duane et al., 2022) by gathering longitudinal empirical data from which processes were formulated for the selection, creation and maintenance of social marketing partnerships with the corporate sector.

This research involved a four-year longitudinal case study of social marketing partnerships by Public Health England (PHE), an executive agency of the UK Department of Health (DH). Partnerships with the corporate sector were a core component of PHE’s social marketing programmes. A unique opportunity arose to study some of PHE’s partnerships across all stages of their development, from initial selection of partners to creation and maintenance of long-term partnerships, within a social marketing team, who by the start of the study had maintained 10 commercial partners and added more over a five-year period (PHE, 2014). The timing of the research enabled partnerships with the corporate sector to be studied during the development and delivery of five national social marketing programmes: Change4Life, Stoptober, Be Clear on Cancer, Act FAST, and One You.

Literature Review

Partnerships have long been recognised as needed in social marketing (Rundle-Thiele, 2025; Russell-Bennett et al., 2019; Temple et al., 2008) and have come to be seen as central to social marketing interventions (Brennan et al., 2016; Dietrich et al., 2022) being increasingly important for tackling complex social issues (Duane et al., 2022) but also “difficult to establish and maintain” (Sowers et al., 2005, p. 63). Given the complexity of most social problems, and the resourcing and financial constraints facing social marketers, partnerships have become increasingly accepted (Dibb & Carrigan, 2013) and are commonly referred to as the 5th P of social marketing (Hastings & Domegan, 2018).

The importance of cross-sector partnerships involving organisations from the public, private and third sectors (where the third sector refers to organisations such as charities and NGOs that work independently of both the public and private sectors), has been emphasised in the macro-social marketing and systems social marketing literature (Duane et al., 2022) with Bastos et al. (2022) highlighting the need for social marketers to target a range of actors within the marketing system to address wicked problems. Working in partnership with multiple partners has been proposed as a core component of social marketing strategy in national behaviour change programmes, with partnerships conceptualised as playing “a strategic role in the long-term development and delivery of solutions to tackle complex social problems” (Shaw et al., 2024, p. 12).

Selecting Potential Partners From the Corporate Sector for a Social Marketing Programme

The first step to creating social marketing partnerships is to select suitable potential partners (Duane & Domegan, 2019) and this should entail identifying and selecting prospective partners at all levels of the marketing system (macro, exo, meso and micro) who have influence on the system and could potentially bring about change (Bastos et al., 2022). These potential partners could include national government departments, NGOs, charities, national corporations and organisations, local employers, local government, schools and community groups (Kennedy, 2016; Shaw et al., 2024).

A macro-social marketing perspective suggests all actors in the marketing system of a complex problem need to be identified and mapped to understand their influence (Luca et al., 2016) and the interconnections between them (Bastos et al., 2022). Although the importance of partner selection in social marketing programmes has been highlighted (Duane & Domegan, 2019; Luca et al., 2016) and the need for a range of prospective partners recognised (Kennedy, 2016), the practices and processes involved in identifying and selecting potential corporate partners are less clear. Suggested qualities to look for in prospective partners include: trust; credibility with the target audience; capability to engage with the target audience (Lefebvre, 2006); provision of “strategic synergies”; and respect for “each partner’s mission and objectives” (Temple et al., 2008, p. 70). However, a robust set of selection criteria and process would be beneficial to social marketing.

Creating Social Marketing Partnerships for a Social Marketing Programme

At their core, partnerships are relationships between different actors (individuals, organisations, governments, or other entities), which involve a sense of cooperation (Sondermann & Ulbert, 2021). However, social marketers have recognised that “partnership relationships can be complex and dynamic” (Duane et al., 2022, p. 50). The use of partnerships in social marketing programmes changes the nature of the exchange, from a restricted exchange between social marketer and target consumer to a complex exchange between social marketer, partner and target consumer. A complex exchange requires a “win-win-win” (Lefebvre, 2006, p. 51) where value is created and delivered to all parties over time to be successful (Duane et al., 2022; Shaw et al., 2024). Certain principles for partnerships in social marketing have been proposed (Abercrombie et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2005; Lefebvre, 2006; Temple et al., 2008) that include: identifying the role for partners; involving partners in the early stages of programme development; identifying mutually beneficial relationships; having honest discussions on objectives and expectations; and ensuring open means of communication. However, research has yet to reveal *how* value can be created and delivered in social marketing partnerships with the corporate sector.

Recognising the complexity of social marketing partnerships, Duane et al. (2022) proposed applying Commitment-Trust theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) to model their mediating variables (see Figure 1). Commitment-Trust theory acknowledges that successful relationships require both commitment and trust - commitment being the desire to maintain a long-term relationship and trust being having confidence in the other party not to do something risky or harmful (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In Duane et al.’s (2022) model, trust is seen as the key mediating variable in social marketing partnerships, with the absence of trust resulting in a lack of relationship commitment and cooperation between partners and an increase in tension. Shared values and communication are presented as being able to influence trust, whilst mutual benefit and shared values influence commitment.

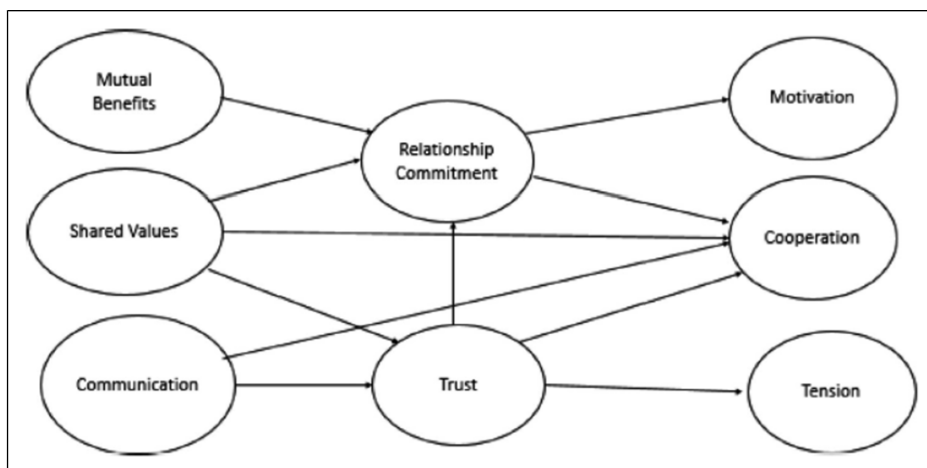


Figure 1. Social marketing partnership model (Duane et al., 2022, p. 70)

Trust is fundamental to social marketing and central to the behaviour change process (Brennan et al., 2016; Issock et al., 2020). In social exchange relationships, such as those in social marketing, voluntary interactions for mutual benefit are facilitated by trust (Korsgaard, 2018). Such relationship-based trust can initially be established on “subjective rationality” where each party looks for good reasons to trust the other party before entering a relationship. In social marketing partnerships, trust is seen as being associated with reliability, dependability, predictability and faith (Duane et al., 2022).

Social marketing partnerships between organisations from the public and private sectors cannot be effective if there is a lack of trust (Jones & Barry, 2011). However, some in social marketing see partnering with the corporate sector as “sleeping with the enemy” and believe businesses are not to be trusted (Hoek & Jones, 2011, p. 39). This tendency to mistrust commercial organisations could hold back the development of effective social marketing partnerships as trust is critical for successful exchanges (Duane et al., 2022). A countervailing position is provided by Kim (2025), writing about the determinants of public trust as an agent of social change the conclusion being that growing distrust in other institutions may be leading to an increase in trust in business. Although the importance of “trust, commitment, shared values and cooperation when addressing behavioural issues” (Duane et al., 2022, p. 70) has been identified, it is not clear what practices and processes are needed for social marketing programmes to create and nurture these variables with the corporate sector.

Maintaining Long-Term Social Marketing Partnerships

The maintenance of partnerships has received little consideration in the social marketing literature, and this appears to reflect the broader partnerships literature where it has been suggested that less attention is paid to maintaining partnerships than creating them (Crizzle et al., 2019). This is surprising, as partner relationships and trust are so important in social marketing and ongoing maintenance of a partnership is key to its long-term success (Butterfoss et al., 1993). Maintaining long-term partnerships is also more cost effective than finding and securing new partners (Chang et al., 2015). There is a need for mechanisms within a partnership to continually build and maintain trust between the partners (Corbin et al., 2018) but it is not clear what these mechanisms are in social marketing partnerships with commercial organisations.

Need for Further Research

This study identified a gap in the literature relating to how the proposed opportunity for social marketing programmes to work in partnerships with the corporate sector can be realised. Duane et al. (2022, p. 71) specifically call for research to examine whether their cross-sectional research with behaviour change experts transferred to the corporate sector and for examining partnerships covering the different stages from initiation to long-term partnerships, particularly ‘early formation and ongoing development’. There have also been calls for further investigation into social marketing partnerships more generally (Duane & Domegan, 2019; Truong & Hall, 2017) and a call for real-world examples (Foote et al., 2024). Gaps in understanding have been identified in: how best to manage partnerships to support complex social change (Dibb, 2014); what makes social marketing partnerships successful (Duane & Domegan, 2019); and “guidelines for effective partnerships” (Foote et al., 2024, p. 40).

This paper responds to these calls and addresses the identified gaps in knowledge through longitudinal research that explores how social marketing programmes that involve partnerships with the corporate sector can be realised. Our research provides greater understanding in three areas: how to identify and select potential partners from the corporate sector to support social marketing programmes; how to create partnerships with commercial organisations in behaviour change programmes; and how to maintain partnerships with commercial organisations to achieve long-term success.

Our research question was formulated as:

RQ – How are partnerships with the corporate sector created and maintained to support social marketing programmes?

Methodology

Research Approach

An exploratory approach was taken to this research in the form of case study research. Case study research offers the opportunity to interrogate complex relationships and inter-organisational relationships (Easton, 2010) and lends itself to answering questions of ‘how’ (Yin, 2018) by allowing ‘the workings of the case’ (Stake, 1995, p. 8) to be uncovered using a range of intensive research methods. An abductive approach was also taken, giving equal weight to existing theory and empirical data to develop knowledge. An abductive approach is particularly useful when the aim is to generate a greater understanding of a phenomenon and to identify new things (Dubois & Gadde, 2002) - in our case how partnerships with the corporate sector were created and maintained in social marketing programmes.

Case Study Setting: Public Health England (PHE)

The setting for this case study research was Public Health England (PHE), which used partnerships with the corporate sector in its national social marketing programmes from its formation in 2013 to its dissolution in 2021. PHE was an executive agency of the UK Department of Health (DH) with responsibility to “protect and improve the nation’s health and wellbeing, and reduce health inequalities” (PHE, 2019 p.2). PHE’s structure included a designated Marketing Team which developed and managed national social marketing programmes to “motivate and support millions more people to make and sustain changes that improve their health” (PHE, 2014). An

integral part of these programmes was the commitment to work in partnership with industry as well as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local authorities and individuals (PHE, 2014).

This setting provided an opportunity to conduct longitudinal research with people actively involved in the creation and maintenance of partnerships with commercial organisations (henceforth referred to as ‘partners’) in PHE’s high profile national social marketing programmes (Kuipers et al., 2020). The research took place over 48 months between October 2014 and September 2018 and encompassed the creation and maintenance of partnerships for five national social marketing programmes: Change4Life, Stoptober, Be Clear on Cancer, Act FAST, and One You.

Research Methods

The research followed an ethnographic approach with in-depth analysis of three research methods: (i) participant observation; (ii) documentary analysis; and (iii) semi-structured interviews. Data from the participant observation and documentary analysis preceded the interviews and informed the interview guide, helped contextualise PHE’s creation and maintenance of partnerships, and supported triangulation.

Participant Observation. The first author was employed in the PHE Marketing team, providing a unique opportunity with unparalleled access to study the creation and maintenance of partnerships for national social marketing programmes in situ as a participant observer. Over a four-year period, the first author was present at meetings and discussions between PHE and their partners where he took notes (extending to six notebooks) of what was said and the actions that needed to be carried out as part of his work.

Documentary Analysis. Documents can provide valuable insights into an organisation, particularly a public body such as PHE whose work is reported in publicly available documents. A search of the Gov. uk website for documents relating to social marketing published by PHE or the Department of Health (responsible for national social marketing programmes prior to PHE’s formation) identified nine publicly available documents (published between 2009 and 2017), which formed the study’s documentary data (see Table 1).

Semi-Structured Interviews. A total of 21 research participants were recruited using purposive sampling, based on their knowledge and experience of the partnerships created and maintained by PHE in their national social marketing programmes. The participants were drawn from PHE’s marketing team (seven participants), PHE’s partnerships agency (four participants), and PHE’s partners (ten participants). Single semi-structured, individual interviews, typically lasting 45–50 minutes, were conducted by the lead author between March 2017 and March 2018. The interview guide and questions were informed by the extant literature and the observation and documentary data and explored: the selection of prospective partners; the creation of partnerships; the development of aims for a partnership; trust and future commitment in partnerships; and the maintenance of partnerships.

Validity and Reliability

Using multiple methods facilitated in-depth analysis and supported understanding through retrodution (Kessler & Bach, 2014) and more robust findings through triangulation of the data to support identifying patterns (Yin, 2018). Multiple research methods promote greater understanding by enabling the researcher to iteratively consult and compare between the empirical data

Table 1. Documentary Data

Document no.	Documents
1	Change4Life Marketing Strategy* (April 2009)
2	Change4Life One Year On* (February 2010)
3	Changing Behaviour, Improving Outcomes – a new social marketing strategy for public health* (April 2011)
4	Change4Life Three Year Social Marketing Strategy* (October 2011)
5	Marketing Plan 2013-14 (April 2013)
6	Public Health England Marketing Strategy 2014 to 2017 (July 2014)
7	Social Marketing Strategy 2014-17: One year on (July 2015)
8	PHE Social Marketing Strategy 2017 to 2020 (September 2017)
9	Stoptober 2016 Campaign evaluation (October 2017)

Note. * Denotes documents published by HM Government, Department of Health (DH) prior to the creation of PHE (all subsequent documents were published by PHE).

and the literature ([Dubois & Gadde, 2002](#)). Retroduction was conducted across the entire data set with the researcher constantly going back and forth between the data collected from the observation, the documents and the interviews to cross-check the insights identified. This process of triangulating data from the three research methods increases the validity of the explanations identified in the research. Retroduction also supports the practice of reflexivity, which the first researcher always adopted during the research process. This required an awareness and acceptance of the role of participant observer and involved constantly acknowledging and questioning the data being collected.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the research and use of the three methods was granted by both the PHE Research Ethics and Governance Group and The Open University's Ethics Committee (Approval No. HREC 2015 1961 2 Shaw, dated 26/08/2016). The research was conducted in accordance with the university's code of practice for research and the [ESRC's \(2015\)](#) research ethics framework. The participant observer also adhered to the ethical code as a PHE employee and civil servant, which included respecting co-workers' general rights. Informed consent was obtained from interview participants in writing, along with consent for the interviews to be recorded, transcribed, analysed and reported (using pseudonyms) in research publications.

With the agreement of the PHE Research Ethics and Governance Group and The Open University's Ethics Committee, informed consent was not sought for the participant observation data, on the grounds that this method provided crucial research data, which might be altered if collected overtly. This exemption is consistent with the [ESRC's \(2015\)](#) research ethics framework. It was also important that the participant observation did not interfere with the normal running of the organisations' activities. The observations did not involve any deception or misrepresentation as notes were taken during the participant observer's PHE work. Permission to use the observation notes from meetings was granted on condition that individuals were not identified and that anonymity was maintained. Care was taken to protect the rights, privacy and avoidance of harm of those who were observed.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed by the lead author in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. The complete data set collected from the three research methods was iteratively coded, reviewed and refined to derive a final list of codes to develop themes to provide insight into how social marketing partnerships were created and maintained. The analysis process involved the whole dataset first being coded with descriptive language, often using the words of the research participants or the documents, then reviewed with respect to the research question and refined to produce first cycle codes. The first cycle codes were brought together into related areas to produce second cycle codes and then these were further reviewed against the identified literature to derive aggregate themes (Saldaña, 2016). These aggregate themes were again reviewed against the literature and further refined to produce final themes that brought everything together regarding how PHE created and maintained partnerships in their national social marketing programmes.

Findings

This section sets out the key findings from the analysis of the case study data, reporting: a focus on long-term strategic partnerships; identifying and selecting potential strategic partners from the corporate sector; and the creation and maintenance of strategic partnerships.

A Focus on Long-Term Strategic Partnerships With the Corporate Sector

The first theme from the data analysis highlights that PHE were focused on creating and maintaining a small number of long-term strategic partnerships with organisations in the corporate sector across their national social marketing programmes. PHE concentrated their resources on the development of long-term relationships with organisations they believed could help change the target audience's behaviour. These strategic partnerships were usually created prior to the development of a social marketing programme, with the commercial partner being involved in the creation of the programme.

The first author's observation notes recorded the terms: "strategic partnerships" and "strategic partners" being used consistently by the PHE Marketing team and these terms were reflected in the document analysis and followed up in the interviews to gain a greater understanding of their meaning.

"Strategic partnerships – a change in approach – identifying specific partners" (Observation notes).

"Deepen our relationship with existing strategic partners and recruit new ones" (Document 7).

"You've got a few very big strategic partners who deliver high impact, high value partnership activity" (Interview 17).

PHE's rationale for creating and maintaining long-term strategic partnerships with the corporate sector was that the complex social problems they were trying to tackle, e.g. obesity, needed a long-term approach and this included the partnerships.

"I think it's long-term strategic partnerships on big issues such as eating healthier, stopping smoking" (Interview 8).

“I think when you look at the big agendas in here, obesity...obesity needs long-term partnerships” (Interview 20).

Identifying and Selecting Potential Strategic Partners From the Corporate Sector

The second theme revealed by our research was that PHE had developed a process for selecting potential strategic partners from the corporate sector for their national social marketing programmes. PHE started by defining the social problem to be tackled and the target audience whose behaviour they were seeking to change. Obtaining a clear understanding of the big picture relating to the issue and the target audience enabled PHE to identify potential partners. PHE then created a “touchpoint map” to identify a long-list of all potential strategic partners who could provide an opportunity to effect a change in the target audience’s behaviour. A “touchpoint” was a direct point of contact between an organisation/company/brand and a member of the target audience. This contact could be face-to-face or online, e.g. with a retailer when the target audience were making a purchase, a brand that they followed on social media, or a pharmacist who they spoke to in a pharmacy.

PHE narrowed this long-list down to a short-list of potential strategic partners using the criteria: reach to the target audience; relevance to the target audience; trust by the target audience; and impact on the target audience. An interesting facet of the trust criterion was recognising the value of a partner being trusted by the target audience i.e. how much PHE believed the commercial partners were trusted by these consumers and that this could facilitate behaviour change.

“There is a step-by-step process. The first thing that we do is a touchpoint map. So, for example, you identify the target audience and you actually do a touchpoint map that identifies, throughout their day, what organisations they engage with at each of the touchpoints” (Interview 19).

“So, reach to the target audience rather than just mass reach, ... there’s relevance to the issue and the person, and... then impact is, does that brand actually have the channels and the wherewithal to be able to communicate a message which will be seen” (Interview 5).

“Our target audience may trust or engage with others more than us... Rather than fighting this, we work with it” (Document 8).

Potential strategic partners on the short-list were then assessed for risk to PHE, with the primary consideration being the potential damage to PHE’s reputation from working with the commercial partner. Risk was a key consideration when creating partnerships with commercial organisations because of the consumer-facing activity that these organisations were carrying out whilst partnering with PHE.

“Need an acceptable level of risk to PHE in terms of their [commercial partners] consumer-facing activity” (Observation notes).

“You need to, kind of, look at their reputation. Risks. I think the big ones really are reputation” (Interview 1).

In [Figure 2](#) we visualise the partner selection criteria and process our research uncovered, which had not been formally documented by PHE.

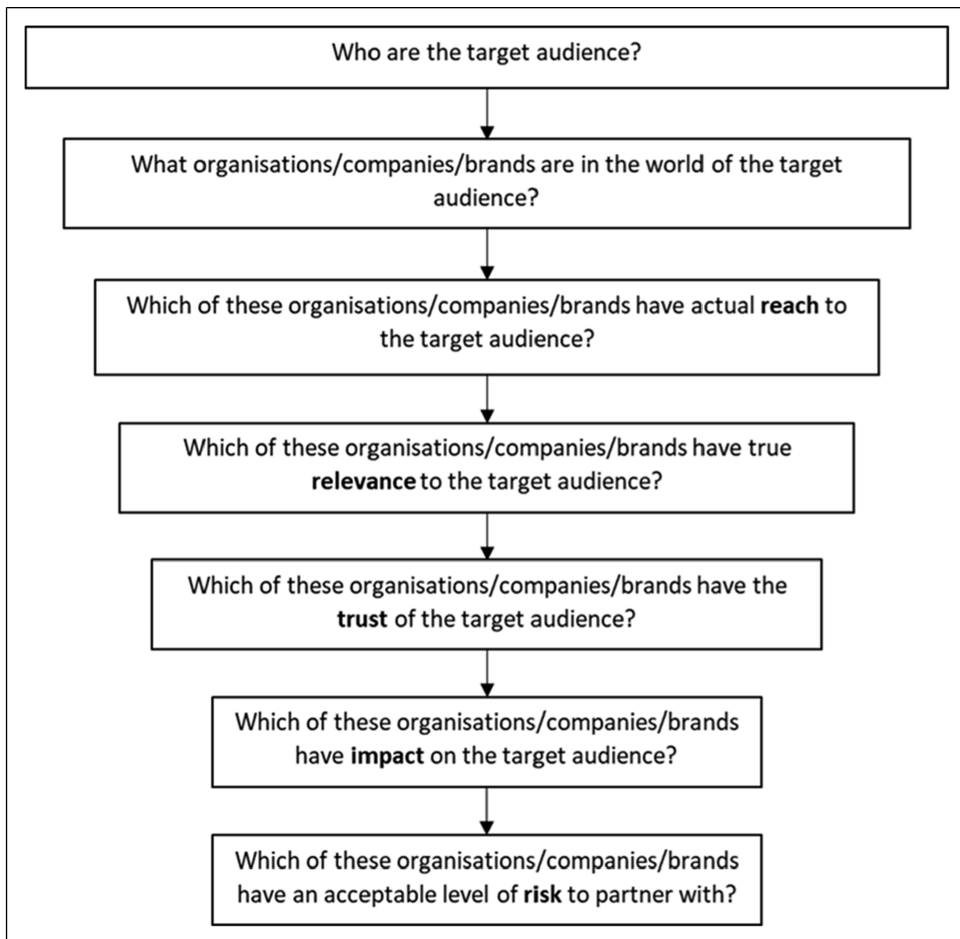


Figure 2. PHE's selection criteria (in bold) and process for identifying prospective strategic corporate partners in their social marketing programmes (authors' own figure)

The Creation and Maintenance of Strategic Partnerships With Commercial Organisations

The third theme uncovered by our data was that PHE had developed a process for the creation and maintenance of strategic partnerships with organisations in the corporate sector. This process had evolved over time to reflect PHE's learnings from their experience of partnerships.

"I think it's been a process of evolution, understanding and getting to understand our partners better and knowing what works" (Interview 16).

PHE saw the benefits of having a long-term, strategic approach to partnerships with the corporate sector as: allowing a greater depth of relationship and trust; not having to start from scratch each time; increased credibility; building on what went before; greater understanding between the two organisations and, ultimately, greater success. Time was highlighted as key to the success of this approach, with the PHE Marketing team needing enough time to: plan their approach to partnerships, engage with and understand prospective partners, encourage their

support, and build trusting relationships. It was also noted that partners had their own timelines too.

“It takes time to engage partners and encourage to support. For relationship building and gaining trust” (Observation notes).

“Longevity is actually really important ... you’ve been on that journey together, you’ve got learnings, you know what happened in the past campaign, and you’ve got the knowledge of each of the organisations and how they work” (Interview 8).

“So, with a long-term partnership, I think you can build some of that depth. Once you are both used to each other’s ways of working, so that we get better at meeting their needs and they start to understand our capacity to deliver and, you know, sometimes our limitations and, you know, and how to get the best out of us for what they want. That also helps build and improve the outputs for both parties, really” (Interview 15).

Within this third theme, we identified trust-creating mechanisms as well as a process for the creation and maintenance of strategic partnerships with organisations in the corporate sector; these are detailed in the two subsections that follow.

Trust-Creating Mechanisms. Five key mechanisms used by PHE to create trust with partnerships with the corporate sector were identified through the data, showing how trust was viewed by PHE as a key factor in the success of these strategic partnerships. The first trust-creating mechanism was adopting a trusting mindset when initiating the creation of partnerships with the corporate sector. This required the second trust-creating mechanism of open and honest communication from the outset.

“I think it’s a given actually, that there is that trust there. It might be a little bit naïve but we kind of assume that, you know, they’re working professionals and they are going to do what it is that they have said that they’re going to do in the way that, you know, we want them to do it” (Interview 2).

“It’s hard to pinpoint how you establish the trust. I think it’s definitely about openness and honesty” (Interview 17).

PHE’s third and fourth trust-creating mechanisms were understanding the needs of commercial partners and having clear objectives as ways to create and maintain trust in strategic partnerships with commercial organisations.

“I think there’s understanding or there’s spending enough time understanding what they [the partner] want to get out of it and understanding their business, rather than it always being an ask. So, you need to create something which is mutually beneficial” (Interview 5).

“I think you just really need to be building that trust. So, I think it’s that really clear objectives but also what’s a no-go from both sides. And sometimes those things just crop up as you go along. But I think that’s the best way to build trust” (Interview 1).

The fifth trust-creating mechanism identified was developing personal relationships.

“It all comes down to personal relationships, doesn’t it, so actually, it’s the interactions you have on that level that enable you to, kind of, build the trust with the organisation” (Interview 7).

PHE's approach to the building of trust appeared to be working since all the partners who took part in this research indicated their intention to continue with the partnership in the future (i.e. relationship commitment).

"Hopefully to continue. As I say I think we have got a really, really good working relationship" (Interview 21).

A 7-Stage Process for Creating and Maintaining Strategic Partnerships With Corporate Partners. In [Figure 3](#) we visualise PHE's 7-stage process for creating and maintaining strategic partnerships with commercial organisations uncovered by our interview and observation data, which also had not previously been formally depicted by PHE. Each stage is then explained and evidenced by illustrative data.

Stage 1 – Identifying and Selecting Potential Strategic Partners From the Corporate Sector. The process PHE had developed for identifying and selecting potential strategic corporate partners was reported with supporting quotations in the previous section and visualised in [Figure 2](#).

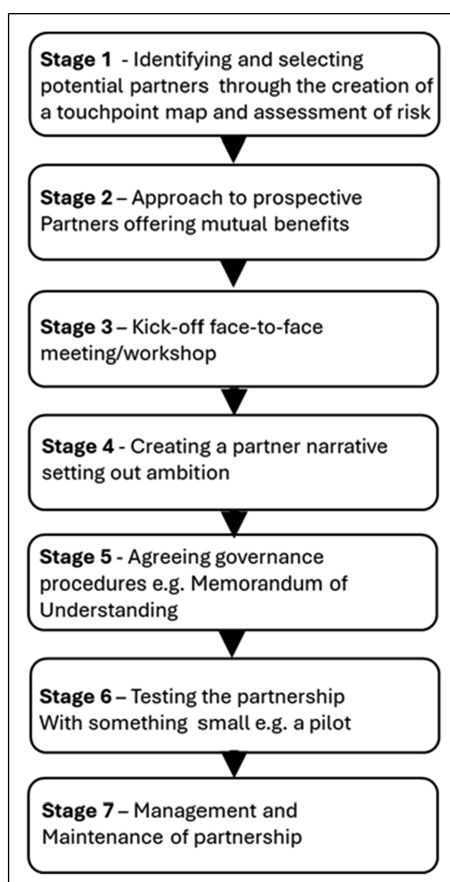


Figure 3. PHE's process for the creation and maintenance of strategic corporate partnerships in their social marketing programmes (authors' own figure)

Stage 2 – Initial Approach to Prospective Strategic Partners. From the short-list of potential partners who met the criteria of reach, relevance, trust and impact, and were deemed not to pose a risk to PHE, an initial approach was made to those partners who PHE felt provided the greatest opportunity to co-create value to the target audience that would encourage and support a change in their behaviour. The aim of the initial approach was to agree a face-to-face “kick-off” meeting.

“When the partner-mapping piece is done, the shortlist identified, we would then look to meet with all those partners ... you actually start with a workshop session” (Interview 19).

Stage 3 – Kick-Off Meeting. This meeting took the form of a workshop led by PHE and was seen as an important opportunity to get to know the prospective partner and understand their aims and goals. This enabled PHE to better identify where their aims could align and provide an opportunity for mutual benefit. A key purpose of this meeting for PHE, observed by the first author and followed up in the interviews, was to better understand the needs of the prospective partner and this helped PHE to appreciate potential risks and build trust.

“Let the partner speak first. You know, because that’s the key. You really need to understand their aims, their goals” (Interview 11).

Stage 4 – Creating a Partnership Narrative. A partnership narrative was developed jointly by the partner and PHE. It was a written document that set out the ambition for the strategic partnership by bringing together the aims of the programme and the role of the specific partner within this.

“We found over time that it’s quite useful to almost build a joint partnership narrative that really looks to look at both tones of voices of the two. Both that partner organisation and indeed the campaign narrative and how the two come together...so, it really looks like it’s a coherent and integrated piece” (Interview 19).

Stage 5 – Agreeing Governance Procedures. Once the partnership narrative was agreed PHE then saw appropriate governance as key to help protect both PHE and the partner. Governance with commercial organisations took the form of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which set out the principles that each partner would work to, ensuring both parties were clear about what was expected of each other, whilst also maintaining flexibility that a contractual approach would not offer. Importantly, the MOU set out what would happen if things went wrong. The exchange in these partnerships was reciprocal, not financial.

“Make sure that your governance is set up right. And governance comes in lots of different ways. But I think the formal agreement piece, the MOU [memorandum of understanding] that sets out how, you know, what happens in the case of anything going wrong” (Interview 1).

“No money changes hand. It’s about a shared ambition or a shared behaviour change initiative that you want to tackle” (Interview 16).

Stage 6 – Testing the Strategic Partnership With Something Small. PHE believed that testing a new partnership by working on a small piece of activity with the partner, e.g. a pilot programme, helped reduce the risk of a partnership, and pilot programmes were observed by the first researcher. This activity tested the commitment of each party, developed relationships between the two organisations, and provided experience of how the different organisational cultures worked together. Also, the complexity of the social problems PHE were trying to tackle could pose a barrier to getting a partnership off the ground. So the partnership started with something small and achievable that provided a greater chance of success and could be built upon.

“The process of partnerships often ... starts with something quite small to, kind of, test out each other’s commitment to the partnership and how things might work. Because if you start from a very global macro perspective of this is what we will achieve together, sometimes it’s very difficult to actually get that moving. So, you’ll start off with something quite small and gradually build” (Interview 14).

Stage 7 – Management and Maintenance of Strategic Partnerships. The findings identified that PHE maintained a small number of strategic partnerships with commercial organisations who they believed had the potential to effect a change in their target audiences’ behaviour. These strategic partnerships supported either one programme over a long period of time or several programmes. The first researcher observed that maintaining these partnerships required a lot of work and resources but PHE saw this as essential to the success of their national social marketing programmes. PHE believed the key factors in maintaining partnerships were developing an understanding of the partners and fostering personal relationships with key personnel within the partner organisation.

“Requires the maintenance of strategic partnerships” (Document 7).

“But I think the real, kind of, work has actually been in maintaining that ... because it takes a lot of work to do that. And it takes a lot of, kind of, maintenance of that relationship” (Interview 1).

“I think that you invest in a relationship, understand each other’s aims, build personal relationships, and I think in partnerships that’s really important. It’s not just about an organisation to an organisation, it’s about individuals” (Interview 5).

PHE’s belief in the importance of maintaining their strategic partnerships led them to form a designated Partnerships team within the overall Marketing team, with responsibility for creating and maintaining the partnerships. Members of the Partnerships team were deemed to have a specific skill set that differed from those working in the Marketing team. Not only did they need to have a good understanding of social marketing but also be skilled in negotiation, listening, relationship management, collaborative working, private sector understanding and sales.

“People that work on the [partnerships] team...have got experience and skills in the area ... have an aptitude for negotiating, for listening, and are also marketing experts” (Interview 5).

The maintenance of strategic partnerships needed to be planned with regular face-to-face meetings to keep each partner updated on how the programmes were progressing and any new activity being planned. This helped to move the relationship forward. The first researcher was present at a number of these meetings and observed the importance put on maintaining strategic partnerships and communicating with the partners.

“If it’s, you know, a key strategic partner, it’s regular face-to-face meetings. We feel as if we’ve got a lot more out of the regular face-to-face meetings” (Interview 2).

“So, that’s a longer-term relationship, but it takes quite a lot of maintenance and checking in that it’s still delivering what we need on both sides. It does mean however that you get a deeper and more meaningful, more impactful level of activity” (Interview 14).

Selected examples of activity PHE developed with commercial partners are provided in [Table 2](#) below.

Table 2. Selected Examples of PHE Working in Partnership With Corporate Partners

Partner	Social Marketing programme	Activity
Disney	Change4Life	Co-created the “10-min shake-up” campaign by inventing a range of ten-minute activity bursts for children themed around a Disney franchise, e.g. Toy Story, Frozen, Star Wars. (Document 8)
Tesco	Change4Life	Co-created in store price promotions offering money off fruit and vegetables in stores across England. (Document 6)
Nintendo Wii Fit	Change4Life	Provided co-branded activity to support the programme. (Document 3)
Asda	One You	Provided free blood pressure testing in store pharmacies across England to support the programme. (Document 7)
The Cooperative	One You	Provided co-branded point of sale material and in-store radio messaging to promote the campaign. (Document 6)
Well Pharmacy	Stoptober	Provided co-branded point of sale material in stores across England to promote the campaign. (Document 6)
Lloyds Pharmacy	Stoptober	Provided in-store price promotions on stop smoking products across England to support the campaign. (Document 6)

Discussion

This study set out to answer the research question: How are partnerships with the corporate sector created and maintained to support national social marketing programmes? Our findings contribute to greater understanding of three key requirements needed for social marketers to build partnerships with the corporate sector: (i) uncovering criteria and a process for identifying and selecting potential commercial partners; (ii) identifying trust-creating mechanisms for creating partnerships with the corporate sector; and (iii) identifying a process for creating, developing and managing the maintenance of partnerships with commercial organisations.

Identifying and Selecting Potential Partners From the Corporate Sector

The social marketing literature highlights the importance of the selection of potential partners in social marketing programmes (Luca et al., 2016) and the breadth of potential partners that need to be mapped (Kennedy, 2016). Our study extends knowledge by uncovering a distinct process for the identification and selection of potential partners in social marketing.

As part of this process, this study further proposes the criteria of ‘reach’, ‘relevance’, ‘trust’ and ‘impact’ be applied when selecting prospective corporate partners in social marketing. This has clear practical implications as, although the literature highlighted the need to identify all actors in the marketing system of a social problem who could support a campaign (Luca et al., 2016), previous research provided no agreed criteria for identifying and selecting potential partners.

Trust-Creating Mechanisms

A key aspect of creating partnerships in social marketing is the development of trust between all parties. The literature recognises the requirement of trust in social marketing partnerships for gaining commitment between the partners through the adaption of Commitment-Trust theory and

highlights the mediating variables of shared values and communication within this (Duane et al., 2022, 2022). However, there is no agreed understanding as to how trust can be developed and sustained between organisations from the public and private sectors, nor the mechanisms and process for progressing from trust to relationship commitment in the theoretical models of previous research.

Our identification of PHE's five key trust-creating mechanisms extends the Commitment-Trust theory as applied to social marketing partnerships (Duane et al., 2022) in the context of commercial partners by illuminating the link between trust and relationship commitment, providing support for the impact of communication on trust and suggesting that mutual benefit exerts influence earlier than previously hypothesised, being developed by understanding the needs of the partner at the start of the creation process. The trust-creating mechanisms uncovered were: (i) a trusting mindset, (ii) open and honest communication, (iii) understanding the needs of commercial partners, (iv) clear objectives and (v) personal relationships. They also provide practical implications for social marketers when partnering with the corporate sector.

A Process for the Creation and Development of Partnerships With Commercial Organisations

Our study identified a requirement for social marketers to be able to create effective partnerships to support their social marketing programmes. The social marketing literature identifies the need to create partnerships (Duane et al., 2022; Shaw et al., 2024), but there is limited understanding of the mechanics of how social marketers can create and maintain partnerships with commercial organisations to support their programmes. Social marketing's focus on effecting systemic change in a social problem and long-term behaviour change in a specific target audience, mean that generic business approaches to creating partnerships may not be appropriate and require more than just screening corporations' ethicality, such as in private-public health partnerships more broadly (Buse & Waxman, 2001). Our research proposes a 7-stage process for the creation and development of partnerships with commercial organisations and offers specific guidance tailored to social marketing, which resonates with Aschermann's 10 steps for social marketers to respond to relationship-building invitations *from businesses*. Our Stage 3 resonates with Aschermann's Step 7 ("listen to find out where you can help the organisation first"). Our Stage 4's narrative resonates with Aschermann's Step 9 ("identify what each player has (or doesn't have) that the other needs and can use"). PHE's MOU resembles Aschermann's "letter of agreement". Finally, PHE's formation of a designated Partnerships team, responsible for creating and maintaining the partnership, resonates with Aschermann's Step 10 (which includes creating a "corporate opportunities group" to manage the partnership account) (Lee et al., 2005, pp. 52-53). However, our process, from the perspective of social marketers' partnership *invitations to businesses*, diverges by including within it a process for identifying and selecting potential partners (our Stage 1), detailing the specific activities involved in the subsequent sequential creation, management and maintenance stages of partnerships.

PHE's processes we uncovered for selecting, developing and maintaining corporate partnerships have further implications for Commitment-Trust theory as applied to social marketing partnerships (Duane et al., 2022). The assessment of risk in the selection process appears to provide PHE with the confidence to go into a new partnership with a trusting mindset. This is important as trust has a "gatekeeping" function in partnerships between organisations from different sectors (Venn & Berg, 2014).

PHE's process for creating partnerships with the corporate sector recognises the risk involved and the need to build trust from the start. The initial face-to-face workshop helped develop trust as the partners got to know each other's work and goals. The partnership narrative set out the shared

ambition for the partnership and making use of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), rather than a contract, suggested a willingness to trust. Commencing a new partnership by working together on a small pilot project helped support the gradual development of trust. Stating the shared ambition and aims of the partnership is in line with [Duane et al.'s \(2022\)](#) mediating variable of shared values. This is an important finding with clear implications for Commitment-Trust theory as applied to social marketing partnerships ([Duane et al., 2022](#)) and social marketing practitioners as some social marketers have a mistrust of commercial organisations owing to their motive for profit rather than social good ([Hoek & Jones, 2011](#)).

An important element of trust identified in our study was the need for any prospective commercial partner to be trusted by the target audience. This is particularly important for health messaging where a target audience needs to consider the organisation presenting the message as trustworthy before considering listening to the advice ([Case et al., 2018](#)) and highlights that partnerships in social marketing have a complex exchange between the social marketer, the partner and the target audience, which requires the precondition of trust between all three parties to successfully effect a change in behaviour. The use of tools such as the Edelman Trust Barometer ([Edelman, 2025](#)) can provide insights that would be of use in this regard since it addresses levels of public trust in the food and beverage sector for example and possible sources of trust diminution.

Managing and Maintaining Partnerships With the Corporate Sector

Our case study research provides a real-world example of how PHE, tasked by the UK Government to tackle complex problems through national social marketing programmes, actively managed the maintenance of partnerships with the corporate sector. PHE had a partnerships team with skills specific to partnerships, e.g. listening, negotiation and relationship building, whose role it was to create and maintain the partnerships for their social marketing programmes. This required an investment in resources and time with regular meetings and communication. This is a key finding that could support social marketing practitioners in the future.

Limitations

All data in this study were collected from a single case, PHE, and its view of social marketing. The research approach provided a unique and in-depth investigation with the partners and agencies involved in the partnerships of the selected case. The limitation of researching a single case was offset by the longitudinal collection of data over four years, encompassing five national social marketing campaigns involving multiple partnerships with the corporate sector plus triangulation of three data sources.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to a deeper understanding of partnerships in social marketing with the corporate sector, based on unique access to longitudinal research within Public Health England (PHE). We uncovered the process developed by PHE for selecting potential corporate partners and PHE's process for creating and maintaining these partnerships. Another key contribution is revealing trust-creating mechanisms for the creation and maintenance of trust in social marketing partnerships between organisations from the public and private sectors, translating [Duane et al.'s \(2022\)](#) theoretical model into longitudinal practice. Future research could test the identified processes and mechanisms in different contexts, e.g. social marketing partnership programmes developed by NGOs, charities or alternative types of public sector organisations.

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Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the research and use of the three methods was granted by both the PHE Research Ethics and Governance Group (R&D Reference: R&D 288, dated 01/09/2016) and The Open University's Ethics Committee (Approval No. HREC 2015 1961 2 Shaw, dated 26/08/2016). The research was conducted in accordance with the university's code of practice for research and the [ESRC's \(2015\)](#) research ethics framework.

Consent to Participate

Informed consent was obtained from interview participants in writing, along with consent for the interviews to be recorded, transcribed, analysed and reported (using pseudonyms) in research publications. With the agreement of the PHE Research Ethics and Governance Group and The Open University's Ethics Committee, informed consent was not sought for the participant observation data, on the grounds that this method provided crucial research data, which might be altered if collected overtly. This exemption is consistent with the [ESRC's \(2015\)](#) research ethics framework. It was also important that the participant observation did not interfere with the normal running of the organisations' activities. The observations did not involve any deception or misrepresentation as notes were taken during the participant observer's PHE work. Permission to use the observation notes from meetings was granted on condition that individuals were not identified and that anonymity was maintained. Care was taken to protect the rights, privacy and avoidance of harm of those who were observed.

Consent for Publication

Consent was received from the PHE Research Ethics and Governance Group for the research findings to be reported in research publications.

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Declaration of conflicting interests

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on request.

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