

Advantages and Disadvantages of Using Social Marketing Approaches in Public Health

Public health campaigns are everywhere. From posters in GP waiting rooms about flu shots, to hashtags encouraging people to #CheckYourBoobs or #GetScreened, social marketing has become a staple in the modern medical toolbox. But here's the question: what are the advantages and disadvantages of using social marketing approaches in public health, and why should you care?

What makes social marketing so attractive?

The first big win is reaching. Using social marketing approaches in public health is about visibility. Instead of waiting for patients to walk through the clinic doors, messages go directly into their Instagram feeds, TikTok scrolls, or onto the banner of their favourite website. You are not passively waiting, but actively present in their everyday lives. That immediacy is a considerable advantage.

The second is cost-effectiveness. Traditional campaigns like print runs of pamphlets or 30-second TV slots burn through budgets fast. In contrast, a well-targeted Facebook campaign aimed at 18- to 24-year-olds in Johannesburg can cost a fraction of the usual while reaching the same number, if not more. This makes one of the clear advantages and disadvantages of using social marketing approaches in public health finance: it stretches limited resources. Still, it can also create a false sense of "cheap equals effective".

The third is flexibility. Campaigns can be adjusted in real time. If a message fails to resonate, you do not need to wait months to fix it. You can pivot mid-campaign, test variations, and track immediate feedback. For doctors used to titrating medication, this feels familiar—adjust, measure, and improve.

Where things get messy

Reach, however, does not equal impact. One of the most significant disadvantages of using social marketing approaches in public health is that exposure does not always lead to behaviour change. People may like or share a post about safe sex practices, but whether that translates into consistent condom use is another matter entirely. Awareness is not the same as action.

Another disadvantage is misinformation. Social platforms are noisy, and your carefully crafted post about vaccine safety may appear next to a conspiracy meme. This dilutes credibility and makes it harder for patients to know which voices to trust. As a healthcare professional, this can be intensely frustrating because evidence-based messages are too often drowned out.

There is also the issue of equity. Campaigns often assume everyone has equal access to technology, but the digital divide is real. Rural communities, older populations, or low-income

groups might be left out. This means that one of the advantages and disadvantages of using social marketing approaches in public health is accessibility: you may reach millions quickly, but you risk leaving out the very populations that need the intervention most.

Actionable tips for medical professionals

So, how do you balance the advantages and disadvantages of using social marketing approaches in public health? Here are strategies that can strengthen your campaigns:

Start with data, not assumptions. Use local epidemiology, patient surveys, or clinic feedback to guide what messages matter most.

Segment your audience. A single campaign for “everyone” is rarely effective. Create separate strategies for teens, young adults, parents, and older adults.

Integrate, do not isolate. Social marketing should not exist on its own. Pair it with in-person talks, clinic reminders, and community outreach.

Measure what matters. Move beyond vanity metrics like “likes” and instead track tangible outcomes such as appointment bookings, vaccination uptake, or screening rates.

Keep it authentic. People ignore robotic language. Use a human tone, relatable imagery, and, where appropriate, humour. The more natural the message, the greater the impact.

Why balance matters

Ultimately, the advantages and disadvantages of using social marketing approaches in public health highlight a bigger truth: there is no single golden ticket. Public health thrives on layered, complementary strategies. Social marketing is powerful, but it works best when combined with the personal trust patients place in their healthcare providers.

Doctors, nurses, and allied health professionals are in a unique position to make this balance work. When you understand the strengths and weaknesses of social marketing, you are better equipped to ask smart questions: Is this campaign reaching the right people? Does it move them towards measurable behaviour change? Is it worth the financial and human investment?

The bottom line

Social marketing is neither hero nor villain. It is a method—and like any method, it is only as effective as the people behind it. Considering the advantages and disadvantages of using social marketing approaches in public health ensures you never rely on it blindly. Instead, you treat it as

one tool in a larger kit. Use it strategically. Adapt it when it falls short. Always pair it with the clinical expertise patients trust most.

At SAHBA, we believe in empowering healthcare professionals with this kind of practical insight. Whether you are experimenting with hashtags, launching a digital ad, or planning a traditional outreach campaign, the goal remains the same: building healthier communities through evidence, balance, and intention.