Introduction to the Special Section on Social Entrepreneurship

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Social entrepreneurs are leaders of ventures that employ innovative approaches to address social problems. Their innovations can emerge in the ways the products or services of the venture function; the ways they are distributed and delivered; the advocacy approach of the venture; the ways the venture accumulates and deploys financial, human, and other resources; or the ways the venture's networks or partnerships are configured. A dominant characteristic of most social entrepreneurs is having a passionate desire to scale social impact. This often means desiring to grow their organization to reach and serve more people in more places, but it could also mean becoming successful at improving people's lives through influencing laws, regulations, or cultural norms. Examples of social entrepreneurial innovations that have scaled their impact effectively include Grameen Bank's microloans, the Teach for America teacher development system, Kiva's computerized matching algorithm that connects donors and causes, and YouthBuild's on-the-job training program that helps school dropouts develop marketable skills in the building trades while also earning a GED.

Interest in social entrepreneurship has grown dramatically in recent years. Many influential people in business, government, philanthropy, and nonprofit organizations have come to believe that social entrepreneurship holds promise for helping alleviate many of the world's most pressing problems in ways that cannot be accomplished by either bureaucratic governments or charity-oriented philanthropic organizations. Furthermore, they view social entrepreneurs as being more adept than other managers of social purpose organizations at managing change and also harnessing market forces to allow financial sustainability to be achieved. Whether operating as a nonprofit, a for-profit, a hybrid, or another format, successful social entrepreneurial organizations seem to be able to find ways to keep costs down, generate adequate revenues, and change lives.

Social entrepreneurship has caught the attention of many students and faculty around the world, with numerous schools now offering courses and experiential learning opportunities in this area. Some of these programs have been developed in business schools, while others reside in public policy or public service schools, public health schools, social work schools, and even engineering schools. Teaching materials and curriculum guides are becoming plentiful. However, what is being covered in these materials has mainly been drawn from case-study research and not from research that has tested theories and found empirical insights that can improve the management practices of a broad cross-section of social entrepreneurs. Moreover, most of the published research to date on social entrepreneurship has drawn from fields such as entrepreneurship, organizational behavior, and strategic management. Very little work in this emerging but growing field has drawn on marketing theories and frameworks for guidance.

This special issue was formulated to try to inject more marketing thought into research about social entrepreneurship. Six papers were selected that represent a wide variety of approaches that could be used to pursue knowledge about how to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of practicing social entrepreneurs. Three of the articles focus on organizations as the unit of analysis (see Epstein and Yuthas; Newbert; and Weerawardena and Mort), and three of the articles focus on individual consumers as the unit of analysis (Griskevicius, Cantu, and Van Vugt; Smith, Cronley, and Barr; and Wood), which is something that has rarely been done in previous research on social entrepreneurship, as studying consumers is less familiar territory for researchers from other disciplines but natural for researchers with marketing backgrounds. In addition, two of the articles are based on comparative case studies (Weerawardena and Mort; Epstein and Yuthas)—a traditional research approach in the field that still can yield very interesting insights. Beyond that, one article is based on experimental studies (Smith, Cronley, and Barr), another is based on a survey of consumers (Wood), another one is based on the analysis of archival data (Newbert), and one is essentially a literature review (Griskevicius, Cantu, and Van Vugt).

The findings and conclusions of these articles are provocative and should pave the way for additional research on a number of topics. Here is what we have learned:

- Social entrepreneurs are significantly less likely than commercial entrepreneurs to implement what could be considered "best marketing practices." (Newbert)

- To achieve desired outcomes with social entrepreneurial efforts, market-focused learning should be accompanied by internally focused learning and organizational flexibility and renewal, as well as network-based learning and collaborative approaches to social value creation. (Weerawardena and Mort)

- Educational organizations that have scaled impact successfully in poor countries have developed quality programs that reflect a deep understanding of client needs and have designed efficient delivery processes and cultivated passionate service delivery personnel (i.e., teachers and managers). (Epstein and Yuthas)

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- Persuading people to pursue prosocial behaviors can be helped by recognizing certain evolutionary bases of human behavior, such as the propensity for self-interest, motivation for relative rather than absolute status, proclivity to unconsciously copy others, and predisposition to be shortsighted. (Griskevicius, Cantu, and Van Vugt)
- Empathy and agreeableness are key personality traits that tend to increase the extent to which people support social innovations. (Wood)

- The pursuit of social enterprise (income-generating) strategies can have a negative impact on how much people are willing to donate to a social purpose organization, but this negative impact can be mitigated if the social enterprise is perceived as mission consistent and competent. (Smith, Cronley, and Barr)

Hopefully, these articles will stimulate others with marketing backgrounds to contribute to the body of knowledge about social entrepreneurship.