



Published on *Marine Ecosystems and Management (MEAM)* (<https://meam.openchannels.org>)

## “Start where your audience is, not where you want them to be”: What EBM and MSP practitioners can (and should) learn from marketing

To some in conservation and resource management, marketing can seem like a bad word, connoting gimmickry, manipulation, consumerism, or overconsumption. But marketing is inherently about getting people to change their behavior, whether it is buying a product, recycling, or supporting a new approach to management.

Marketing techniques, honed by the commercial sector, bring together elements of psychology, sociology, economics, and graphic design. They help marketers: 1) understand people and how they make decisions, 2) build relationships with them, 3) create awareness of products/issues, 4) ensure audiences understand the relevance of those products/issues to their lives, and 5) rigorously analyze performance to continually improve techniques.

Conservation and management efforts can benefit from marketing because effective conservation and management are also about getting people – resource users, resource managers, consumers, local citizens, politicians, etc. – to change their behavior. In some cases, the desired changes are ending human behaviors/activities with negative environmental impacts such as poaching. In others, it is encouraging positive behaviors such as purchasing sustainably sourced seafood. For ocean planning and marine EBM, convincing skeptical or disinterested stakeholders to participate collaboratively in ocean planning processes is a particular challenge.

To learn more about what EBM and MSP practitioners can, and should, learn from marketing to make their processes more effective, MEAM spoke with three conservation marketing experts – Diogo Verissimo, Nicole Lampe, and Kristian Teleki.

Diogo Verissimo is a David H. Smith Research Fellow with Rare and Georgia State University focusing on improving conservation outreach. Nicole Lampe is a vice president at Resource Media, a nonprofit public relations firm that helps develop and execute smart communications strategies for the environment and public health. Kristian Teleki is director of global engagement with the Global Ocean Commission, a high level initiative that developed recommendations to end overfishing and habitat and biodiversity loss in the ocean and improve high seas governance. He was formerly a vice president at SeaWeb, a non-profit organization that uses social marketing research and ocean science to increase awareness of critical ocean issues.

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### MEAM: What are some of the biggest lessons ocean planners and managers can learn from the marketing world to improve EBM and MSP outcomes?

**Verissimo:** The biggest benefit that marketing offers EBM and MSP processes is helping them ensure that the target groups they aim to engage are placed at the center of all outreach messages, activities, and campaigns. It is common for conservation and management actions to be framed around the values of those conducting or sponsoring them rather than around the values of the groups that are most affected or most central to success.

Marketing at its core is about identifying which groups are fundamental for the change you are hoping to see, how they relate to the issue at hand, and what is the exchange of benefits that you are proposing. It is generally pretty easy to describe what you want others to do, but it is harder to explain in a meaningful way what others have to gain by engaging in this new behavior. This is where marketing research comes into play. To be able to get your message across, you need to really understand your target audience and be able to see the issue through their values and within their social and cultural context.

**Lampe:** The first rule of strategic communications is to meet people where they are. For ocean planning efforts, this means connecting with people around their relationship to the resource. Is it a source of jobs for the community? Is local seafood important to the region? Are there beloved coastal areas that will be addressed in the plan?

Next, it's helpful to identify the problem(s) your work is designed to address in terms that will be familiar to your audience. What are the *specific* threats, and how will they impact people's lives (especially their plates and pocketbooks)? Finally, explain how EBM will help solve that problem and invite people to get involved.

The basic formula for a "message" looks like this:

Value + Problem or Threats + Solution + Call to Action

For example, in our work with ocean advocates on MPA planning in Southern California, we started by talking about the ocean as integral to the local lifestyle. Coastal hotspots like La Jolla and Malibu are popular with residents and visitors alike, supporting a multi-million dollar tourism and recreation economy in addition to thriving fisheries. We described how climate change, coastal development, and increased demand for fresh seafood are threatening beloved coastal areas. We explained how MPAs – or "underwater parks," as we called them to make the connection to terrestrial parks that already enjoy broad support – help buffer against these threats, allowing sea life to

recover and thrive. Finally, we noted that the state was seeking input from ocean users and relying on local expertise to ensure the system of protected areas served everyone's needs, and we listed opportunities get involved.

**Teleki:** Social marketing is not a new idea. In the 1970s, professional marketers realized that the principles that were being used to sell products to consumers could also be used to sell ideas, attitudes, and behaviors. For the EBM and MSP communities, social marketing provides a tool to show how putting EBM into practice can benefit society. The basic principle of consumer marketing — that is, benefit vs. cost — applies to social marketing as well. If the benefits of the policy or behavior change outweigh the costs, it is likely to be adopted.

A simple phrase that I learned in my first few days at SeaWeb, and one I wish someone had whispered in my ear many years before that, is “Start where your audience is, not where you want them to be.” This for me is the ‘elevator pitch’ and basis for any social marketing effort. Today, for anyone who will listen, I call this ‘step zero’ of a project and strongly advocate for it to be built into project design and budgeting. I look back at a number of projects I was involved with in the past and had I better understood the principles of social marketing, I would have managed them differently and might have achieved more positive and successful outcomes in a shorter amount of time.

Your objective should be to bring your stakeholder groups with you on the ‘project journey’ to the outcomes for which you have planned. Find out what they know and understand and listen carefully to what they have to say. Then design your project with them as active participants, not bystanders. This may seem obvious, but I have seen countless examples of ocean managers who have an objective and want to hit the ground running. They make assumptions about what their stakeholders know and run into obstacle after obstacle, slowing the projects and wasting valuable resources. Getting to know your audience and walking a mile in their shoes will pay dividends in reaching successful outcomes more quickly.

## MEAM: What are your main marketing tips for ocean planners and managers?

### Verissimo:

Do:

- Think about who your target audience is. An intervention never targets everyone in a community in the same way. To target everyone is to target no one. Prioritizing interventions among groups will make your strategy clearer and more likely to succeed.
- Use market research as a way to know your target audience. Personal experience and interactions are likely to be strongly biased, and well-designed surveys, focus groups, or interviews can greatly improve your understanding of your target audience.
- Be rigorous when it comes to evaluating your efforts. Knowing if a given activity or campaign has succeeded is the only way to constantly improve.

Don't:

- Don't use terms such as social marketing, social media, advertising, or public relations as if they all mean the same thing. Although definitions vary, few would argue any of these are synonyms! Here is a short glossary:
  - Marketing is the overall process of communicating and delivering products to a target audience through a mix of product, price, place, and promotion
  - Social marketing is a process that applies marketing principles and techniques to create, communicate, and deliver value in order to influence target audience behaviors that benefit society as well as the target audience
  - Social media are more personal and interactive forms of message delivery than are traditional mass media. From a conceptual perspective, these electronic systems are similar to print, broadcast, and outdoor media such as billboards and posters
  - Advertising is a means of communicating to a target audience using mostly paid media such as television, radio, the Internet, and print publications
  - Public relations is a communication method used by businesses to convey a positive image to a target audience and other members of the public.

### Lampe:

1. Lead with shared values. You are likely targeting people who love or rely on the ocean, so acknowledge their interest in its long-term health and invite them to help steward it.
2. Use plain English. Spell acronyms out. Avoid jargon and scientific terms. Instead of using a phrase like Ecosystem-Based Management or getting mired in explaining the process, talk about the results.
3. Localize. People care most about what is happening right in their backyard, so focus on local problems and solutions even if the planning effort covers a broader geography.
4. Call out beloved places and critters by name.
5. Identify the problem or threats, but focus on solutions and benefits to communities. We want to inspire hope and action, not despair.

### Teleki:

1. Constantly remind yourself (throughout both planning and implementation) to “Start where you audience is, not where you want them to be.” This is the guiding principle of social marketing and should be your litmus test for how to proceed. Your stakeholders must recognize for themselves that there is a problem or an issue that they need to overcome or address. They must also see that the benefits of change outweigh the costs. If neither of these things happen, you are likely setting yourself up for failure.
2. Seek authoritative and credible voices that are passionate and enthusiastic about what they do. Have fishermen talk about fishing and surfers talk about the ocean. Passionate advocates can accelerate change among their peers, excite the media, and influence politicians and policy.
3. Remember your social marketing objective is not to influence the behavior of the masses. This is far too costly and virtually impossible to accomplish. Rather you want to build support for the change you are trying to achieve by enabling society's (or your stakeholders') ‘gatekeepers’ and opinion leaders to advocate for that change.

## MEAM: Do you have any examples of how these actions have helped ocean planning or marine EBM projects in the past?

**Verissimo:** I am currently involved in [Fish Forever](#), a project which aims to use social marketing as a tool to empower local communities to manage their coastal fisheries in a sustainable way. Fish Forever uses the implementation of Territorial Use Rights for Fishing (TURF) reserves as a key management tool and is currently being implemented in five countries: Indonesia, Philippines, Brazil, Mozambique, and Belize. To my knowledge, this is the first time that social marketing has been used at such a global scale in the realm of marine conservation, although [Rare](#), one of the project partners, has been using social marketing to promote marine conservation for more than a decade.

**Lampe:** In the case of California's Marine Life Protection Act, effective community outreach and organizing resulted in tremendous public engagement. California had tens of thousands of people attend meetings or submit comments during the planning period, and many stakeholder groups remain engaged in MPA monitoring and education and stewardship programs through a series of [Coastal Collaboratives](#).

**Teleki:** SeaWeb provides a number of [useful EBM tools and resources related to social marketing](#). Of particular note is ‘[Trade-Off](#)’, a board game that lets you play the role of different coastal stakeholders — natural resource managers, commercial fishers, scientists, developers, elected officials, and others — who negotiate uses and activities in a coastal community. During the game, a coastal management plan takes shape, and the stakeholders gain an understanding of the compatibility and potential conflicts of multiple-use objectives.

## Learn more about how conservation marketing can help your work

- A webinar on how social marketing can improve conservation and management outcomes led by Diogo Verissimo of Rare and Georgia State University will be held on Thursday, March 24, at 1 pm US EDT/10 am PDT/5 pm UTC. You can register for the webinar at <https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/2061840860623463169>.
- See a [list of top conservation marketing publications](#) (most are open access) from Diogo Verissimo.
- Resource Media provides a toolkit of guides, worksheets, and presentations on strategic communications at <http://www.resource-media.org/toolbox>.

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