



Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration

The reference for understanding government action

PUBLIC SECTOR MARKETING

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In a nutshell, the meaning of marketing is construed in two different but complementary ways. In the first and most widespread meaning (Meffert, Burmann and Kirchgeorg, 2008), the emphasis is on the managerial dimension, with special focus being dedicated to the tasks that an organization must fulfil in order to ensure long-term success with target groups. The second and more comprehensive meaning (Kotler, Dubois and Manceau, 2004) is concerned with the function of marketing and focuses on the notions of exchange and relationship as these occur between an organization and those individuals and groups who seek to satisfy their needs. Analogously, public sector marketing seeks to articulate and propose solutions regarding the exchange and relationships occurring between a government organization and individuals, groups of individuals, organizations or communities in connection with the request for and performance of public-oriented tasks and services.

In order to delimit situations in which marketing principles and approaches can be applied from those in which the basic conditions are not met, it is worth crossing types of exchange with the nature of the relationships that can emerge between the parties. The following table presents the results of such crossing.

	Absence of exchange	Exchange subject to constraint / Free exchange
Relationship subject to constraint	No marketing	Selective use of marketing tools
Partially free relationship / Free relationship	Elements of relationship marketing	Potential application of the conceptual approach underlying marketing and of corresponding tools

The first case, which frequently occurs in the public sector, corresponds to the type of situation in which the relationship is subject to constraint and no exchange occurs. A police officer who makes an arrest, a judge who issues a summons, etc., are all significant, concrete situations in which marketing, as a discipline, is absent from public sector thinking: one cannot speak of the satisfaction of a party or of freedom in the relationship. Furthermore, in order to protect people from the arbitrary use of constraint, these situations are clearly codified in democratic systems and the rules

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governing constraint (e.g., codes of procedure, administrative directives, etc.) are stringent. This is not to imply that administrations and public officials are exempted from complying with a number of by now basic principles of modern society, such as showing respect for individuals (e.g., listening to people; showing a minimum of empathy; taking into account, as much as possible, certain characteristics of an individual who presents a handicap or does not understand the language, etc.), or employing communication skills (e.g., clearly explaining the situation and underlying expectations; justifying decisions in a way that is easily understandable; informing individuals of their rights, etc.). Even though some of these elements can also be discerned in the principles of relationship marketing, they do not provide a sufficient basis for discussing these public service activities in terms of a marketing approach.

In situations in which exchange is absent and the relationship is devoid of constraint (i.e., is at least partially free), one may resort to an approach that more systematically takes elements of relationship marketing into account. It is a fact that many public organization activities do not consist in the provisioning of services for citizens but instead in the development, implementation and monitoring of policies. Although all such activities do not culminate in an exchange, they can, however, involve individuals or groups of individuals, owing to the need to gather and analyze data, hold discussions with the representatives of these people, etc. When, for example, a municipality decides to review its public transportation grid in response to expanding demand or out of a need to establish a competitive tendering process regarding any related concession, it can send citizens a questionnaire for the purpose of learning more about their transportation habits, hold a public briefing, or foster dialogue with citizens (e.g., Web forum, suggestion box, etc.). Depending on the activity and the institutional context, these organizations can apply the principles of relationship marketing with a view to establishing a lasting relationship of trust.

A different kind of situation occurs where the relationship is subject to constraint but where a certain degree of exchange exists. This is the case, for example, of mandatory periodic vehicle inspections that are, at the same time, the occasion of a concrete service transaction (i.e., authorization is given to use a vehicle in return for guarantees that the vehicle complies with safety standards). Owing to the absence of freedom in the relationship that is established between the administration and the service user, it is not possible to apply all marketing principles – regarding, for example, the segmentation of needs, expectations or behaviours, or the positioning of the service offering (due to little or no competitive environment, the absence of any possible differentiation in terms of service fee, etc.). Nevertheless, organizations can apply a certain number of marketing tools by trying to adapt elements of the service offering in relation to recipients (for example, garage owners as opposed to individual citizens). One such way is to step up the use of communication tools to improve and simplify transactions between the organization and the recipient (e.g., the option of choosing the time of one's car inspection on the Internet; prepayment via various modern mechanisms, etc.). Another way is to establish ways of systematically improving the transaction and the relationship with service users (e.g., surveys on user satisfaction or service quality). This situation also applies in the case of compulsory education, tax collection, etc.

Whenever the relationship is at least partially free and a degree of exchange occurs, there is room for implementing more fully developed marketing approaches. The simplest case involves the situation in which both the exchange and the relationship are totally free. Then, the public organization can, subject to existing laws and regulations, act like a private business to a very great extent. Such criteria are fully satisfied in the case of the continuing education programs offered by public universities, which enjoy considerable latitude in terms of accepting or refusing program participants and which are also free to determine the form and content of their program offering. In

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the public sector, however, the freedom characterizing the relationship is often limited – where users are concerned – to accepting or refusing the corresponding service. That being said, limitations can apply to the choice of operator or supplier and both the offer and the terms and conditions of the exchange are subject to restrictions. As regards the organization, the ability and interest in using marketing tools stems directly from the possibility of incorporating differentiation criteria into the service offering and of obtaining input from users as part of this exchange.

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