

RESEARCH · PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

Marketing Public Programs: Borrowing the Private-Sector Metric

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WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

Public-sector capacity is contracting at the same time that private-sector marketing capability has become more sophisticated and more measurable than at any point in history. The agencies that learn to structure partnerships around audience accountability, not just service delivery, will reach populations that traditional outreach has stopped reaching. The framework below is intended for state and municipal program designers, public health agencies, and economic development offices currently evaluating PPP structures.

ABSTRACT

Public programs are evaluated on delivery: on budget, on population, on quality. They are rarely evaluated on whether the audience noticed. Private companies cannot afford that omission; products that go unrecognized fail. Public-private partnerships work when they import the private-sector accountability for awareness into a public-sector program. This paper draws on the Global Public-Private Partnership for Hand Washing with Soap, the Ghana implementation, and the published research of Val Curtis to identify four conditions that determine whether a PPP will deliver (aligned interests, a single unifying idea, audience self-interest, and pilot-before-scale), and applies the framework to current domains including public health, housing finance, workforce development, and benefits enrollment.

In Ghana, a coordinated public-private hand-washing campaign reached recognition above 70% among target mothers. Reported hand washing with soap rose. The global baseline before the campaign was 5 to 15% (Curtis, 2001).

The intervention wasn't new. The awareness was.

Public programs are evaluated on delivery, not on whether anyone noticed. Private companies are evaluated on whether anyone noticed. If they aren't noticed, they die. Public-private partnerships work because they import the private metric into a public program.

That's the thesis. The rest is evidence and method.

The Structural Problem

Public programs measure success in service delivery: on budget, on population, on quality. These are real. Awareness is not on the list.

Private companies cannot leave awareness off the list. A retailer that opens a store without signs doesn't blame the consumer. They redesign the store. Public programs face no equivalent feedback. The funding cycle rewards announcement, not penetration.

A PPP changes this. It brings a partner whose survival depends on consumer response.

Ghana

In 2000, Colgate-Palmolive, Unilever, and Procter & Gamble joined the Global Public-Private Partnership for Hand Washing with Soap, convened by the World Bank's Water and Sanitation Program. Founding members included USAID, UNICEF, and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. The CDC joined later (Curtis, 2007).

The Ghana implementation deployed coordinated multi-channel saturation: television advertising in multiple languages on national stations, radio in ten or more local languages across regional networks, urban billboards in major cities, and community events reaching tens of thousands of mothers, schoolchildren, teachers, and food vendors over the life of the campaign (Curtis, 2007).

Result: recognition above 70% among target mothers, with measurable behavior change.

This is what saturation looks like when consumer marketers run the operation. Public health agencies don't normally execute at this volume because they're not normally measured against the audience.

Four Conditions

Stripped of context, four conditions made Ghana work. Any PPP missing one will struggle.

1. Aligned interests. Soap companies sold more soap. Health agencies saved more children. Neither side compromised mission. Most failed PPPs fail this test before they start.

2. A single unifying idea. Wash your hands with soap to protect your child. One message, every channel, every language. Public communication tends to over-explain. One repeated idea beats five scattered ones.

3. Audience self-interest, not program mission. The campaign sold child protection, not hygiene. Mothers care about their children. The mission was hygiene. The marketing was about love.

4. Tested before scale. Pilot, measure, adjust, scale. Public programs frequently launch national first because funding rewards announcement.

If a proposed PPP cannot satisfy all four, it will fail.

When PPPs Fail

The case for PPPs is conditional. They fail when private interest diverges from public mission.

Tobacco funding anti-smoking education is the extreme case. Less obvious: fast food funding school nutrition, oil funding climate education, payday lending funding financial literacy. The marketing capability is real. The conflict of mission is fatal.

The screening question: in the scenarios where the private partner profits most, does the public outcome also improve? If no, the partnership is a marketing channel for the private partner, not a delivery vehicle for the public program.

Applying the Framework

Take a regional public health agency that wants to increase HPV vaccination rates among adolescents. The agency has clinical infrastructure, school access, and data on uptake. It does not have consumer marketing capability. A natural private partner is a

regional pharmacy chain. Pharmacies sell more vaccines when uptake is higher, and they have brand reach into the same parent population the agency is trying to influence.

Tested against the four conditions:

- **Aligned interests:** Higher vaccination rates serve both partners. No mission compromise.
- **Unifying idea:** Protect your kid before high school. One message.
- **Audience self-interest:** Parents act on their child's health, not on public health statistics.
- **Tested before scale:** Pilot in two counties, measure uptake against control counties, then expand.

The same logic applies across domains: a city housing authority partnering with a regional bank on first-time homebuyer programs, a state workforce board partnering with an LMS provider on credentialing, a local food bank partnering with a grocery chain on benefits enrollment. The structure is portable. The four conditions are the test.

Conclusion

The Ghana campaign is one of the most cited social marketing successes of the last twenty-five years. The reason is not that the soap companies were generous. The reason is that the partnership architecture forced public health agencies to be measured the way private companies are measured: by whether the audience noticed.

Public programs that don't borrow this discipline will continue to deliver good services that few people use. The fix is not more public-sector marketing budget. The fix is a partnership structure that imports the metric.

See also: [Acting in the Cracks: A Note on Verification Infrastructure \(2026\)](#).

References

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ABOUT THE WRITER

John F. Long writes from Newport County on the South Coast of Massachusetts and Rhode Island. MPA, Roger Williams University. Two years of doctoral coursework in higher education administration at UMass Dartmouth. The practice underneath the writing is real estate (johnlong.realestate) and verification infrastructure (longfamilyarchive.com). The writing sits at johnlong.io as the canonical surface for the body of work on citizenship and its material preconditions.

The body of work is structured as a quartet of citizenship surveys (time, ground, voice, currency), with [The Periscope](#) as the catalyst essay, [The Map](#) as the compressed survey, [The Absent Presence](#) as the meta-frame, and [Acting in the Cracks](#) as the applied note. The full reading order is at [/the-index](#).

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