

Viewpoint Q&A

Associate Professor Michael Mehmet

Can you tell us about yourself and your current role?

I am an Associate Professor at the University of Wollongong. I specialise in upstream social marketing using digital techniques and technologies. My current role is hard to describe. Basically, I freelance with industry partners to assist in positive behaviour change. I specialise in using digital channels and content to better understand problems/perspectives and provide strategic recommendations to research teams and organisations. My role also has a team formation component, where I headhunt specific talent to join research teams to achieve specific objectives. If needed, this is extended to include mentoring and upskilling. More broadly, I assist staff at UOW in the research journey, helping them scope and apply for grants, using digital technologies to promote their work and training staff in social listening techniques.

What attracted you to social marketing?

In a word impact! In 2015, I made a conscious decision to embark on an academic pursuit driven by the aspiration to create a meaningful impact. The allure of dedicating substantial time to addressing complex and challenging issues, and delving into multifaceted research endeavours with the ultimate aim of achieving favourable outcomes, captivated my interest. Let's be honest; few positionings allow us to do what we love and positively impact people's lives.

What are the most satisfying parts of your work as a social marketing researcher?

Working with great teams. Engaging in collaborative endeavours with exceptional teams has been an enriching aspect of my professional journey, spanning various national and international institutions. While undoubtedly the gratification derived from aiding individuals and influencing well-informed policy decisions is substantial, the



most profound sense of fulfilment arises from the collective effort invested over long periods of time, united in pursuit of a shared objective. I also really enjoy showcasing the power of social research to policymakers, and seeing their faces when they realise just what we can do. I don't know if it is ego or the transformational aspect of knowledge sharing but see people who doubted your approach suddenly become your biggest fans is a bit of a kick.

Can you share with us a project that you are worked on that went particularly well?

I was lucky enough to work on a long-term collaboration with the Department of Primary Industry (Fisheries) for nearly six years, transforming shark management and mitigation in New South Wales. I would be lying if I said that the project went to plan, as we really did not have one when we started out. We conducted an initial project with the DPI, and then identified opportunities and then worked on the next stage, we did this five or six times. Just letting the research guide us...glad we did.

The DPI was great and saw value in social research. The collaboration blossomed over the years and was truly co-created. Ultimately



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the research project culminated in securing over \$20 million in shark funding for the DPI (Fisheries). We transformed, internationally, how shark mitigation and management research is done and impacted (positively) how shark management is implemented in NSW (and other places around the world). I am most proud of how the community played a central role in every aspect of the program. They helped select the mitigation measures the DPI employed and gave us insights into behaviours that needed changing and communication that would resonate to shape behaviour change.

Ultimately, the shark project demonstrated that if all parties are in it for the right reasons, you can achieve amazing things.

In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges faced by social marketers and/or social marketing today?

I see three big challenges.

1. Valuing social marketing research. We have come a long way in getting our field recognised. Our community has amazing leadership, but we are still not taken seriously by some in power. I know building credibility and a 'brand' takes time, but breaking the stigma of our research is my priority.
2. AI. Systems like Chat GPT can be our best friend or worst enemy. I am enjoying learning how to use the tool to assist my research and thinking, but I am concerned that people may use it to answer questions that it cannot answer or take shortcuts. The pursuit for quick answers over thorough investigation is a trend across society and is something that I worry about entering our field. Learning the nuances related to our research takes time, and there are no shortcuts.
3. Same, same thinking. We need to learn to continually question what we do. Sometimes we can do what we do, not because it is the best option but because it is familiar. We must question our actions to ensure our minds are open to new theories, methods, solutions and work habits. I am concerned that some people think social marketing research has

a formula and forget to look at the problem from different perspectives.

Finally, what tips do you have for other social marketing researchers?

Top three tips for social marketers. I sound like a blog, but seriously. My biggest tip is to surround yourself with good people. As I said before, teams are the best asset you have. You want to surround yourself with the best team you can, with complementary skills, knowledge and thought processes. The human hand works so well because every finger has strengths and plays its part. Just imagine if you had five pinkies. Once you have a great team, be patient and learn to listen. Great teams are built over time by learning when to push and give way, just like any relationship.

Next, there is no substitute for dedication and tenacity. Ask any coach. The person who works the hardest always seems to be the 'luckiest'. If you want to succeed in the space, you need to work hard and commit yourself. I would rather work with a team member that works hard than a genius that does not commit.

Finally, network. Unless you are a Professor Raciti, Rundle-Theile or Gordon people are not knocking at your door to shower you with money! You need to network, understand problems from multiple perspectives, and network some more. It is not about talking yourself up or showing off; it is more about understanding, listening and positioning. Go to conferences, email people, join a committee, volunteer, or whatever. Network! If you are shy, remember it is a skill, not a personality type. You can learn to network.

