Ideas have consequences only if they lead to action. Turning ideas into action requires the development of intellectual raw materials, their conversion into specific policy and media products, and the distribution and promotion of these products to different public and policy audiences.

The conservative movement in the U.S. has understood and followed this “knowledge production” strategy for over 30 years. It has married think tanks, communications experts and activist institutions to ideologically driven foundations and corporations to wage what has been widely termed “the war of ideas.” Conservative strategists see this “war of ideas” as a battle for the hearts and minds of people. And they understand the pivotal role marketing and communications play in such a battle.

Despite recent setbacks, the conservative movement’s strategy over the last three decades has largely succeeded in reducing the role and effectiveness of government, deregulating markets and shaping public opinion accordingly.

In contrast, those interested in debunking the GDP and promoting better measures of progress have paid far too little attention to developing successful communications and marketing strategies for promoting their ideas. In particular, there has been no sustained investment in moving these ideas over “the last mile” into the hands of the general public. In today’s hyper-competitive marketplace of ideas, it is not enough to be right. You must be able to move your ideas into the mainstream, to popularize them, to get them implemented. You must be able to convert your ideas into action.

In order to better understand the role of communications and marketing, the Glaser Progress Foundation developed and implemented a small campaign last year challenging GDP as a measure of progress. The Foundation orchestrated a U.S. Senate hearing and created an Internet video to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Robert Kennedy’s famous critique of GDP at the University of Kansas. Based on this case study, several recommendations will be offered for strengthening the role of private foundations in developing better communications and marketing strategies.