Integrated Communications

Student Critique

Brad Osborn
Integrated Communications
Instructor: Dr. Sandra H. Utt
The University of Memphis
Memphis, Tennessee
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Introduction

Integrated Communications (IC) or Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) are those messages dispatched to, and received from myriad stakeholder groups or vested parties, both consumer and non-consumer, which effect a unified voice employing tools from the traditional communications disciplines, producing a coherent message while attempting to achieve synergy amongst communications specialties. IC/IMC utilizes all forms of communication that are relevant to the customer, both internal and external.

These communications efforts utilize general advertising, direct marketing, direct response, sales promotions and public relations (PR) to provide a single clear message.

Modern IMC definitions not only emphasize the strategic coordination of all messages and media used by an organization to collectively influence its perceived brand value, but also include any parties with an interest in the organization/brand, as well as all stakeholders, while strategically controlling or influencing all messages and encouraging purposeful dialogue.

This enlarged concept of audience places more emphasis on long-term effects such as brand loyalty and maintaining relationships.
**Persuasive Disciplines, Tools and Support**

Persuasive tools include public relations, direct marketing (DM), promotions, packaging and advertising. Conventional advertising is augmented by media planning, sales promotion and DM. Direct response, turnkey solutions, project management, graphic design and internet marketing, as well as new media and business consulting are employed. Strategic planning, web site development (including intranets), multimedia and trade show design add to the tools mix.

Public relations practitioners are addressing markets, and marketers are addressing publics. Advertising extends into the marketing arena. Marketing, advertising and public relations are historically separated, but can come together to use their respective tools and those of other persuasive disciplines to reach all markets, publics, targets and stakeholders.

Separate from persona, the "One Voice" of IMC is sent out, like a gyroscope, to bounce off all sides of its target box, using all means available: public relations releases, annual reports, promotional messages, direct marketing campaigns, All contribute to build upon, and draw from brand equity.

Corporate culture and politics impact the implementation of marketing communications. Organizational structure and resources influence them, as well. The complexity of relationships within an organization and traditional compensation, i.e. commission, salary, expense reports and bonuses are key issues. Variability in personal abilities and goals introduces inconsistency. Differential budget allocations also strain cooperation.
Extent of Integration

Ad agencies are transforming into integrated communications providers. Integration modifies the execution of marketing communications. Supposed benefits are touted. Many advertising firms claim full communications integration.4

In fact, advertising is the discipline that appears to be most integrated across media, while sales promotion and PR are the least integrated. Direct marketing is the discipline claimed to be most integrated with advertising -- PR the least.4

Benefit/Harm Analysis

Conflict between disciplines is an important consideration. Organizations using IMC employ such tools as event marketing, sponsorships, sales promotion, direct marketing, the internet, targeted radio, global branding, etc. There are fears this will result in lower profits.

A study examined ad agencies offering integrated marketing communications. It showed that more agencies are doing IMC, doing it well and that clients see an improved bottom line when the integration is properly practiced.4

One of the limitations of IMC is that promotional tools do not appear to work together.4 Boomerang effects are also a hazard.
Boomerang effects occur as a result of one's cognitive experiences. The receiver is influenced more by cognition than by the message sent. Even if the organization is sending out a consistent, integrated message, the receiver takes away a contradictory message. This is brand-based perception. The message may then cause a negative reaction if a contrary motivation is perceived.¹

IMC claims cost reduction, but if it is just used as a media cash cow it cannot succeed. However, used to aid stakeholder edification, streamline media and personnel use, increase market knowledge and simplify consumer choices, it can be a worthwhile endeavor.

**Reasons for Enthusiasm**

To deliver uniform brand messages, firms can turn over local advertising to national ad agencies, have local ad agencies report nationally, give control for local advertising to regional managers and establish comprehensive responsibility for all advertising and marketing. Promotions and PR could follow. All would have as goals to improve market share, increase brand or product awareness, penetrate new markets, develop greater marketing efficiencies, etc.

As compared to the traditional linear communications model, which has a distinct beginning, passes through whatever medium and ends at the consumer, the IMC model is circular, and engages the receiver in ongoing dialogue through various feedback loops.¹ The receiver is the focus in IMC!
Conclusion

Integrated communications may work well for organizations with either vast capital to get behind a truly concerted effort to integrate marketing, advertising and public relations, or for firms that have very little monetary resources, and thus don't have entrenched departments for each discipline and could better afford the "One Voice" of IC.

Those business concerns with moderate expenditure capabilities and with no internal incentive to move toward an integrated marketing plan, i.e. those that are "getting by," may not reap its full benefits. Corporate and disciplinary culture weigh heavily in the decision to proceed with IC implementation.

Another potential beneficiary of an integrated plan could be a company or organization that has, in the past, primarily exploited just one of the persuasive disciplines, e.g. advertising. The message developed for ads could be adapted for use in the small amount of PR or other marketing that is done by the firm. Then, in the future, should the use of one or more of the other disciplines grow, an integrated plan would be in place.

Lastly, newly formed organizations could benefit for the same reasons: lack of entrenchment, limited funds and growth potential.

The advent of IMC places a enormous burden on its architect for clarity and completeness, since it is "The One Plan."
Reference List


