



Integrated marketing communication: from tactics to strategy

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Abstract

Purpose – The emergence of integrated marketing communications (IMC) has become a significant example of development in the marketing discipline. It has influenced thinking and acting among all types of companies and organizations facing the realities of competition in an open economy. From the beginning of the 1990s IMC became a real hot topic in the field of marketing. Four stages of IMC have been identified, starting from tactical coordination to financial and strategic integration. However, the majority of firms are anchored in the first stages and very few have moved to a strategic level. One conclusion is that there are barriers to developing IMC from tactics to strategy. The main purpose of this paper is to identify obstacles to further developing IMC.

Design/methodology/approach – A review of relevant literature during the 1990s and a study of four large Swedish companies.

Findings – Results show that decisions concerning IMC are rooted on the advertising agency level and have failed to appear on management level, whose communicative ability has remained insufficient, mainly due to obsolete tradition.

Originality/value – Indicates a need for international research and a reconsideration of educational programs regarding management, marketing and marketing communications.

Keywords Marketing communications, Marketing strategy, Competitive strategy, Sweden

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The emergence of integrated marketing communications (IMC) has become one of the most significant example of development in the marketing discipline (Kitchen, 2003). It has influenced thinking and acting among companies but also authorities, state owned companies and political parties, all facing the realities of competition in an open economy.

Some 20 years ago academics and professionals discussed theory and practice of business communication but without considering the idea of integration as a realistic approach to reach a competitive strategic position for the company. Some early attempts in the beginning of the 1980s initiated academic interest and articles appeared in the academic literature (Dyer, 1982; Coulson-Thomas, 1983). From the beginning of the 1990s IMC became a real hot topic in the field of marketing (Caywood *et al.*, 1991; Miller and Rose, 1994; Kitchen and Schultz, 1997, 1998, 1999). Twenty years ago, 75 percent of marketing budgets went to advertising in the US. Today, 50 percent goes into trade promotions, 25 percent into consumer promotions and less than 25 percent into advertising (Kitchen, 2003). The allocation of communication budgets away from mass media and traditional advertising has obviously promoted IMC in recognition and importance for effective marketing. The emergence of IT has fundamentally changed the media landscape, contributed to an extensive deregulation of markets



and individualized patterns of consumption and increased the segmentation of consumer tastes and preferences (Eagle and Kitchen, 2000; Kitchen, 2003).

Kitchen and Schultz (2000) have identified four stages of IMC starting from tactical coordination of promotional elements, redefining the scope of marketing communications, application of information technology to financial and strategic integration. They found that the majority of firms are anchored in the first two stages, some are moving into stage three and very few have moved to stage four.

One conclusion is that there are barriers to developing IMC from tactics to strategy. If we accept that communication is the foundation of all human relationship (Duncan, 2002) we also have to accept that only strategically oriented integrated brand communications can help business to reach a sustainable competitive position. The main purpose of this paper is to identify obstacles to further developing IMC.

The concept of IMC

As a concept IMC has become well known on an international scale during the 1990s. Thus IMC is a term whose widespread use is comparatively recent, a fact, which might explain why there not yet is a common understanding of its real meaning and the lack of a generally accepted definition. Let us assume that the ultimate purpose of marketing is to deliver a higher standard of living (Kotler, 2003). If we use a more limited definition we could say that marketing is a societal process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want through creating, offering and freely exchanging products and services of value with others (Kotler, 2003, p. 9). The keyword is value, which can be defined as a ratio between benefits and costs, between what the customer gets and what he/she gives. To increase the value of the customer offering the marketer can use several combinations of methods, all aiming to raise benefits and reduce costs. It is then evident that the main purpose of marketing communication is to affect the consumer's conception of value and of the relation between benefits and costs. This can be achieved by raising benefits, reducing costs, raising benefits and reducing costs, raising benefits by more than the raise in costs and lower benefits by less than the reduction in costs.

Smith *et al.* (1999) have defined IMC. They distinguish three definitions:

- (1) Management and control of all market communications.
- (2) Ensuring that the brand positioning, personality and messages are delivered synergistically across every element of communication and are delivered from a single consistent strategy.
- (3) The strategic analysis, choice, implementation and control of all elements of marketing communications which efficiently (best use of resources), economically (minimum costs) and effectively (maximum results) influence transactions between an organization and its existing and potential customers, consumers and clients.

In order to reach a better understanding of the full meaning and process of IMC Smith *et al.* (1999) have developed a tool which is supposed to show marketing integration as occurring at one or more of seven levels. They distinguish the following levels and corresponding degrees of integration.

- *Vertical objectives integration.* It means that communication objectives fit with marketing objectives and the overall corporate objectives.

- *Horizontal/functional integration.* Marketing communications activities fit well with other business functions of manufacturing, operations and human resource management.
- *Marketing mix integration.* The marketing mix of product, price and place decisions is consistent with the promotion decisions, e.g. with the required communication messages.
- *Communications mix integration.* All the 12 communications tools are being used to guide the customer/consumer/client through each stage of the buying process and all of them portray a consistent message.
- *Creative design integration.* The creative design and execution is uniform and consistent with the chosen positioning of the product.
- *Internal/external integration.* All internal departments and all external employed agencies are working together to an agreed plan and strategy.
- *Financial integration.* The budget is being used in the most effective and efficient way ensuring that economies of scale are achieved and that long-term investment is optimized.

Smith *et al.* claim that the most important and fundamental level is that of vertical integration of objectives and activities and that no effective marketing communication objective can be formulated, which is not directly linked to specific marketing objectives and to relevant corporate objectives.

All these levels contain specific problems which might occur during the process and need to be solved. We shall here mention some critical complications/issues.

One of the most essential tasks is to secure that goals on different levels and character are mutually achievable. Objectives for profitability must be consistent with objectives for growth, for gaining increasing market share and for certain social responsibilities and to broader societal concerns. Goals and strategies must deal with industry threats and take into consideration risks of competitive response. When it comes to communication and implementation it must be secured that the goals are well understood and accepted by the key implementers, something, which cannot be taken for granted, especially not in a technique-oriented company like, for instance, Ericsson. The emergence of the internet and new information technology has led many companies to reconsider their key factors to competitive success. Porter (2001) states that some companies have used internet technology to shift the basis of competition away from quality, features and service toward price, making it harder for anyone in their industry to reach profitability. Porter has pointed out how internet influences industry structure. Some of his findings are:

- differences among competitors are reduced;
- competition migrates to price;
- geographic market widens increasing the number of competitors;
- new substitution threats are created by the proliferation of internet;
- standardization of products reduces differentiation;
- reduced barriers to entry shifts power to suppliers;
- traditional powerful channels are eliminated;

- end-users bargaining power is increased through reduced switching costs;
- difficult to keep internet applications from new entrants; and
- the internet can expand the market by making the industry more efficient.

Evidently, these and other factors must be taken into consideration when developing marketing communication. A reduced difference among competitors and standardization of products forces the need to develop new sustainable strategic positioning, new products and services. The elimination of traditional powerful channel might force a decision to fundamentally change the communication mix as well as if competition migrates to price.

However, the most essential difference, from a communicative perspective, is not the changing set of tools. More important is to adjust objectives and strategies to changing marketing and communication realities. As we can see, IMC is a more complex issue than coordination in space and time of a number of activities. It is rather the art of uniting a sender's purposes and goals with the carefully selected receiver's prerequisites of interpretation and preunderstanding, to develop a creative strategy, where content and form of the messages are congruent and to optimize the selection of channels. The process has obvious similarities with classic methodology of rhetoric (Vossius, 1990).

Thus IMC has become a strategic issue and should, therefore, be treated in accordance with the nature of strategy and strategic decisions. The characteristics commonly associated with the concept of strategy and strategic decisions are, first, that strategy is concerned with the long-term direction of an organization or a company. Second, strategic decisions are likely about to gain some competitive advantage. Third, strategic decisions are concerned with the scope of the organization's activities. It is to do with what owners and managements want the organization to be like and to be about. This could and should include important decisions about visions, product range, withdrawal from or entering markets. Johnson and Scholes (2002) claim that strategy can be seen as the matching of resources and activities or an organization to the environment in which it operates, sometimes known as the search for strategic fit. Besides identifying strengths and weaknesses, threats and opportunities in the business environment it would be seen as important to achieve the correct positioning of the company including the organization of the three concepts identity, profile and image. Questions concerning the connection between these concepts are of the utmost importance for the organization's relations to its market, for its ability to develop, maintain and increase a competitive position (Holm, 1998).

The IT-revolution

On a macro level, we can distinguish three factors which have fundamentally changed the conditions for IMC; deregulations of markets, globalization of the economy and individualization of the consumption. The emergence of new information technology can be considered as the dominating underlying factor. Communication has always been built upon three different systems – sound, image and writing. All these systems have been depending on technological development. Up till now no technology has been able to transmit all systems, at the most two. Gutenberg produced writing and image. Sound film came 1929, based on sound technology and photography. The numeric revolution handle the three systems and has become a fourth system, the digital system which itself has had tremendous economic and social consequences.

Previously, the three communication systems were separate. The IT-revolution has made a total communicative integration possible, which in its turn has changed business structures. Three large business areas are now integrated: telephony, television and the computer industry. The importance of specialization has decreased and differences between previously separate cultures as publishing, film industry and music industry have diminished. Fusions have brought the three spheres together and they have become the heavy industry of our time. The development of the industrial revolution took around 200 years. The new technology has reached practically all over the world in 20 years.

However, communication remains as one of the most human of activities. We can define communication as “a transactional process between two or more parties whereby meaning is exchanged through the intentional use of symbols” (Engel *et al.*, 1994). Important to notice are the key elements: communication is intentional; a deliberate effort is made to bring about a response. It is a transaction and the participants are all involved in the process and it is symbolic where words, pictures, music and other stimulants are used to convey thoughts (Blythe, 2000). Computer-based systems have revolutionized communications. Computer-based communications include data based systems and web sites. We can argue that technological development has put “good old days” far behind. The competitive arena of today bears little resemblance to that of the mid-1990s (Blythe, 2000, p. 10). Non-differentiated mass markets rarely exist today. A number of factors have emerged and interact in such a way that the environment for communication strategy is radically changed. Engel *et al.* (1994) claimed that appealing to unidentified individuals in a mass market is increasingly becoming a dead end. One fundamental consequence is that the traditional emphasis on heavyweight mass communication campaigns (so-called above-the-line), has been replaced by more direct and highly targeted promotional activities using direct marketing and other tools aimed to reach the smallest of all target groups, the single individual.

The tools of the communications mix and levels of decision

There are many tactics at the marketer’s disposal when using the elements of the communications mix in order to maximize the impact of the communications activities. A basic taxonomy of promotional tools is the four-way division into advertising, public relations, sales promotion and personal selling (Blythe, 2000).

Traditionally, the tools of marketing communications are around 12-20. Collectively, these are referred to as the promotional mix (Blythe, 2000; Burnett and Moriarity, 1998; Fill, 1999; Kitchen, 2003; Kotler, 2003; Pickton and Broderick, 2001; Smith *et al.*, 1999).

In order to illustrate the complexity of the communication process, we must add a number of tools of varying importance and of different character, both personal and mass marketing communications. On a macro level, the scope of marketing should include ideologies, political as well as commercially oriented. On a large scale, we find examples like the Nazi era in Germany. The Ministry of Propaganda systematically used sports events like the Olympic Games, 1936 as large-scale event marketing. Music, opera, art, architecture, uniforms, badges, flags, exhibitions, film, literature, education and parades were all used as communications tools in order to sell a political ideology. We find similar examples in the former Soviet Union and in today’s North Korea and also in western democracies. However, increasing need and opportunities to reach the single individual consumer, buyer, guest, client, visitor, patient or voter, leads

to the search for more sophisticated and in several situations critical tools. An eye contact, which did not occur, a churlish answer can mean serious and long lasting loss of reputation for a hotel, a restaurant, for an apple salesperson, for a politician. It is of utmost importance to widen the methodological perspective and take into consideration tools of particular interest in a one-to-one marketing perspective. The numerous tools and the uncountable possible combinations illustrate the complexity of IMC and that decisions concerning IMC is a strategic issue mainly consisting of principals and guidelines rather than instructions on a tactical level, mostly handled by advertising agencies (Schroeder, 2002; Percy *et al.*, 2002) and account executives.

We can assume that the theoretical and methodological perspectives and frameworks are influenced by educational background and tradition. On a tactical level marketing, communication is handled by professionally skilled account executives, art directors and copy directors with very limited competence and experience from strategic management. A study of the two leading marketing communication schools in Sweden shows that the education programs contain less than 10 percent leadership and strategic management. More than 90 percent is aimed at communication theory, consumer behavior, advertising, media, art, copy and a project work (IHR – Institute for applied Communication and RMI – Berghs School of Communication). Swedish Institute of Management (Institutet för företagsledning, IFL) is the leading school in Sweden. A study of the current educational program, specially designed for management on strategic level, shows that communication theory and methodology takes up approximately 3 percent of total time. The rest of the time is devoted to strategic planning, applied management, financial analysis, marketing, politics and economics. This educational structure has remained during at least the last two decades.

A main conclusion we can draw is that those who have strategic and tactic responsibility for IMC live in separate educational, cultural, intellectual and empirical spheres. Those responsible for strategic management decisions possess, at the best, strategic management ability but lack insight and awareness concerning communication theory and method. And those professionally skilled in communication lack relevant skills concerning strategic management, theoretically and empirically. If we imagine these two spheres as areas, we can easily notice that the intersection field is very small.

Studies of four large Swedish companies show lack of historical awareness, strategic thinking, marketing savvy and theoretical consciousness (Holm, 2003, 2004). Regardless of ownership, historical, cultural, technological or economic background, they have remained dependent on a management philosophy rooted in the past or refined within a context with little relevance to the company's actual competitive situation. The studies include a consumer co-operative typical of many in western societies, a privately owned traditional manufacturing company, typical in the growth of western industrialism, a state-owned company operating in the open market and one of the leading actors in telecom, a company with its roots in early industrialism. These companies were analyzed with the help of a theoretical framework, the business pathology diagnostics (BPD) model (Holm, 2003, 2004). The study of the four cases showed that consequences followed when those who should and could have realized the meaning and impact of changing market realities failed to do so. Lack of historic and theoretical awareness led cooperative leaders in the wrong direction and they misjudged the changing nature of market realities. The brilliant innovator and entrepreneur, who founded the

manufacturing company, focused on technological problems and maintained the formula for success even when the threatening clouds gathered during the beginning of the 1970s. As the major owner of the limited telecom company, the state and its actors at the political level tried to eliminate the mechanisms of the market system by trying to force the company to act in accordance with socialistic ideology. The management in the privately owned and leading telecom company miscalculated market development, failed to understand the change of patterns of consumption, did not perceive the consequences of the changing of the competition and did not realize that user-friendliness and design would be the major competitive advantages.

About communication theory

Communication is the process by which individuals share meaning. This means that each participant must fully understand the meaning of the other's communication. Otherwise no dialogue will occur. Only through knowledge and understanding of the communication process the actors are likely to achieve their objectives of influencing attitudes, knowledge and/or behavior, to persuade, which is one of the most prominent reasons why organizations need to communicate (Fill, 1999). With increasing worldwide interest in the emergent concept and field of IMC it is important to investigate its theoretical foundations.

Shannon and Weaver (1949) noticed that recent years had witnessed considerable research activity in communication theory. They stated that the fundamental problem of communication is that of reproducing at one point either exactly or approximately a message selected at another point (Shannon and Weaver, 1949, p. 3). By a communication system Shannon and Weaver meant a system indicated essentially of five parts:

- (1) An information source which produces a message or sequence of messages to be communicated to a receiving terminal. The message may be of various types.
- (2) A transmitter which operates on the message to produce a signal suitable for transmission over the channel.
- (3) The channel is merely the medium used to transmit the signal from transmitter to receiver.
- (4) The receiver, reconstructing the message from the signal.
- (5) The destination is the person for whom the message is intended.

Shannon and Weaver classified communication systems into three main categories, discrete, continuous and mixed. By a discrete system they meant one in which both the message and the signal are a sequence of discrete symbols, for instance telegraphy. A continuous system is one in which the message and signal both are treated as continuous functions, e.g. radio or television. A mixed system is one in which both discrete and continuous variables appear, e.g. transmission of speech.

In order to consider certain general problems involving communication systems Shannon and Weaver found it necessary to represent the various elements involved as mathematical entities.

Important in this context is the statement they made:

Frequently the messages have meaning; that is they refer to or are correlated according to some system with certain physical or conceptual entities. These semantic aspects of communication are irrelevant to the engineering problem (p. 3).

Warren (1949) identified, related to the broad subject or communication, problems at three levels.

Level A

The technical problem – how accurately the symbols of communication can be transmitted.

Level B

The semantic problem – how precisely the transmitted symbols convey the desired meaning.

Level C

The effectiveness problem – how effectively the received meaning does affect conduct in the desired way.

Figure 1 shows a communication system, where the information source selects a desired message out of a set of possible messages. The selected messages may consist of written or spoken words, or of pictures, music, etc. The message is changed by the transmitter into the signal, which is sent over the channel to the receiver.

The kinds of questions which Shannon seeks to ask concerning such a communication system are:

- (1) How to measure amount of information?
- (2) How to measure the capacity of a communication channel?
- (3) The action of the transmitter in changing the message into the signal often involves a coding process. When the coding process is as efficient as possible, at what rate can the channel convey information?
- (4) What are the general characteristics of noise and how can undesirable effects of noise be minimized or eliminated?
- (5) If the signal being transmitted (as in written speech, telegraphy) how does this fact affect the problem?

Shannon remarks that the word information in this theory should not be confused with meaning. If, says Shannon, one of two messages is loaded with meaning and the other is pure nonsense, the two messages are equivalent from the present viewpoint, as regards information. This is what Shannon means when he says that “the semantic

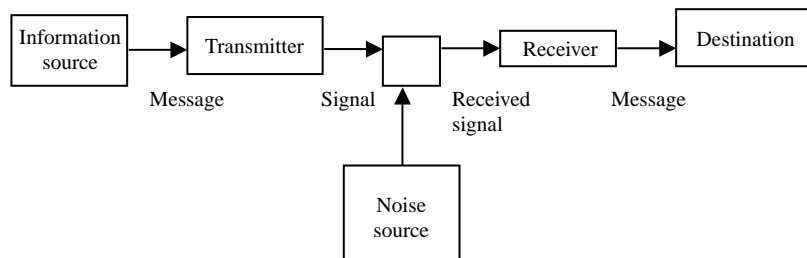


Figure 1.
Schematic diagram of a
general communication
system

aspects of communication are irrelevant to the engineering aspects". However, he adds, "that does not mean that the engineering aspects are necessarily irrelevant to the semantic aspects" (p. 99).

Shannon and Weaver developed what is now accepted as the basic model of communications. It is a sequential and linear model, which has survived for decades and appears in somewhat different shapes in common literature in the field of marketing communications. However, the model is essentially a one-step model of communication and is oversimplified since communications do not necessarily occur in a single step. The linear model of communications emphasizes the transmission of signals, ideas and information primarily through symbols. As we have seen the linear model focuses on transmission effectiveness and efficiency and emphasizes measurability. Holm (2002) found that 70-80 percent of relevant literature in the field of marketing communications during the 1990s is based on the linear, process-oriented perspective on communication theory.

We assume that communication is intentional and a deliberate effort to bring about response. We also assume that communication is a transactional process between two and more parties whereby meaning is exchanged through the intentional use of symbols. This means that all actors in the process must share a common view of what the symbols and signs involved actually mean. This, in turn, means that a sender's and a receiver's field of experience, understanding, prerequisites for interpretation to a certain extent must overlap. This requires a somewhat different and developed theoretical approach to marketing communications, a qualitative approach, which pays attention to the reader, to the listener and the viewer since meaning can only be derived socially (Blythe, 2000). Meaning, signs, symbols, syntactic and culture become essential elements in the developing of communications. The linear, process-oriented model and its components are straightforward, but it is the quality of the linkages between the various elements in the process that determine whether the communication will be successful (Fill, 2002). However, this crucial perspective on communications is focused by only 20-30 percent of the relevant literature in the field of marketing communications.

Conclusions

The primary goal of IMC is to affect the perception of value and behavior through directed communication. The development and diffusion of IMC is closely associated with fast technological advancement and of a rapidly globalizing and deregulations of markets and individualization of consumption patterns. This has emphasized the need to adjust objectives and strategies to changing marketing and communication realities. From this point of view, communication has to move from tactics to strategy. In the rapidly changing and highly competitive world of the twenty-first century only strategically oriented IMC can help business to move forward. However, Kitchen and Schultz (2000) have found that a majority of firms have remained on a level mainly dealing with tactical coordination of promotional elements and that very few, a handful in today's world, have moved to financial and strategic integration.

A study of relevant literature published during the 1990s shows that a simplified theoretical perspective on communication as process oriented, sequential and linear is dominating 70-80 percent of the books, thereby overlooking the complexity of communication.

Different educational cultures might be an essential obstacle to move IMC from tactics to strategy. A study of leading Swedish schools and institutes in the fields of management shows that approximately only 3 percent of total time is devoted to communication theory and methodology. The study also shows that the education programs of the leading marketing communications schools contain less than 10 percent of leadership and strategic management while more 90 percent is aimed at communication theory, various techniques, advertising, art, copy and account executive training.

A concluding remark is that the concept of IMC is dominated by a simplified and insufficient theoretical perspective and handled by professionals with skills on a technical and tactical level. This indicates that there is a gap between two cultural, intellectual and empirical spheres.

It is a matter of common interest for academics, professional schools and practitioners on strategic and tactical levels to close the gap in order to move IMC from tactics to strategy. This can be achieved by international research and reconsidering educational programs regarding management, marketing and marketing communications.

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