Modern Media Planning: An Exploratory Study into the Gap between Theory and Practice

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MODERN MEDIA PLANNING:
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY INTO THE GAP BETWEEN
THEORY AND PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

The concept of IMC and a range of scientific models for media planning have received a great deal of recent attention in the academic literature. At the same time, marketing academia has been criticised for being out of touch with practice. This paper begins with a review of the current literature pertaining to IMC and media planning, before detailing an exploratory study conducted in order to ascertain advertising practitioner attitudes towards both IMC and modern media planning. The paper concludes by drawing comparisons between theory and practice.

INTRODUCTION

Media spending constitutes the largest part of all advertising expenditure (Tellis 2005), with the UK advertising industry experiencing an 82 per cent increase in ad spend between 1996 and 2005 (World Advertising Research Centre 2005). In addition to this growth, development of new media and modern tools for media measurement are driving changes in media planning, both from a practical and a theoretical point of view. Moreover, the concept of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) has become a widely accepted norm in marketing academia, and has received phenomenal attention from marketing academics in the last two decades (Kitchen et al. 2004). The integration proposed by the IMC paradigm directly relates to integration in media planning and usage, therefore changes driven by IMC are also likely to impact on media planning. However, as Boddy (2007) asserts, all too often marketing academic research is criticised as myopic, and actually contributes to the academic-practitioner divide. This study reviews the recent marketing literature pertaining to media planning, from which several pertinent themes are identified. These themes then form the basis of an exploratory study into the perceptions of current media planning among practitioners. Gaps between theory and practice are discussed.

MEDIA PLANNING

There is still some disagreement regarding the definitions of IMC both as a concept and a process (Beard 1997; Kliatchko 2005), despite, or perhaps due to, its rapid changes in such a short time (Keller 2001). Kliatchlko's (2005) recent review of the literature notes that various definitions incorporate the themes of one voice throughout all messages and media, synergy, total branding, integration, co-ordination of supporting communications tools (sales promotions, PR, etc.) with advertising, and an ability to influence consumer behaviour. The value of IMC is said to be increased sales growth, profitability, and cost savings (Kitchen 2005, 2007), resulting from a fundamental change from an 'outside-in' approach that focuses on the needs of the customer (Swain 2004) and encourages loyalty. Eagle et al (1999) found IMC to be a driver of fundamental changes among advertising agencies, while Schultz and Kitchen (2000) strongly believe that IMC is a new paradigm and not merely a management fad. However, they do agree that there does appear to be some difficulty in translating IMC from a concept to reality (Eagle and Kitchen 2000), with Kliatchko (2002) describing it as "conceptually old but operationally new." This appears to be particularly true in Great Britain, where the concept

is theoretically mature but still in its earliest stages of development from a practical point of view (Kitchen et al 2004; Kitchen 2007). Thus, a basic research question is still to ascertain the practical workability of IMC (Swain 2004).

One of the major challenges to IMC implementation is the structural changes necessary to agencies (Kitchen et al 2004). IMC's integrated approach tends towards centralised decision making to ensure control and synergy of the messages. However, as Christensen et al (2005) note, fragmentation of consumer markets and consumers becoming active as opposed to passive suggests the need for decentralisation in order to move decision making power as close to the customer as possible. At the same time, as Morrison and Hayley (2006) suggest, media strategy is likely to be affected by the integration of account planning with overall business solutions development. Although not yet fully researched, these authors found that account planners need integration with media planning more than any other planning area in the agency. It also appears that integration of planning in full service agencies seems to be lacking in areas of media strategy, public relations, and sales promotions planning (Coulter and Sarkis 2005; Morrison and Haley 2006).

Since its inception, the focus of media planning as part of the overall advertising effort has been on the choice between the wide variety of media available and how best to optimise value for money. Hansen and Christiansen (2005) discuss modern developments in the fields of media spend and suggest that for FMCGs the level of market share determines the amount of money spent on advertising. Brands with higher market shares can maintain a lower share of voice (i.e., spend less on advertising) whilst capitalising on the existing strength of the brand. At the same time, new entrants and smaller brands have to spend more in order to grow. Thus, accurate estimates on behalf of larger brands in both oligopoly and competitive market situations can lead to a decrease in share of voice, therefore reducing the advertising spend to the right amount for positive brand and economic outcomes. As the industry moves forward, digital technology, consumer fragmentation, and the need for greater accountability are factors that are challenging established practices (Lloyd et al 2000). Emphasis is shifting towards greater accountability and lesser commission rates, thus changing the focus of agency compensation (Bogart 2000).

As media buying practices have evolved, other trends have emerged. As with any industry, maturity has led to mergers and consolidations, primarily because of increased buying power. Other important factors driving change are consumer fragmentation, the increases in options and types of media, technology, and increases in the amount of information generated and needed to make media planning more scientific. Bogart (2000) explains that the typical media department structure has shifted from a consideration of all media related functions, including buying, planning, execution, and follow-ups, toward the unbundling of media buying and planning. Planning has often been retained by the agencies while buying has been sublet for increased efficiency. As the buying centrals (a company specialising in media buying) increased in size, there was typically a shift in emphasis from financial to operational efficiency. This resulted in the development of a range of optimisation models. At the basic level media planning should involve at least two variables: media options and reach options, and this basic planning method was typically viewed as cost per thousand. Today, however, multiple planning and measurement techniques considering reach and optimum frequency for fragmented audiences has resulted in more complicated models, whilst computer aided programs allow for multiple campaign structures for comparison with each other.

Nevertheless, even with a range of optimisation models from which to choose, at the heart of media planning there still remains the need to balance art and science. Artistic ability, as well as experience, product type, target audience, budgets, etc. are essentially integrated with scientific modelling. Indeed, as Bogart (2000) notes, there is no one formula guaranteed to bring success, whilst sole reliance on formulas is likely to be the formula for failure. Moreover, Coulter and Sarkis (2005) suggest that media planning has relied heavily on judgment based decision making in the past. The need to formalise these decisions in modern media environments is a challenge that involves integration of qualitative and quantitative techniques to measure media efficiency for planning purposes (Tektas and Alakavuk 2003).

Coulter and Sarkis (2005) suggest an analytical processing model for media planning that takes into consideration both qualitative abilities and quantitative aspects of traditional media to provide media planners with more informed decision making. Media planners today use as many as 5 – 15 individual factors that relate to the qualitative aspects of different media options. The relative advantages and disadvantages of individual vehicles are considered from the three main objectives of exposure, communication, and response generation. The difficulty of incorporating expert knowledge into computer based systems is therefore an important factor. However, the focus of much academic research pertaining to media planning centres around the use of more

sophisticated and scientific approaches which incorporate all measurable factors, and at the same time reduces traditional judgement (Boivin and Coderre 2000).

Cheong's (2005) review of the literature pertaining to modern developments in media planning identified two main approaches: the 'Media Approach' and the 'Consumer Audience Approach'. The former incorporates developments such as frequency value planning and lagged effects of media, while the latter focuses more on product and brand usage and value factor distance measures. Recent research appears to suggest a shift in focus toward the consumer. Kusumoto (2002), for example, suggests that the usual computer-based optimisation models, with the emphasis on demographics and cost efficiency, do not necessarily cover highly involved audiences, and do not consider psychographics. He designed the Value Factor Distance model which, he asserts, overcomes many of the problems of traditional models, as it does not depend on demographics, but rather the shared values between brand users and magazine readers.

Similarly, Heath and Nairn (2005) oppose the long accepted view of advertisement effectiveness being measured through recall, and suggest a model based on recognition. Recall is believed to influence direct or explicit memory processes, whilst recognition influences implicit memory, leading to emotional changes. Implicit memory processing does not necessarily require consumer's attention, thus can change emotional behaviour even when attention or involvement is low. Heath and Nairn's (2005) study therefore shifts the focus of research on effectiveness from the traditional recall to cross-analysis of recognition because they are able to evaluate the emotional power that advertising has. Indeed, recent studies suggest that media decisions should incorporate an awareness of the effects of a medium on a certain type of message for a specific product category (Shavitt et al, 2004; Vakratsas and Ma 2005). The use of media context providing an experiential format for consumers is discussed by Calder and Malthouse (2005), who suggest that media metrics need to go beyond reach and frequency to consider the ability to affect the consumer's mind. Messages, therefore, should be viewed as customer contact points as opposed to merely persuasive arguments, thus evaluation of media needs to consider quality of experience through the media contact rather than merely the potential of exposure.

Further recent studies also focus on the consumer behavioural outcomes of ads. The placements of ads in terms of pre and post product usage were studied by Braun-LaTour and LaTour (2005) who found that in different circumstances the consumer experience can be shaped by a post experience advert and a pre experience advert. This situational study of consumer behaviour provides important information about resulting behavioural changes, suggesting effectiveness tests can be shaped by the psychographic study of consumers in order to enable media planners to change the content or placement decisions for improved results.

Overall, then, this brief review of recent academic literature pertaining to media planning suggests several important trends, from which specific research questions emerged. First, there is still disagreement among academics as to what IMC constitutes, although there does appear to be agreement over its value and usefulness. The literature also suggests that while the concept of IMC has been around for some time, there are difficulties in its practical implementation, not least in the structural changes and integration of departments needed. In addition to the changes resulting from IMC, the literature suggests a shift toward greater accountability for media planners. However, despite recognition of the need to balance judgement and scientific tools, the academic literature appears to focus on scientific approaches that reduce judgment. Finally, there seems to a major shift in the emphasis of academic research toward the consumer approach, and recognition of the need to consider qualitative and psychographic data. This shift suggests a change in the types of media planning tools used, and their associated measures of effectiveness. It was identification of these trends that drove the exploratory study.

METHOD

A structured questionnaire, comprising both open and closed questions, was designed around the 10 specific research areas outlined above, in order to ascertain the perceptions of advertising practitioners of these areas. The questionnaire was designed in electronic format as a web page, using the services of ZapSurvey.com. Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA) member agencies comprised the initial sample frame, and access to these agencies was gained through online email contacts available at the IPA website (www.ipa.co.uk). Both full service and media specific agencies were selected, resulting in an initial email contact to 270 agencies. These emails were sent to managerial-level personnel in media departments, and explained the nature of the research and the web link to the questionnaire. Over a period of 4 weeks, reminder emails were sent on a weekly basis to all those agencies who had not replied. At the end of the 4 week period, a formal letter was sent to those agencies who had still not participated. Because response rates were still disappointing, a second sample frame was

identified. This comprised a further 436 agencies identified via the Internet source 'Marketing and Creative Handbook 2007" (www.mch.co.uk), resulting in 706 agencies being contacted overall.

RESULTS

Despite the attempts made to encourage agencies to participate in the study, only 39 responses were received, giving an overall response rate of only 5.5%. Due to this small number, detailed statistical analysis is impossible, thus this section is limited to descriptive data analysis.

As can be seen from table 1, individual respondents were drawn from a range of departments and designations.

Table 1: Job Title/Department of Respondents

Department	n	%
Senior Management	12	31
Media	11	28
Account Planning	6	15
New Business Development	5	13
Other	5	13
Total	**39**	**100**

Table 2 shows the majority (77%) of respondents had extensive experience (11 or more years), while only a small number (8%) were relatively inexperienced.

Table 2: Years of Experience of Respondents

Years of Experience	n	%
1-5	3	8
6-10	6	15
11 or more	30	77
Total	**39**	**100**

Respondents were drawn form a fairly equal number of agency sizes (table 3).

Table 3: Agency Size

Size of Agency (employee numbers)	n	%
Small (10-20)	14	38
Medium (21-40)	10	27
Large (more than 40)	13	35
Total	**37**	**100**

The questionnaire began by asking respondents to give their definitions of IMC, from a choice of definitions, all of which appeared in the literature. Respondents could select any number of options, and as table 4 shows, practitioners felt that IMC is best described as a combination and consistency of communication options in order to maximise impact. Many felt it was a strategic initiative, and brand orientation was also associated with the IMC paradigm. Comprehensiveness and stakeholder orientation were less popular choices.

Table 4: Practitioner Definitions of IMC

| Definition	n	%
Comprehensiveness	20	51
Strategic Orientation	34	87
Brand Orientation	26	67
Variety of Communications	28	72
Combination of Communications	36	92
Consistency	32	82
Maximisation of Communication Impact	33	85
Stakeholder Orientation	16	41

In terms of the scope of IMC, respondents were asked if they believed IMC was a business process or a marketing related activity, and how long they felt the concept had been around. Whilst the majority (62%) felt it is a business process, over one third (38%) of respondents believed IMC to be solely a marketing activity. Despite this, none felt it was merely a passing management fad. Rather, only 5% believed it to be a new business concept, with the overwhelming majority asserting that IMC as a concept has always existed.

In addition to the nature of IMC, respondents were asked to demonstrate their levels of agreement pertaining to a statement on the structural changes dictated by IMC. As table 5 shows, the majority of respondents felt this either to be true (28%) or at least partially true (44%). Nevertheless, 15% were unsure, and 13% felt that IMC could be implemented with no or little structural change.

Table 5: IMC and Structural Changes

IMC Dictates Structural Changes to Business	n	%
Strongly Agree	11	28
Partially Agree	17	44
Neither Agree nor Disagree	6	15
Partially Disagree	2	5
Strongly Disagree	3	8

Respondents also gave their views on which departments they felt should be integrated with media planning when constructing an IMC campaign, and which were actually integrated in practice (figure 1).

Figure 1: Preferred and Actual Departmental Integration (%)
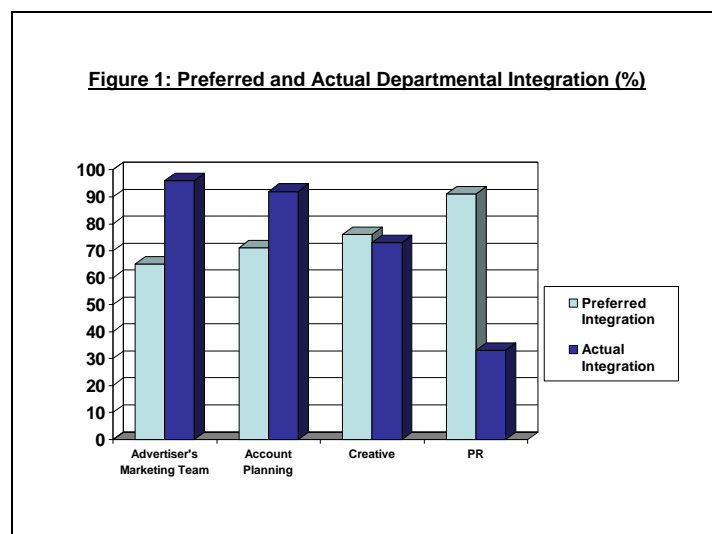
As can be seen from figure 1, the levels of actual integration between the media planning department and the marketing team and account planning ream is higher than respondent's thought was necessary. In contrast, actual and preferred integration with the creative teams was about equal, whilst actual integration with PR lagged far behind the levels of integration that media planning people would prefer.

The literature also suggested an increased need for accountability, and overwhelmingly respondents agreed that this was true, with only 10% failing to experience increased levels of accountability. Likewise, practice mirrored the literature in terms of media planning being a combination of planner's experience and judgement with modern optimisation tools. Indeed, 86% of respondent agreed that media planning had to combine both judgement and models. That said there appears to be a discrepancy between the literature's focus on scientific approaches to media planning and measures of effectiveness, and the suggested shift toward incorporation of psychographic data in order to move away from the media approach and closer to the customer. Indeed, table 6 shows that increasing media options are perceived as driving change to a greater extent than consumer fragmentation, whilst technological developments in media planning is not perceived to be a major change driver in comparison to increased accountability.

Table 6: Change Drivers to Media Planning

Change Driver	n	%
Consumer Fragmentation	21	72
Technological Developments in Planning	11	38
Increased Media Options	25	86
Increased Accountability	22	56
Increased Information	2	7
Other	3	10

Likewise, despite the academic focus on psychographics, as table 7 highlights, communication, response generation and exposure targets are still given priority over psychographics when completing media schedules.

Table 7: Relative Importance of Factors for Consideration in Scheduling Practice

Factor for Consideration	Level of Importance (%)		
	High	Moderate	Low
Exposure Targets	47	52	0
Communication Targets	80	20	0
Response Generation Targets	58	37	4
Demographics	16	70	12
Psychographics	33	54	12

Finally, as figure 2 illustrates, the media planning and measurement tools actually used in practice do not appear to reflect those in the recent literature. Whilst 100% of respondents claimed to be aware of the Value Factor Index, only 16% claim to use it. Likewise, actual usage of other planning models far lagged behind the 100% awareness levels for Analytical Hierarchy Process (28% usage level) and Analytical Network Process (14% actual usage levels). Only Frequency Value Planning and Lagged Effects of Media appear to have similar levels of awareness and usage among practitioners. As can be seen from table 8, despite the academic focus on scientific measurement techniques, sales increase is still the most popular effectiveness measurement in practice. At the same time, the much criticised ad recall is utilised less than the brand identity survey.
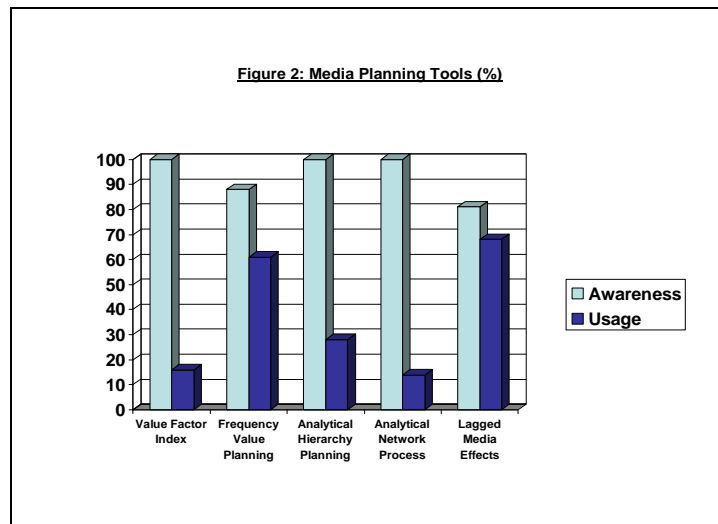
Figure 2: Media Planning Tools (%)

Table 8: Effectiveness Measurement Techniques Used

Measurement Technique	n	%
Cost Per Thousand	7	26
Sales Increase	20	74
Ad Recall	10	37
Brand Identity Survey	14	52
Other (including ROI & direct responses)	8	30

DISCUSSION

In terms of IMC, comparisons between theory on the one hand and beliefs and practice on the other suggest that the literature is correct in that IMC is a conceptually old concept (Kliatchko 2002), and is perceived by both academics (Schultz and Kitchen 2000) and practitioners as much more than a passing fad. However, whilst the sample on the whole agreed with the literature in that IMC is a business process, many respondents failed to take the wider stakeholder perspective. Stakeholder orientation and comprehensiveness in IMC ideology relate to communications above and beyond the brand and promotional level, and these results support Kitchen's (2005) contention that firms in the UK are still anchored in the infant stages of the process. Nevertheless, synergy and a strong brand focus appear to be benefits that some firms are reaping, although the consumer behaviour outcomes suggested by Schultz (2005) are less prominent at this time.

The implementation of IMC as a business process requires integration across communication disciplines. The literature suggests this requirement may need agencies to make relevant adjustments to their organisational structures (Kitchen et al 2004), a viewpoint that most respondents agreed with. However, the differences between actual and preferred departmental integration suggests these changes are not yet complete. The lack of integration with the PR function not only supports earlier research into full integration (Coulter and Sarkis 2005; Morrison and Haley 2006), but is particularly interesting, given the relative lack of a stakeholder perspective taken by respondents. This appears to suggest that PR, with its traditional focus beyond the brand and consumer level, still has a major part to play in full implementation of IMC, in order for agencies to take a wider perspective.

Respondents wholeheartedly agreed with Bogart's (2000) assertion that media planning is a balance of art and science. Likewise, the increased accountability often mentioned in the literature (Christensen et al 2005) was also shown to be a major concern for media practitioners, with pressures being perceived as higher than ever. Contrasts between theory and practice, however, were found between the literature's suggested move from a

media centred to a more customer audience approach (Cheong 2005) and current practice. Results suggest the most used media planning tools are still Lagged Effects of Media and Frequency Value Planning, both of which constitute a media approach. In contrast, in order to ensure a consumer audience approach, models such as Value Factor Distance, which was shown to be little used by respondents, would need to be embraced. Likewise, psychographics was only assigned a moderate level of importance, and would need to be given more priority if the move to a consumer approach is to be fulfilled. Despite this, respondents did suggest that brand surveys are currently utilised more than ad recall methods, which fulfils Heath and Nairn's (2005) call for a shift away from measurement methods that focus purely on recall.

CONCLUSIONS

This research was conducted in order to ascertain the gap between theory and practice in media planning. There was found to be a considerable level of understanding and appreciation of the IMC concept among respondents. However, there was found to still be some uncertainty regarding the overall corporate nature of IMC. The research revealed a changing media planning environment as a result of growth in media options and changing consumer needs. Comparison of theory and practice regarding the use of professional judgment and use of modern tools demonstrated that while the two were in agreement as to the need for both, actual use of the more modern tools is yet to catch up with the literature. Moreover, belief in the importance of psychographic profiling in practice also lags behind academic recognition.

The major limitation of this research is the very small sample size, and results cannot therefore be generalised to the whole UK advertising industry. Marketing academia has been criticised as being out of touch with practice (Boddy 2007). Perhaps the most important factor to emerge from this research is that more than 94% of practitioners who were contacted ignored repeated, lengthy, and professional attempts to persuade them to participate in the study. If the academic-practitioner divide is to be closed, then both parties need to collaborate. Until then, academics will continue to run the risk of conducting research that fails to reach its potential from a practical point of view.

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