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Strategy in Direct and Interactive Marketing and Integrated Marketing Communications

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Abstract

Continuing advances in database management and communication technologies have greatly accelerated the ability of marketing to become more direct, highly focused, and increasingly interactive. Academic programs must be able to provide students with both the theoretical knowledge and the applied skills to meet the business expectations and provide students with distinctive and sustainable career advantages. Professionals in direct and interactive marketing (DIM) and integrated marketing communications (IMC) have worked to reach a profitable balance between science and art as well as technique and creativity. At its best, DIM in IMC combines the freedom to explore new worlds of creativity with the discipline of measured response. This paper offers an overview of direct and interactive marketing strategy concepts, presented in ways that encourage effective teaching and learning.

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1. Introduction

Marketing has become more direct, highly focused, and increasingly interactive. The consumer acceptance coupled with compressed value chains, individualized target markets, and personalized business relationships have dramatically changed the face of the practice we call marketing. Continuing advances in database management and communication technologies have greatly accelerated the ability to go direct. Because these changes are occurring at such a rapid pace, organizations frequently have trouble understanding and adapting to this one-to-one marketing phenomenon. Herein lies the opportunity for students and the challenge of academia. (Hauser & Lewison, 2005)

While many business firms may lack the expertise to pursue high level direct marketing initiatives, they expect their new hires, usually recent college graduates, to bring to the table the knowledge and a set of competencies consistent with the new realities of direct marketing. Therefore, academic programs capable of providing the theoretical knowledge together with the basic skill and core competencies needed in the application of said knowledge will provide their students distinctive and sustainable career advantages within the real world marketplace. Direct interactive marketing is an exciting, robust, and expanding field of endeavor.

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Marketing educators should strive to provide students with the knowledge and skills needed for effective integrated marketing communications. Some marketing professionals express concern that graduates do not know how to execute theoretical concepts in practical situations. Thus an interdisciplinary approach that mirrors the IMC profession makes most sense. The key to managing that process in the classroom is to present IMC as a whole concept with several parts rather than distinct practices that get cobbled together to form an overall IMC plan.

Indeed previous research on effectively teaching concepts in IMC includes using a broad perspective (Scott, 2001) and an interdisciplinary approach (Everett, Siegel, & Marchant, 1999). However, a study on marketing curriculum and delivery found that in general, IMC is taught in a typical classroom lecture environment without utilizing active learning (Schultz, Kerr, Kim, & Patti, 2007). Active learning enriches the classroom experience and has a positive impact on student outcomes (Drea, Tripp, & Stuenkel, 2005).

Applied marketing courses, such as direct and interactive marketing, should include experiential activities that apply knowledge and foster skills development (Schibrowsky, Peltier, & Boyt, 2002). Further, instruction in direct marketing should also include developing technical skills and practical learning opportunities. In general, a solid approach to direct and interactive marketing education includes linking classroom experiences with industry expectations.

2. Integrated Marketing Communications

Integrated marketing communication (IMC) is an approach to brand communications where the different modes work together to create a seamless experience for the customer and are presented with a similar tone and style that reinforces the brand's core message. Its goal is to make all aspects of marketing communication such as advertising, sales promotion, public relations direct marketing, online communications and social media work together as a unified force, rather than permitting each to work in isolation, which maximizes their cost effectiveness.

IMC is becoming more significant in marketing practice because of the reduced cost effectiveness of mass media and media fragmentation. As consumers spend more time online and on mobile devices all exposures of the brand need to tie together so they are more likely to be remembered. Increasingly the strategies of brands cannot be understood by looking solely at their advertising. Instead they can be understood by seeing how all aspects of their communications ecosystem work together and in particular how communications are personalized for each customer and react in real time, as in a conversation.

This is enhanced when integration goes beyond just the basic communications tools. There are other levels of integration such as Horizontal, Vertical, Internal, External and Data integration. Here is how they help to strengthen Integrated Communications.

Horizontal Integration occurs across the marketing mix and across business functions - for example, production, finance, distribution and communications should work together and be conscious that their decisions and actions send messages to customers.

While different departments such as sales, direct mail and advertising can help each other through Data Integration. This requires a marketing information system which collects and shares relevant data across different departments.

Vertical Integration means marketing and communications objectives must support the higher level corporate objectives and corporate missions.

Meanwhile Internal Integration requires internal marketing - keeping all staff informed and motivated about any new developments from new advertisements, to new corporate identities, new service standards, new strategic partners and so on.

External Integration, on the other hand, requires external partners such as advertising and PR agencies to work closely together to deliver a single seamless solution - a cohesive message - an integrated message.

2.1. Benefits and barriers of IMC

Although Integrated Marketing Communications requires a lot of effort it delivers many benefits. It can create competitive advantage, boost sales and profits, while saving money, time and stress.

IMC wraps communications around customers and helps them move through the various stages of the buying process. The organisation simultaneously consolidates its image, develops a dialogue and nurtures its relationship with customers.

This 'Relationship Marketing' cements a bond of loyalty with customers which can protect them from the inevitable onslaught of competition. The ability to keep a customer for life is a powerful competitive advantage.

IMC also increases profits through increased effectiveness. At its most basic level, a unified message has more impact than a disjointed myriad of messages. In a busy world, a consistent, consolidated and crystal clear message has a better chance of cutting through the 'noise' of over five hundred commercial messages which bombard customers each and every day.

At another level, initial research suggests that images shared in advertising and direct mail boost both advertising awareness and mail shot responses. So IMC can boost sales by stretching messages across several communications tools to create more avenues for customers to become aware, aroused, and ultimately, to make a purchase

Carefully linked messages also help buyers by giving timely reminders, updated information and special offers which, when presented in a planned sequence, help them move comfortably through the stages of their buying process... and this reduces their 'misery of choice' in a complex and busy world.

IMC also makes messages more consistent and therefore more credible. This reduces risk in the mind of the buyer which, in turn, shortens the search process and helps to dictate the outcome of brand comparisons.

Un-integrated communications send disjointed messages which dilute the impact of the message. This may also confuse, frustrate and arouse anxiety in customers. On the other hand, integrated communications present a reassuring sense of order.

Consistent images and relevant, useful, messages help nurture long term relationships with customers. Here, customer databases can identify precisely which customers need what information when... and throughout their whole buying life.

Finally, IMC saves money as it eliminates duplication in areas such as graphics and photography since they can be shared and used in say, advertising, exhibitions and sales literature. Agency fees are reduced by using a single agency for all communications and even if there are several agencies, time is saved when meetings bring all the agencies together - for briefings, creative sessions, tactical or strategic planning. This reduces workload and subsequent stress levels - one of the many benefits of IMC.

Despite its many benefits, Integrated Marketing Communications, or IMC, has many barriers.

In addition to the usual resistance to change and the special problems of communicating with a wide variety of target audiences, there are many other obstacles which restrict IMC. These include: Functional Silos; Stifled Creativity; Time Scale Conflicts and a lack of Management know-how.

Take functional silos. Rigid organizational structures are infested with managers who protect both their budgets and their power base.

Sadly, some organizational structures isolate communications, data, and even managers from each other. For example the PR department often doesn't report to marketing. The sales force rarely meet the advertising or sales promotion people and so on. Imagine what can happen when sales reps are not told about a new promotional offer!

And all of this can be aggravated by turf wars or internal power battles where specific managers resist having some of their decisions (and budgets) determined or even influenced by someone from another department.

Here are two difficult questions - What should a truly integrated marketing department look like? And how will it affect creativity?

It shouldn't matter whose creative idea it is, but often, it does. An advertising agency may not be so enthusiastic about developing a creative idea generated by, say, a PR or a direct marketing consultant.

IMC can restrict creativity. No more wild and wacky sales promotions unless they fit into the overall marketing communications strategy. The joy of rampant creativity may be stifled, but the creative challenge may be greater and ultimately more satisfying when operating within a tighter, integrated, creative brief.

Add different time scales into a creative brief and you'll see Time Horizons provide one more barrier to IMC. For example, image advertising, designed to nurture the brand over the longer term, may conflict with shorter term advertising or sales promotions designed to boost quarterly sales. However the two objectives can be accommodated within an overall IMC if carefully planned.

But this kind of planning is not common. A survey in 1995, revealed that most managers lack expertise in IMC. But its not just managers, but also agencies. There is a proliferation of single discipline agencies. There appear to be very few people who have real experience of all the marketing communications disciplines. This lack of know how is then compounded by a lack of commitment.

3. Creative Concepts and Executions in Direct and Interactive Marketing

None of the four elements of IMC is inherently superior or inferior; they all have important functions in an integrated campaign. The campaign should focus on a “big idea” and a graphic look that threads through all four elements. This maximizes the chances that consumers will get the message and then have the message reinforced and layered in their memories without the “cognitive dissonance” that arises from mixed messages or incongruous graphic elements. (Jones, 2008)

Using active learning in the IMC classroom highlights these concepts. Students identify a company they do business with that, upon their reflection and learning, they can assert has an IMC campaign. Students describe the company and then provide examples of that firm’s general advertising, direct marketing, sales promotion and PR efforts. For example, for Dell they might highlight Dell’s ads on television that have minimal direct response elements (general advertising); Dell’s mailed catalogs and sponsored search efforts (direct marketing); Dell’s limited-time special offers and package deals (sales promotion) and Dell’s efforts to utilize outdated computers to help those in need through the Foundation (PR).

The essential character of direct marketing lies in its *action orientation*. To sell, or to invite a step toward a sale, direct marketers include a call to immediate action and an easy-to-use response device. Direct marketers make specific offers: they tell prospects what they are going to get and what they have to do to get it – be it a product in exchange for a price or free information in exchange for a phone call. In addition to action orientation, direct marketing has several other important characteristics. It is: targeted, personal, measurable, testable and flexible.

For active learning, students watch direct-response TV and develop a log that helps them identify patterns such as the amount of time the phone number or web site is on the screen. They also look for repetition as well as selling formulas. Then they evaluate their logs and explain what they have learned about how DRTV differs from general advertising and how the two disciplines are starting to merge with higher production values in DRTV and direct response elements in general advertising.

Just as most copywriters and graphic designers do not get involved in directing and filming direct response TV spots, there is no compelling need for every direct marketing creative to “do it all” in interactive media. Even so, some writers and designers will carve this out as a specialty, and most creatives will at least have the opportunity to contribute concepts, copy and art for interactive media ventures. Advice for creative people regarding Web sites includes: offer multiple ways to search, plan for constant updates that entice visitors to return, make the site easy to follow, and use direct marketing knowledge as a competitive advantage online.

For active learning students evaluate various websites using an extended version of the criteria mentioned above. Part of the critique involves highlighting effective use of direct marketing techniques online and making suggestions to rectify problem areas.

4. Conclusion

Direct and interactive marketing and integrated marketing communications efforts can best be orchestrated by a cross-functional team using a comprehensive promotional plan. Bringing this concept to the marketing, advertising or communications classroom is instrumental in graduating students with a holistic view of IMC via DIM. Since a primary goal of direct marketing education is to develop effective teaching strategies it is only reasonable to focus on how to best prepare students for a career in IMC.

Given marketing students learn best when presented with activities that apply course concepts to real-world scenarios (Karns, 2005), making extensive use of active learning exercises, such as the ones outlined above, is both motivating and constructive. Utilizing such an approach should also help to bridge the gap between traditional academic deliveries of course content and professional preparedness expected in the contemporary IMC marketplace.

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