

Managing the Integrated Online Marketing Communication

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter investigates the particularities of integrated marketing communication in the online environment. The study starts from the premise that the specific characteristics of the Internet transform the application of IMC principles from an alternative option to an absolute requirement for online organizations. Based on the analysis of the specific characteristics of the online environment and audiences, and on the primary data collected through face-to-face interviews with 19 marketing or communication managers of UK consumer retail firms, this article explores the opportunities and requirements for implementing integrated online marketing communication, proposing a theoretical model of that can be adopted by *Internet-active organizations*.

BACKGROUND

In the last 10 years, the concept of *integrated marketing communication* (IMC) has achieved notoriety and legitimacy both in the academic and in the professional environment (Schultz & Kitchen, 2000). This situation is proved by the numerous studies and debates centered on the subject of IMC (Cornelissen & Lock, 2001; Gould, 2004; Percy, Rossiter, & Elliott, 2001; Schultz & Kitchen, 2000).

The emergence and the development of IMC has been determined by a number of evolutionary trends in the areas of:

- *Marketing*—The increased fragmentation and segmentation of markets, relationship marketing, and direct marketing (Durkin & Lawlor, 2001; Eagle & Kitchen, 2000).
- *Information Technology*—The development of new communication technologies and database applications (McKim, 2002).
- *Communication*—Increased fragmentation of media audiences, multiplicity, and saturation of media channels (Smith, 2002).

From this perspective, the new paradigm of IMC can be represented as a strategic answer to the social and business conditions of the postmodern society (Proctor & Kitchen,

2002), which forced marketing organizations to move beyond functionally driven, internally focused approaches to marketing and communication (Cornelissen, 2003).

The concept of IMC was defined in many different, often contradictorial ways (Duncan, 2002; Shimp, 2000). The integration of marketing communication procedures was considered a result of centralized management, centralized budgeting, or message similarity across all communication channels, while other authors emphasized the integration of all the elements of the promotional mix in a coherent strategy (Pickton & Broderick, 2001). Many definitions emphasize that the integration of marketing communication should not be understood as a simple uniformity of the message transmitted across different channels (Kitchen, Brignell, Li, & Jones, 2004), but rather as the complex coordination and management of the information transmitted through complementary channels in order to effectively present a coherent image of the organization to the targeted audiences.

Beverland and Luxton (2005) argue that one of the main effects of IMC is the development of brand trust and credibility. Proctor and Kitchen (2002) emphasize that in the last 10 years there has been a significant move away from line branding towards corporate brand. The main reason is the desire to amortize communication across the entire portfolio as the cost of designing and supporting individual brands continues its upward curve. Board members and executives have come to realize that a major portion of shareholder value is brand equity, which requires careful development and management (Laczniak, 2005). In a fragmented and highly competitive marketplace, coherent images and messages lead to a greater impact on the perception and attitudes of targeted audiences (Moriarty, 1997). The integrated marketing communication effort can ensure that brand messages are strategically consistent and new communication technologies are effectively used to facilitate profitable interactions with customers and other stakeholders.

Despite the recognized impact of the Internet on integrated marketing communication, very few studies have investigated the specific requirements and opportunities for IMC in the online environment (Durkin & Lawlor, 2001), and the relation between IMC and customer relationship management (Grönroos, 2004; Johnson & Schultz, 2004; Schultz, 2003).

This article attempts to investigate the particularities of implementing integrated marketing communication in an

online environment. The study considers that the specific characteristics of the Internet transform the application of IMC principles from an alternative option to an absolute requirement.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In the first stage of this research project, a series of secondary sources of data have been accessed in the first instance, in order to collect general information about the evolution of the IMC concept, Internet characteristics, online communications, and online audiences.

In the second stage of data collection, a series of semi-structured interviews have been conducted with marketing or communication managers of Internet-active UK retailing firms. Using the contact information provided on their Web sites, 50 UK retailers specialized in consumer products (food, drinks, cosmetics, clothes, shoes) were contacted by phone or e-mail and invited to participate in this study. Twenty-four of these firms responded favorably, but only 19 interviews could be organized because of time restrictions in the interviewees' program. The face-to-face interviews took place from February to May 2006, and lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. The topics of discussion included the concept of integrated marketing communications, the opportunities and challenges created by the Internet concerning the corporate communication model, and the specific strategic model that can enhance the online marketing communication process. The analysis of the primary data was done manually, considering the limited number of interviews performed and the exploratory nature of the study.

THE IMPACT OF INTERNET TECHNOLOGY ON MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS

The rapid development of the Internet in the last 15 years has had a profound impact on traditional marketing paradigms and practices. But, most importantly, the Internet has changed the classical communication procedures, because of three specific and co-existent characteristics that differentiate it from any other communication channel:

- *Interactivity*—The Internet offers multiple possibilities of interactive communication, acting not only as an interface, but also as a communication agent (allowing a direct interaction between individuals and software applications).
- *Transparency*—The information published online can be accessed and viewed by any Internet user, unless this information is specifically protected.

- *Memory*—The Web is a channel not only for transmitting information, but also for storing information—in other words, the information published on the Web remains in the memory of the network until it is erased.

The networked world has increased exponentially the number of available channels of communication. We get messages from more different media: e-mail, voicemail, faxes, pages, cell phones, interoffice memos, overnight courier packages, television (with hundreds of channels), radio, Internet radio, and so forth. As a result, the media that used to provide an efficient channel of communication for practitioners have now become only noise that most of the audiences have learned to filter out. On the other hand, the *networked environment* provided the audiences with a new model, one in which they no longer accept every message a communicator wants to push to them, but they rather pull the information that suits their interests and needs. In the networked environment, information must be available where audiences can find it, and it needs to be customized or customizable (Rowley, 2001, 2004).

Therefore, in comparison with the traditional customer, the Internet user has more control over the communication process and can adopt a more proactive attitude, expressed by the capacity to:

1. easily search, select, and access information (using search and meta-search engines, intelligent agents, etc.);
2. contact online organizations or other individuals (using e-mail, chat, or discussion forums); and
3. express their opinions/views in a visible and lasting manner (creating and storing online content).

Taking advantage of the various online resources requires strategic thinking that recognizes that all these aspects of the networked world coexist. They must be coordinated to achieve specific, measurable objectives consistent with the goals of any marketing communications effort.

THE MEANING(S) OF INTEGRATED ONLINE MARKETING COMMUNICATION

The lack of a unifying definition for integrated marketing communication is one of the main barriers for the development and the practical application of this concept. One possible explanation of this theoretical crisis is the multitude of possible co-existent meanings for the IMC concept. This assumption might also be true in the case of Internet communication.

In order to identify the meaning(s) of integrated online marketing communication, the interviewees have been asked

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