

Integrated marketing communications – current status, future developments

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Introduction

Since the first book on integrated marketing communications (IMC) (Schultz *et al.*, 1993), media and technologies have expanded and accelerated, whereas markets have further fragmented (Kitchen, 2010; Kitchen and Uzunoglu, 2015; Schultz *et al.*, 2011). Measuring return on investment has become more straightforward online via cell phones, yet more complex as many more channels (media) have proliferated. Consumers are now more streetwise, savvy and sophisticated. At the same time, markets have splintered into smaller segments and niches, and audiences have become more difficult to reach or access, influence and persuade. Hence, in the marketing communications world, a multiplicity of media communicates messages which often are entirely irrelevant to viewers, listeners and readers creating not only environmental noise, but also market nuisance. Despite accelerated communications modalities, it has only been a few years since the world experienced a major economic crisis. That alone severely dented consumer confidence, and the aftershocks and aftermaths of that crisis will continue to be felt over many years (Kitchen, 2013). Yet, already in 2016, at least in the UK banking and mortgage sectors, the same old pattern of 100 per cent mortgages is already being communicated or promoted for admittedly a smaller proportion of apparently high-income consumers (Financial Stability Report, 2015). Thus, the crises of the past will be revisited in the future and insofar as marketing communications is concerned, it is once again business as usual.

Leaving aside environmental turbulence, this special issue seeks to present the latest research from academic participants in the field of marketing and brand communication and measurement concerning IMC. It is likely that the thoughts and views offered in this special issue will help to mould and shape the subject as we move toward 2020.

IMC has become one of the most influential marketing management frameworks over the past two decades. It is now the overarching theme of every marketing communications text, the title for chapters in marketing management texts and the oft-repeated theme of professional books and articles presented at practitioner and academic conferences. Moreover, academic journal special issues and editorials have been presented by *Journal of Advertising*, *Journal of Advertising Research*, *Journal of Marketing Communications*, the *International Journal of Advertising* and in other academic journals, and there have been several hundred papers in the marketing and communications practitioner press and calls for papers for special issues continue. Major marketing associations now include courses on IMC as a norm. A great deal of interest in IMC has been manifest by the American Productivity and Quality Council (APQC), the American Marketing Association (AMA) and advertising associations such as the Institute of Advertising Practitioner (IPA) and their equivalents in other countries. Further, the focus on measuring marketing investments and activities and developing integrated approaches to marketing was one of the Marketing Science Institute's priorities from 2014 to 2016. That emphasis continues because from 2016 to 2018 the priority has been adjusted to: "delivering integrated, real-time, relevant experiences in context" (MSI, 2016), a point reinforced in a recent paper by Tafesse and Kitchen, 2015 that "the first, and perhaps most important, research priority is measurement" and is supported earlier by Taylor (2010). Undergirding and overarching the academic crescendo is the apparent adoption and usage of IMC by companies and agencies of all types.



But, is IMC more about vocalisation and volume, or does it concern actual usage and measurement? How this takes place is among the subjects addressed here.

Challenges

Challenges facing contemporary marketing and brand managers concern ongoing distinction and concomitant interface between traditional and usually offline sales, marketing and communications and the new, online interactive sales, marketing and communication, and combinations between the old and the new. Brand marketing communication activities are focused upon customers and prospects with the need to measure or show marketplace results.

In the first special issue on IMC published in the *Journal of Marketing Communications* (1998), Don Schultz and his wife Heidi, spoke of transitioning from old to new ways of communicating, based upon the needs associated with the needs of the twenty-first century. How does a firm or brand move from their current location to where they need to be in the dynamic global marketplace of the twenty-first century? They argued that the old four Ps (product, price, promotion, place) approach was essentially outbound, linear and driven by a supply-side orientation (Schultz and Schultz, 1998). The reality is of course that markets are not, and perhaps never have been product, production or even marketing-driven (Kitchen, 2010). Currently, perhaps more than ever before, markets are driven by customers, consumers and prospects. Demand-side factors are just as important as supply-side considerations. And, one day – if technological facilitators permit – all economies pace businesses will be customer-dominated and customer-driven. We are not there yet, and may not be for some time, but it seems reasonable to claim that a business that understands its customers and communicates to and with them, with the recognition that business is demand-driven, should be able to access and capitalise upon a continuous stream of ongoing information that leads to competitive advantage.

Hence, customer insight and integrated brand communication strategy are likely crucial keys to competing in and winning the marketing game, a game vociferously fought in every country and every market.

So, it would seem on the one hand that the road to integration of messages is complete as the ideal of one voice, one sight and one sound proclaimed by Don Schultz and his colleagues at Northwestern – and others since then – has become the standard or norm across the world. Thus, what commenced as a single track, in the practitioner world of the late 1980s, with an academic awakening and contributions in the 1990s and 2000s – underpinned by marketplace changes – has become a superhighway for companies, commentators and academic researchers.

However, though the road towards IMC practice as found in earlier texts and seen as the integration of promotional mix variables (or the “one voice” phenomenon) reached its zenith, the journey towards integration from a consumer or corporate perspective has scarcely begun. Thus, what Schultz and Kitchen (2000) regarded as a four-stage process, for the majority of companies, has – for all intents and purposes – stalled at its very beginning. Yes, we have “message integration” but not necessarily “consumer integration”. Most companies carry out poor, ineffectual market research. There is an insufficiency of real understanding of markets, marketplaces or marketspaces. There is a concomitant lack of investment in database and data systems to gather information from customers and consumers on an ongoing basis. Thus, most messages are still outbound and linear, with the added virtue of looking or sounding the same via all media. Integrated brand marketing, where one measures behavioural outcomes in response to marketing communication, remains a far-fetched dream for most companies. IMC, while it has achieved its goal in one direction, i.e.

message integration, has not reached its subsequent purpose as a strategic business process (Schultz and Kitchen, 2010) in terms of strategic integration or for that matter organisational integration. It is, however, moving in these directions as evidenced in these pages.

Further, there are techniques, processes and workable techniques for after-the-event evaluation of IMC. But, as in all searches for a holy grail, almost none work with immediacy, or during campaign implementation. However, a more realistic picture of IMC may be gradually emerging from the maelstrom of debate, conceptualisations and currently available empirical evidence. For example, it can be claimed that IMC adoption, irrespective of theory, is both situation-specific and context-dependent. Thus, whereas it is a widely accepted model and paradigm, its use or implementation depends on what the company wishes to do within its own budgetary constraints or what senior managers proscribe, particularly in terms of investment in data analytics, customer interfaces and communication modalities.

There still are difficult and problematic issues. IMC, in terms of its major tenets, design, contribution and benefits, has gained academic and practitioner acceptance throughout the world. One can already make out the bones of what could be termed a “central theory”, which most IMC researchers and practitioners would accept. Around the edges (i.e. of PR, of turf battles, of a stages theory of IMC, etc.), there is and will be always be healthy disagreement, conjecture and criticism. IMC has already proved to be remarkably robust; it is no passing phase or passing fad (Kitchen *et al.*, 2004; Kitchen, 2010). However, the time has come for more evidence to be presented from companies and for more sophisticated questions to be asked and answered. Only then, will IMC’s weak theoretical foundations be strengthened. Current barriers are capable of being understood, corrected and overcome. And, despite academic quibbling – the crucible of practice, where IMC was born and grown – is where the cutting edge of IMC continues to manifest and undergo change.

This special issue offers papers which debate the meaningfulness of, and challenges pertaining to IMC in the twenty-first century and as readers will observe, papers are provocative, multi-disciplinary and eclectic. All, however, assist in unravelling and understanding IMC.

Unusually, in an introduction, I would like to thank all those who submitted papers. I also thank a veritable regiment of 80 or so great reviewers, all of whom were invited or selected because of their interest in, involvement with and publications relating to IMC. I have to say, however, we were inundated with papers from all over the world.

In the original call, contributions were sought that would offer innovative insights based on rigorous and thoughtful conceptualisation, deep literature review, empirical evidence and/or case studies surrounding, but not necessarily limited to the following research areas:

- How and in what ways is IMC taught around the world? How should it be taught and what should students be expected to learn? How does technological advancement impact IMC and how it is taught?
- evidence of IMC adoption and usage in companies;
- interactions between IMC and ICC (integrated corporate communications);
- IMC and social media;
- evolution of IMC, its current status and relevance;
- connections between IMC, brands and branding in an interconnected and interactive marketplace/space;
- measurement – how and in what ways are IMC approaches accountable now, and how may these increase; and

- as IMC was developed in the West, how and in what ways is IMC operationalised in new or emergent markets? Is there any evidence of leapfrogging previous stages of development?

The harvest of papers

In the subheadings below, these do not necessarily represent the total contribution or focus of the papers, though a major thrust of a paper may fall into a specific domain. Many of the papers overlap and interfuse between different related topics. However, all add to the topic under consideration – IMC.

Education

The paper by Kerr and Kelly addresses the issues of IMC education in the context of digital disruption. It adopts the Delphi technique in recruiting IMC thought leaders and educators from major economic areas in the world. The paper indicates that IMC education is widespread and that the term “IMC” or “integrated marketing communications” has become common parlance and is here to stay. It is noted that while few object to the term “IMC”, its meaning and implementation varies significantly across geographic areas, countries and companies. Three major recommendations arise:

- (1) to position IMC as the integrator and digital as the facilitator. This leads to the recommendation;
- (2) to include more data-minded faculty (i.e. faculty with digital and mathematical skills); and
- (3) to recognise a nascent need for an IMC academic association, perhaps serving to help drive the subject forward in a coordinated manner.

The theme of education and learning from an organisational context is also addressed by Luxton, Reid, and Mavondo whose paper addresses organisational antecedents influencing the adoption and use of IMC capabilities. As is made clear, organisational or managerial learning is dependent upon a firm’s marketing and brand orientation. Such orientations may lead to strategic consistency, program implementation and adaptation and eventually superior brand performance. Thus, adopting IMC in one form or another, without first addressing these issues would seem to be a recipe for one-voice integration, which is the easiest and simplest way to adopt IMC (Schultz *et al.*, 1993). In addition, Luxton *et al.* add brand size. Whereas for large brands, IMC is now considered to be a critical element of a brand equity strategy, small firms often lack resources and thus their brand building activities may be poorer in terms of investment or innovation by reason of resource constraint. The findings show that brand orientation (not necessarily market orientation) is a critical antecedent. Moreover, the brand – however defined – is seen as an organisational asset underpinned by ongoing analysis of the needs of served markets; that is, this includes customer and competitor information. Such information is fundamentally necessary to the development and implementation of consistent IMC. Thus, brand orientation depends on market dynamics, which if understood correctly, lead to integrated communications, which lead to improved overall brand performance. It is interesting that the brand has become the asset, while earlier IMC authors claimed that customers or consumers were the asset (Schultz and Schultz, 1998). I suspect both brand and customer dynamics are inextricably interrelated, with IMC acting as the intervening variable between them. nb, The theme of organisational antecedents is also addressed in a later paper by Foroudi *et al.* [IMC antecedents and the consequences of planned brand identity in higher education (HE)].

The paper by Finne and Gronroos concerns moving from a focus upon the sender, the organisation or source, to a focus upon customer integration or sense-making of communications, which lays a conceptual foundation for movement towards an outside-in oriented customer-integrated marketing communication. Yet, as is made clear in the paper, this movement was prefigured by earlier writers commenting upon an outside-in approach to IMC (Kitchen *et al.*, 2004; Kitchen, 2010), with Don Schultz being the first to argue for this approach (Schultz, 1996), which by necessity corresponds more appropriately with marketing *per se*. The paper argues for a radical re-education of marketing practitioners and academics. The dominant mindset relates more to brands, organisations and marketing personnel. The new mindset is much more about how to relate to customers and to their ecosystems. The aim is to lead to customer engagement and involvement in terms of communications-in-use. This does not necessarily simplify communications, but a greater understanding of customers may lead to efficiency savings, greater relevance and perhaps even a reduction in the barrage of unwanted and uninteresting bombardment of [marketing] communications to increasingly resistant and annoyed receivers. In other words, to direct attention to customer activity and logic and the ecosystem(s) that influences their behaviour. Naturally, such change means mental models in marketers needs to change – perhaps the most difficult of all educational challenges.

I would greatly encourage proposals that seek to draw organisations closer to their customers, consumers, target markets and stakeholders. I would welcome the testing of the conceptualisations by Finne and Gronroos, and look forward to the empirical evidence.

A later paper by Mortimer and Laurie also draws attention to the need for IMC education by company and brand managers and also to the need for training of agency executives in a national context – in this case the UK.

Organisational and brand performance

Luxton *et al.* have already touched upon the topic of brand performance and lucidly described its antecedents including IMC. Ots and Nyilasy, via an ethnographic case study at a leading Swedish retailer, pick up on the oft-repeated theme of the need for empirical evidence between what IMC theories may prescribe versus what practitioners actually do in practice. In other words, how do practitioners actually behave? What tools or technologies do they use? Which rules or procedures do they follow? What cultural templates, often tacit to users, do they draw upon? And also, what personal understanding or teleo-affective structures do they draw upon? The outcomes show, as might be anticipated to some degree, that planning by analysts, brand managers and campaign planners comes first, which is underpinned by market and brand data. Developed plans are then approved within their selected retail organisation. This leads to positioning attributes which are then presented, discussed and tested by a range of customers and stakeholders. This is followed by material set-ups that serve as enablers and barriers to integration. At no point in the process does IMC-strategising begin with a blank canvas. In fact, if we commence with consumer data-driven understanding, the canvas *per se* will never be blank. Data-driven understanding in this case example is followed by other elements of the model described in the plan (see five questions above) and operationalised during a two-year process.

The conclusions make clear that a complete and useful theory of IMC needs to contain theoretical understanding of what happens in terms of its practical use. The “lived experience” of IMC needs to be incorporated into the literature. This has been argued for many years. I agree with the authors that it is imperative that the world of theory and the world of practice need to be brought into juxtaposition. For, as is also made plain in this paper, there is no shortcut to drawing upon organisational experience or practice of IMC

planning and implementation. Nostrums or prescriptions taken from the literature are insufficient.

The challenge of implementation is also taken up by Mortimer and Laurie and follows from a series of studies of IMC practice relative to UK organisations. The paper adopts a critical realism approach. Despite many studies in the UK previously, the paper (in my view, disappointingly) finds that UK clients (i.e. the “driving force” behind IMC implementation) are facing barriers similar to those faced by other countries a decade or so ago. Summarised, these include:

- difficulty in understanding IMC;
- the risks of change;
- marketing departments lacking control or influence over other parts of the organisation; frequently, marketing may not be or is not represented at the board level; and
- agencies may not have a clear role in IMC.

The last point seems to be excusable as agencies always act in accordance with client instructions. The first three bullet points seem to relate to the relative poor status of marketing in the UK, amid a general unwillingness to invest in new ideas, processes and technologies – which add up to a marked tendency of organisations or their managers to draw closer to customers, or put another way, to allow customers any real access to influence marketing processes.

The earlier point of the need for education is reinforced here. However, the context in this case – national expectations, norms and behaviours – seems to result in barriers to continuing innovation, including the adoption and usage of IMC. But, if the world of business continues to move in the direction of greater customer involvement in marketing, then this does not spell a bright future for hidebound UK companies.

Brand identity

The theme of IMC antecedents and planned brand identity is analysed by Foroudi *et al.* relative to two London-based universities. Admittedly, because universities are drawn further into marketisation, the need to communicate brand positioning and benefits to different audiences is mandated. The paper shows that among the driving forces for IMC, identity and strategy must also be taken into consideration. Support is given for the oft-repeated assertion that consumer attitudes may be enhanced by following a strategy and consistently integrating messages across controlled communication. In addition, the relationship between brand strategy and uncontrolled communication has not yet been proved, albeit in this particular context. Understanding of these extraneous communications needs to be enhanced. In either form of communication, relationships between brand and consumer need to be understood and enhanced. The outcome is that IMC programmes based on identifiable parameters should underpin brand loyalty.

I would like to see further empirical studies of what HE marketing communication professionals do in IMC terms either from a marketing or corporate communication perspective. Studies are few and far between, and the burgeoning growth of HE in the UK and its evident success with UK and overseas students make this a rich and fertile field for IMC studies in the future.

Networked brand identity and multi-stakeholder perspective in a retailer context is the focus of a conceptual paper by Orazi *et al.* Both this paper and the previous one, extend IMC more into the boundaries of corporate communication, an area which fits more coherently

with the notion of integration *per se*. Admittedly, there are crossovers and interconnections with marketing, and the need to differentiate between the two communication typologies is mandated. Neither controls the other, and while it would seem that marketing communications generates by far the lion's share of the budget, the corporate communications domain is becoming more important as corporate brands also need to be communicated, perhaps more to stakeholders.

However, to return to Orazi *et al.*, the entire network of a firm's stakeholders are now – or have the capacity to be – involved in the creation and communication of brand identity. New digital media and technologies amend, adjust or alter traditional, albeit integrated, processes of communicating brand identity, with significant communications now occurring with stakeholders external to a firm. Thus, traditional and more modern contact points must be navigated effectively in current marketplaces/spaces in developing, maintaining and building brand equity. This likely means, as recommended by the authors, that a host of activities (i.e. contact points) that define consumer and stakeholder brand perceptions may not always be instigated and managed by the IMC function. However, IMC specialists could readily be seconded into other managerial functions, such as human resources or corporate communications, to orchestrate brand activities in aligning brand identity and image and subsequently brand equity. The need is manifested though to undertake empirical research and to test the robust hypotheses developed here.

A second paper by Foroudi *et al.* concerns corporate and brand identity and the need to integrate this into strategy and controlled and uncontrolled communications to inculcate trust, loyalty and commitment via integrated marketing communications. However, its one weakness is to differentiate between corporate brands and marketing brands depending upon brand architecture. In some companies, the corporate brand and brand marketing are one and the same. In other corporations, corporate brand communications may be minimal in terms of expenditure when compared to expenditures on individually known and well-loved brands. There the structure of corporate, SBU, product category and individual brand communication may need to be considered. As was said earlier, IMC may well be and likely is both situation-specific and context-dependent. Put another way, a generalised approach to IMC must include industry, company, brand, context and competitive circumstances. In each case (following analysis of brand architecture and market dynamics) the question is whether the company's identity, strategy and personality communicate an authentic message to a target audience. Further, the audience can be customers, consumers or stakeholders and the source and direction of the communications need to be clearly identified. As was indicated in a previous paper, in a world of increasing access to social media, both controlled and uncontrolled communications need to be assessed in terms of their impact upon brand identity and equity.

A paper by Porcu *et al.*, while focused mainly upon measurement, upon firm-wide IMC, looks at the subject from an organisational perspective and clarifies issues regarding the name and acronym, definition and dimensions of the concept. Similar to the paper by Foroudi *et al.*, it extends IMC from its initial location in marketing communications or promotion, and moves into organisational marketing and corporate communication. Thus, stakeholders, constituencies and publics also need to be considered and measurement forms developed.

New media and changing environmental circumstances

While IMC is admittedly accepted as a sophisticated and efficient communications discipline, the marketing communication environment continues to present challenges and always will. IMC does seem to offer, however, the flexibility to adjust and change as needed

relative to changed circumstance. Turner's paper addresses how IMC can be used in the case of a major sport event sponsorship – the Asian Cup 2015 – and particularly how business and community leaders assisted in facilitating event communication in a multi-lingual region i.e. across 16 countries. In a sense, this can be likened to a multi-national or global company integrating a major sponsorship across many countries. In this case, the ambassadors assisted in writing and placement of adverts across countries. Further, business, media groups, religious groups and community bodies presented an additional range of nuanced subtleties which required a nuanced address. Local and national communication via many communication media and modalities had to be linked back or connected to the overall communication campaign. The role of the ambassadors became crucial especially because they had to interact with, and respond to, various stakeholder groups. Traditional media (advertising, WOM, direct marketing and personal selling) were all used. However, new media and social media relative to different stakeholders were also needed (i.e. using their own language and incorporating associated cultural idiosyncrasies). Turner states that in effect, the ambassadors became quasi-internal stakeholders.

In the Close, Hempel, and Kang paper, touchpoints are again addressed, and IMC, or IBP here (integrated brand promotion), requires every touchpoint of value to be accessed and used. In conjunction with other papers, the authors see a future where a brand focus is required with demonstrable synergies in digital and multi-modal communication. In this paper, the authors develop the notion that emails with embedded video content are more effective than emails alone. Such connected media serve to attract attention and evoke emotional responses to messages. But, do such embedded content materials generate more product interest, enhance brand prestige, underpin behavioural intention to the brand and create intent to pass along content in digital or social media settings (eWom)? Admittedly, videos have been viewed in other online contexts such as social media, i.e. YouTube and Instagram. In these cases, videos are not necessarily within another marketing communication message modality, i.e. email. Results from Apple and Audi opt-ins indicate that video additions to emails create more information than email alone, generate greater interest, enhance brand prestige and result in higher intent to pass along content via positive eWom. Admittedly, the research focus on high-involvement products is a limitation to this subject. It would be most interesting to see how this may work in a low-involvement product category as well.

Maja Seric also notes the expansion of IMC from its one-voice phenomenon to its more needful strategic, consumer-centred approach. However, progression depends upon technological developments and the need to move from theory to operational practice. Thus, advances in social and communication technology or “post Web 2.0 marketing”, or the social web are among important current drivers and may relate to the development of brand equity. Thus, while some of her hypotheses are traditional – i.e. IMC's impact on brand equity, this may in turn be dependent on national culture (shown in another way in the paper by Mortimer and Laurie), and in turn impact in statistically significant ways the hotel guest evaluations of IMC, social web and brand equity. In this case, the sample frame of hotels was located in Croatia with guests from Italy, England, Croatia, USA, Germany, Austria and Spain. Thus, this is a cross-cultural study with ramifications for IMC in a developing country or market. Strong positive and significant relationships were found between social web and IMC, and IMC and brand equity. Further, national culture exerted a statistically significant effect in terms of country of origin of hotel guests. Based on the study – admittedly in one service domain – consumers are becoming more active and proactive. Therefore, feedback is required from marketers to online reviews to enhance customer experiences. Moreover, dealing positively and expeditiously with online complaints can serve to enhance brand

equity. The social web (a non-traditional and interactive communications modality) is now considered to be a driver of IMC, and IMC itself acts as a mediating construct relative to brand equity.

A conceptual paper by Schnebelen and Bruhn is also located in the new media domain in relation to new ways of thinking which could lead to or underpin strategic components of customer-centric IMC, and relates to educational matters and ties into the work of Finne and Gronroos. Social media emergence adds a new dynamic to a previously one-way communication. They cite [Berthon *et al.* \(2012\)](#) that the focus shifts from:

[...] companies to consumers, individuals to communities, nodes to networks, publishing to participation and intrusion to invitation.

The authors acknowledge (as does this editor) that IMC is much more complex than it appears to be at first sight, and as company and market factors change and interactive technologies accelerate, the need for customer-centric communication becomes paramount, or put another way customers and consumers are integral to the brand concept and communication and marketing processes to sustain or build brand equity. Indeed, as we move further into a social media world, IMC from a consumer perspective is mandated. As noted by the authors, IMC is by no means a static, once and for all, concept. From its inauguration in the 1990's, its ability to flex, change and adapt to market circumstances has been among its strengths. Now, with the challenge of social media, IMC will be noted by a balancing act between a company's branding activities and the concomitant integration of consumer-centred issues.

I would like to see empirical evidence to support many of the issues raised in this conceptual paper.

A paper by Henninger, Alevizou and Oates focused on IMC and social media, is contextualised or analysed from the perspective of UK-based fashion micro-organisations. This paper represents a somewhat missing link as the exploration of IMC in small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) has been seriously neglected, despite an earlier claim by leading authors that SMEs are closer to customers than their larger counterparts. In this paper, an exploratory and longitudinal methodology is applied enabling immersion by the researchers in the company's [communication] processes, where other methods included interview, semiotics, Twitterfeed and Facebook. In this context, social media was described as:

[...] a great way to get in touch with your people who are interested in your brand – can share ideas, inspirations, styles, tips and ideas [...].

As may be anticipated, these organisations tend to overcome resource constraints by being innovative and seeking access to every available free relevant digital platform, updating accounts on a regular basis (twice a day mentioned). However, and of interest here, receiver feedback did not seem to be incorporated into the communications strategy or tactics deployed by the micro-company. The authors indicate that the company's communications seem to best accord with the first stage of Schultz and Kitchen (2010) IMC model, i.e. an inside-out, sales-oriented approach to marketing communications. This is, of course, by no means was limited to SMEs (Editor). For these SMEs, IMC is adopted in a somewhat partial and rather simplified manner; different channels are experimented with suggesting a lack of familiarity with customers and their media choices, and the focus tends to be short term in nature.

Given the paucity of studies of IMC in SMEs, this could be a very fruitful field for subsequent research.

Measurement

This was one of the areas included in the call for papers. While several papers are focused to a minor degree upon this topic, only one tackles this subject wholeheartedly (Porcu *et al.*). Many commentators seem to agree that the relationship between IMC and economic and financial performance is supported strongly; there is little empirical evidence to support this support. Porcu *et al.* indicate that their firm-wide IMC scale (and related subscales) may offer at least a partial solution. However, there remains the need to apply the scale or their derivatives in specific company settings (before, during and following campaigns) either at the corporate, marketing or entire brand communication levels. In other words, the measurement issue, the holy grail of IMC and other forms of marketing communications, remains paramount insofar as future studies are concerned. Watch this space.

Concluding comments

The juggernaut of marketing communication is changing shape, metamorphosing into new configurations and forms as a result of the underlying technological revolution and in the face of ongoing recessionary influences, including a loss of consumer confidence. The form best suited to accommodate these changes, at this time, appears to be integrated marketing communications or IMC and its corporate equivalent whether under the same title or ICC. I see few grounds as yet for the emergence of “corporate marketing” as espoused by some in the 1990s and 2000s. Undoubtedly, the attractiveness of IMC has been noticed but not yet wholly purloined by its smaller-budgeted corporate equivalent. In addition to business-to-consumer (B2C) and business-to-business (B2B) communication, the digital revolution means that for the first time in history, consumers and customers are exerting more influence, but not necessarily control over some marketing processes, including communication. Thus, consumer-to-consumer (C2C) communications are also becoming more important, and many corporations are now striving to insert themselves into the dialogue. Inevitable as it may seem, inevitably and inexorably, customers and consumers will exert a far greater control in co-creating, disseminating, sharing and evaluating marketing communications if the “M” in IMC is to be realised fully.

Media are moving in conjunction with their technological drivers. For example, in relation to cloud technological facilitators, 5 exabytes of information were created between the dawn of civilisation through 2003, but that much information is now created “every 2 days.” As Schmidt (2010), the then CEO of Google pointed out “The real issue is user-generated content”, noting that pictures, instant messages and tweets all add to this. An exabyte is defined as “a unit of information equal to one quintillion (10¹⁸) bytes, or one billion gigabytes”. As the amount of data in the world explodes, the ability to manage all of this information has become increasingly difficult. In 2009, over \$4tn dollars was spent to manage close to 800,000 petabytes of data (1 PB = 1M GB), and by 2020, total data is expected to be 44 times that! And, 70 per cent of all this data is media or media related. Admittedly, doubts have been cast on this data, but it has been repeated many times since then.

As pointed out in several papers, IMC itself must be marketing-driven or marketing-oriented. Effective IMC depends upon a data-driven approach coupled with information fecundity. Consumers, markets, audiences, stakeholders, constituencies and publics are different. Techniques or models derived from a different era struggle in this new contextual setting. Hence, macro-style marketing or mass marketing is moving over in a similar manner to Neanderthals losing ground to the sharper, faster and more intelligent *Homo sapiens*. Micro-marketing – the marketing to niches, segments or unitary markets seems the way forward (Kitchen and Proctor, 2015).

And as noted in the papers, the need for IMC-related education is paramount; the need to learn or re-learn is limited not only to brand and marketing managers but also their executive task masters. Marketers are changing and the pews of previous macro-marketers are being filled by the new posteriors of Generation Y and Z characters, those who may understand the dynamics of current markets (Kitchen, 2016).

A few simple points may be made at the end:

Based on these papers, the term IMC is here to stay for the foreseeable future. Inexorably, “brand”, consumer’ and “stakeholder” are becoming inextricably intertwined with the concept.

Measurement remains the Achilles’ heel for IMC, just as it was before for advertising. There are no simple, quick or easy answers relating what is spent or invested on communications relative to campaigns, annual sales or longer-term brand branding to measurable returns. The answer would appear to lie in building and maintaining sophisticated data base systems or integrating all elements of the supply chain. Meanwhile, the call for short- and long-term returns relative to named campaigns or businesses is mandated. I suspect, however, the grappling claws of easy measurement will continue to grope around at the arcade game level of communications, but may not return very much in terms of measurable return prizes.

Whatever else happens, a focus on inside-out IMC is not saying that much about anything. It is, when all is said and done, a short fix to bring about the one-voice phenomenon. It is, in fact, much more to do with selling and telling and less to do with marketing and real two-way communications.

Whatever else happens [...] companies should not lose touch with their markets whether they be online/offline or both.

And finally, it is great to see a new generation of IMC researchers starting to plumb the depths of IMC in exploring its foundation, examining its developing, evaluating its applicability and vulnerabilities and extending the concept and practice to new unthought-of domains (some of these points were explored at an invited lecture, Tel Aviv, 2016).

Watch this space!

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