

Evolution & Effectiveness of Strategic Marketing Process-Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC)

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Abstract—Integrated marketing communications (IMC) has emerged as a promising area of study in the past decade. This paper throws light on the strategy of marketing process where brand identity and integrated marketing communications are the key components.

In this paper strategy of brand equity reflects the role of Integrated Marketing Communication to develop and maintaining brand equity, also the role of brand identity helps to inform, help and guides to implement and nurture the overall firm's IMC strategy. A conceptual framework was developed towards IMC theory development that was tested research propositions. Finally, a discussion of implications for academics and practitioners is provided, and opportunities for future qualitative and quantitative research are suggested.

The concept of IMC as practiced by many firms gives an insight in understanding the future of IMC in developing nations like India.

Integrated marketing communications (IMC) has emerged as a promising area of study in the past decade. However, this area has received disproportionate attention for research not only in India but around the world. Many aspects have determined the effectiveness of different components and total IMC on different brands in India. Changes in the business environment, along with technological innovation, increasing consumer sophistication and changes in marketing communications practices, have led organizations to seek to improve relationships with their consumers.. Although Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) is an emerging field with a seemingly underdeveloped theoretical base, it appears to be an unavoidable trend which will continue into the future.

Results suggest that all the individual components of IMC have significant positive effects on the sales of different brands. Thus, research findings help the firms in allocating their budget through different components of IMC that results in greater sales and higher return on their investments.

Keywords: Budgets, India, IMC, Components, Brands.

1. INTRODUCTION

Integrated Marketing Communications is a simple concept. It ensures that all forms of communications and messages are carefully linked together.

At its most basic level, Integrated Marketing Communications, or IMC, as we'll call it, means integrating all the promotional tools, so that they work together in harmony. Promotion is one of the Ps in the marketing mix. A promotion has its own mix of communications tools.

All of these communications tools work better if they work together in harmony rather than in isolation. Their sum is greater than their parts - providing they speak consistently with one voice all the time, every time.

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. Check out the Hall Of Fame later for more about 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.

The many benefits of IMC are examined in the section called, 'Benefits of IMC'.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Keller (2003) notes that the firm's marketing communications contribute to brand equity. That is, effective communication enables the formations of brand awareness and a positive brand image. These then form the brand knowledge structures, which, in turn, trigger the differentiated responses that constitute brand equity. Following Schultz (2004), we define IMC strategy as a set of processes that include the planning, development, execution, and evaluation of coordinated, measurable, persuasive brand communications programs over time with consumers, customers, prospects, employees, associates, and other targeted, relevant external and internal audiences. Therefore, effective IMC is an integral part of an effective brand equity strategy. Furthermore, effective IMC potentially enhances the effectiveness of the firm's portfolio of brands, and hence, could positively influence brand equity

The marketers of twenty-first century should utilize an IMC program, which goes beyond usual marketing concepts of 4p's, trying in addition to generate new ways of creating customers by database (Johnson and Schultz, 2004).

Let us assume that the ultimate process of marketing is to deliver higher standard of living through communications (Kotler.P.,2003).

Integrated Marketing Communication has recognized all the trends by which firms touch customers must be related, aligned and coordinated making it more than advertising, sales promotion and direct marketing programs (Schultz.D.E.,2003).

If companies disregard IMC and different messages are not delivered in unison, it may lead to an incoherent brand image, which can negatively influence consumer behavior (McGrath, 2005).

The primary goal of IMC is to affect the perception of value and behavior through communication (Holm.D.,2006).

To draw the benefits from IMC approach, it is imperative that whole organization, cross functional and subsidiaries understands how IMC works and how IMC plans can be put into action if this is not the case integration will be lost which will in turn weaken both corporate brand and relationship (Reid, et.al., 2005).

The psychological continuity is a consistent attitude towards a brand or firm. It is reference for company's voice and personality for the consumers. This can be achieved but Integrated Marketing Communication with them (Panda. T. k, 2009).

Marketing communication activities must be integrated to deliver a consistent message and strategic positioning (Kotler.P. Keller.K.L., et.al., 2009).

The greater utilization of marketing communication tools within an IMC approach can lead to a better overall outcome and may also deliver a more holistic picture (Smith, et.al. 2006).

3. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Integrated Marketing Communication is the boost for promotional mix elements, whether it is advertising; direct marketing, interactive/internet marketing, sales promotion, publicity/public relations or personal selling, combining these disciplines to provide consistently and clearly a maximum communication impact. Promotion has been defined as the coordination of all seller-initiated efforts to set up channels of information and persuasion to sell goods and services or promote an idea.

Promotion is the systematic attempt to move forward step by step prospects from a state of unawareness to awareness then to knowledge and liking, then to preference and conviction and finally to action (purchase) or a positive behavioral response. The communication accomplishes its objectives in a series of mental stages as the receiver or audience moves from unawareness to actual deal. The purpose of integrated marketing communication should be to maximize customer delivered value. Integrated marketing communication plays a very important role in the ability and capacity of firm to innovate and success fully delivers competitive response through value added offerings to their customers.

4. CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

IMC has come a long way from being conceptualized as the coordination of communication tools for a brand (Krugman et al. 1994) to a more strategic conceptualization (Duncan 2002; Percy, Rossiter, and Elliott 2001; Schultz 2004a). As Carlson, Grove, and Dorsch (2003) note, the initial conceptualizations of IMC were somewhat blurred and led to the adoption of different approaches to creating messages. Even after a decade of research in the IMC area, differences still exist among researchers as to the conceptualization of IMC. For example, Cornelissen and Lock (2000) claimed IMC to be a "management fashion" rather than a theoretical concept. In reply, Schultz and Kitchen (2000) argued that IMC is an emerging paradigm whose progression as a concept and discipline is entirely appropriate and in accordance with

scientific theory. Recently, Gould (2004) noted that though IMC remains a controversial theoretical concept, it could be a powerful theoretical tool when viewed from a post structural paradigmatic perspective on theory. Table 1 further explains the global move and evolution of IMC. Therefore, it can be inferred from the preceding discussion that IMC as a theoretical concept is on the right path in terms of attracting consumers.

Table 1: The Evolution of Integrated Marketing Communications

IMC has evolved from	To ...
Tactical orientation	Strategic orientation
Local	Global
Emerging development "Inside-out"	Major communication development "Outside-in" customer-oriented
Managerial fashion Emerging paradigm	New management paradigm Representing a paradigm shift
Representing an emicetic gap	Representing a post structural set of practices and discourses
"What is it?"	A multistage model incorporating a focus on all contacts with consumers
Most basic notion of coordinating all corporate communications	One associated with management and brands

5. STRATEGIC ROLE OF IMC IN BRAND EQUITY

Kitchen et al. (2004) point out that IMC is no longer just a communication process, but a process associated with management and brands. Furthermore, for Kitchen et al. (2004), IMC involves managing marketing communications in a holistic manner to achieve strategic objectives. The findings of *McArthur and Griffin (1997)* that the responsibility for marketing communications is clearly becoming an internal, upper management affair suggests that IMC is evolving to be Strategically oriented rather than tactically oriented.

One of the major reasons for the growing importance of integrated marketing communications over the past decade is that it plays a major role in the process of developing and sustaining brand identity and equity. As branding expert *Kevin Keller Notes*, "Building and Properly Managing Brand Equity has become a priority for companies of all sizes, in all types of industries, in all types of markets." With more and more products and services competing for consideration by customers who have less and less time to make choices, well-known brands have a major competitive advantage in today's market place. Building and maintaining brand identity and equity require the creation of well-known brands that have favorable, strong, and unique associations in the mind of the consumer. Companies recognize that brand equity is as important an asset as factories, patents, and cash because strong brands have the power to command a premium price from consumers as well as investors.

Brand identity is a combination of many factors, including the name, logo, symbols, design, packaging, and performance of a product or service as well as the image or type of associations that comes to mind when consumers think about a brand. It encompasses the entire spectrum of consumers' awareness, knowledge, and image of the brand as well as the company behind it. It is the sum of all points of encounter or contact that consumers have with the brand, and it extends beyond the experience or outcome of using it. These contacts can also result from various forms of integrated marketing communications activities used by a company, including mass-media advertising, sales promotion offers, sponsorship activities at sporting or entertainment events, Web sites on the Internet, and direct-mail pieces such as letters, brochures, catalogs, or videos. Consumers can also have contact with or receive information about a brand in stores at the point of sale; through articles or stories they see, hear, or read in the media; or through interactions with a company representative, such as a salesperson. Marketers recognize that in the modern world of marketing there are many different opportunities and methods for contacting current and prospective customers to provide them with information about a company and/or brands. The challenge is to understand how the use of the various IMC tools to make such contacts and deliver the branding message effectively and efficiently. A successful IMC program requires that marketers find the right combination of communication tools and techniques, define their role and the extent to which they can or should be used, and coordinate their use. To accomplish this, the persons responsible for the company's communication efforts must have an understanding of the IMC tools that are available and the ways they can be used.

6. DISCUSSION

Consistent with recent developments in the understanding and application of IMC, the proposed conceptual framework

(1) applies IMC as an integral element in a successful brand equity strategy; (2) treats IMC as a strategic activity rather than as a tactical activity; (3) places in the hands of the brand strategist the responsibility for the development and coordination of the IMC program through its brand identity strategy; and (4) incorporates feedback from customers, prospects, and competitors into the brand identity strategy. The focus on brand identity enables the marketing firm to accurately and consistently communicate this identity, through brand identity contacts, to those brand stewards responsible for developing and implementing the IMC strategy. A fundamental thesis of this work is that these brand identity contacts will lead to a more synergistic and effective IMC program. The second fundamental thesis is that such an IMC program will lead to stronger brand equity through brand equity contacts.

The testable propositions suggest that certain characteristics of the firms will lead to a more synergistic and effective IMC

program. These characteristics include a brand identity oriented culture, top management support for the brand identity, and internal market orientation. Furthermore, the more synergistic (i.e., consistent, interactive, and complementary) and effective the IMC program, the higher the resulting brand equity. As used here, brand equity means strong brand awareness and a favorable brand image i.e a brand image that is congruent with the inspirational brand identity.

Our brand equity schematic and conceptual framework have many implications for practitioners. The successful application of the proposed framework begins with a "fully defined and operationalized" brand identity. Therefore, firms should focus on efforts that define and develop brand identity. Next, the brand managers and employees of the firm should concentrate on communicating that brand identity to every individual responsible for the firm's marketing communications efforts. After the brand managers clarify their aspirations for the brand, and are able to clearly and accurately communicate these aspirations to the brand stewards, the IMC program should commence. Whether internal or external to the marketing firm, if the brand stewards have a clear and accurate understanding of the brand identity, they are better able to develop a comprehensive, strategic IMC program that more clearly and accurately communicates that brand identity. Finally, feedback from customers, prospects, and publics regarding the brand awareness and image, along with feedback from other entities in the environment, including competitors, will enable the brand owner to adjust its brand image strategy, and/or its IMC strategy. Therefore, the firm should pay particular attention to brand-related market information from the environment.

By integrating the works of various researchers, this paper provides a theoretical foundation in the form of a conceptual framework. It should be noted, however, that what we present here is a conceptual framework and not the conceptual framework. We expect this paper to generate a more intellectually stimulating and informed debate that contributes to IMC research. Toward the goal of developing a high-quality IMC research program, we look forward to critiques, extensions, and rivals to our proposed conceptual framework.

The testable research propositions that we have developed from our conceptual framework and the works of various researchers provide evidence that we are on the right path toward developing IMC theory. Again, we hope that in addition to our future research in this area, IMC as a field of research can attract more scholars to develop a robust IMC theory. Here, we present a few directions for future research.

7. FUTURE RESEARCH

The proposed conceptual framework and the testable research propositions offer multiple avenues and opportunities for

future IMC research. Various qualitative and quantitative studies would be appropriate for this endeavor. With reference to qualitative research, case studies could follow the brand equity strategy of a single brand, or a portfolio of brands, through brand identity development and IMC strategy through to brand equity. Such studies may provide a rich understanding of the brand equity strategy process. In addition, depth interviews of brand managers, marketing communication managers, and employees of agencies responsible for marketing communications could provide further insights into enriching the conceptual framework and the research propositions.

Focus group discussions among selected groups of customers exposed to the firm's proposed communication options could provide additional inputs for better integrating the marketing communications.

With reference to quantitative studies, the proposed conceptual framework can be empirically tested. Methods such as survey research could potentially offer more generalizable results.

Published scales are available for several of the constructs in the proposed framework. Scales for the remaining constructs can be developed using items adapted from other scales or created anew. Using surveys, researchers could study the brand owner or the IMC agency.

Future research could test our conceptual framework in parts—that is, (1) brand identity factors leading to brand equity factors, and (2) brand equity factors leading to brand equity. A more sophisticated study might involve dyadic, or even triadic, research, studying the brand owner, brand stewards, and customers.

Future research could also investigate other brand identity factors that might lead to synergistic and effective IMC programs, as well as other characteristics of the IMC program that might lead to higher brand equity. Other research might focus on the measurement of brand equity, especially as it relates to brand identity. Specifically, measures of brand image brand identity congruence should be developed.

Also, researchers could look into organization structures and cultures that are conducive to developing effective brand identity strategy and IMC strategy. In conclusion, we present our paper as (1) a foundation for further theory development, (2) a starting point for more relevant and rigorous research, and (3) a small but significant contribution with potential implications for academics and practitioners.

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