

GUEST EDITORIAL

The evolution of IMC: IMC in a customer-driven marketplace

One of the advantages of a long career is that you get to see and experience many changes. Seldom are the changes radical and immediately obvious, but over time, we've seen the development of new models of learning, the globalization of higher education, the increased emphasis on research, the call for marketing productivity and the resulting emphasis on marketing metrics. Many of these changes have been profound in that they changed what we do forever. Certainly, earlier periods in marketing, the 'good old days', set the stage for the present and the future, but only for those who could accurately see the environment and accurately assess the impact on how we now think about marketing and especially about marketing communications.

During the past 50 years, we've seen the emergence of many marketing management frameworks, for example, the '4Ps' (product, price, place and promotion), the marketing concept, the product life cycle, positioning and others. Often these frameworks shape the way we think about marketing, stimulate our research questions, influence what we teach and, typically, guide marketing practice. Some of these frameworks influence marketing practice for a long time – others are more short-lived, replaced by new observations. This issue of the *Journal of Marketing Communications* is about the development, maturity and future of one of these managerial frameworks – integrated marketing communications (IMC). There can be little doubt that IMC is one of the most influential marketing management frameworks of our time. Today, IMC is the subject of professional and textbooks; trade and academic conferences; higher education curricula; academic journals and industry magazines; and an on-going, lively discussion about how to shorten the gap between what *is* happening with IMC practice and what *should* happen. How did the IMC evolution happen and where do we go from here?

The 'good old days'

The world, consumers, communications systems and the study of IMC have all changed dramatically in the last dozen years. When the IMC concept first entered the scene, through the text *Integrated marketing communication: Pulling it together and making it work* (Schultz, Tannenbaum, and Lauterborn 1993), marketing communications was a rather simple managerial task. Most marketing communication investments were being made in only four areas: advertising, sales promotion, direct marketing and public relations, and those were generally classified as above-the-line or below-the-line, with advertising being the lead element. Thus, the manager's integrating task was perceived to be aligning and coordinating messages and incentives delivered through those four functional areas so they presented a clear, cohesive and comprehensible whole that moved customers along the communication and purchasing continuum.

In this rather simple, outbound, mass communication approach, the marketer was generally in control of the system. Thus, the marketing organization and the marketing

communication manager developed and managed most of the communication elements being sent through the media to customers, consumers and anticipated prospects. As a result, the focus of marketing communication was on identifying target markets, developing mass media communication and then, delivering those messages and incentives as efficiently as possible. No one thought very much about measurement or what we now call accountability.

Thus, integration, at least as perceived by both the professional and academic communities, was essentially all about tactical coordination – that is, making sure the same corporate colors were used in all communication, the logos were correct and correctly placed, the aural elements of the brand were properly aligned and the like. All of this was internally focused, reflecting what the marketer wanted to deliver or hoped to deliver to audiences whoever and wherever they might be.

In short, integration was simple and often simplistic. No wonder the early critics of integration saw nothing new in the IMC concept. It was what skilled and practiced marketing communicators had been doing for years. It simply codified what many perceived to be ‘best practices’ or what should be best practices.

Most research on integration and IMC, given the focus on tactical alignment and integration, was on the ‘how to’ or ‘how it was being done’. Much of the early work focused on comparative studies of how agencies were doing integration or how clients were doing it or how advertising and public relations agencies could work together to make integration *happen* or make that happening easier. It was primarily reporting the ‘how’ rather than the underlying ‘what’. Unfortunately, in too many instances the focus on application research is still true.

Enter new technology

In the mid-1990s, new technologies burst on the scene in the forms of the Internet and the World Wide Web, all driven by advances in digital technology. Along with digitalization came a large number of ancillary communication devices, products and services. First, we saw fax machines and computers, then cell phones, then iPods and Blackberries and now social networks such as YouTube, Facebook, MySpace and the like. These new tools essentially offer consumers new ways to communicate with each other, and, increasingly gave them ways to talk back to the marketers who were trying to influence their purchases. Consumers were no longer passive receivers of messages sent by marketing organizations through traditional media forms: the former receivers suddenly became active communication generators.

The digital revolution was not just limited to communication devices. It enabled the capture and use of vast amounts of information in the form of customer databases which spawned Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and a host of allied fields, all designed to give marketers better insights into customers and prospects. Initially, marketers controlled most of these tools and techniques, which enabled them to better target their messages. But, today, increasingly, consumers are employing what is now being called VRM or Vendor Relationship Management, which simply means consumers now have access to and are beginning to use technology in much the same way marketers used it in the past – to identify, evaluate and build relationships with the suppliers they have identified as being the most relevant and practical for their needs. Thus, we have seen digital technology come full circle, from usage primarily by consumers to usage by marketers and now back to consumers.

Uneven development

One of the major challenges of integration and the development of IMC is that the technology and the capabilities in digital technology development have not expanded or developed evenly around the world. And, what is most interesting is that some of the emerging countries such as China, India, Brazil and others are much more advanced in digital technology than are those areas and markets that typically have been considered 'more developed nations' such as the USA, UK and western Europe. The model was simple. If you don't have telephone lines, you build cell phone towers. Thus, many of the newly developing countries have jumped from very limited communication systems to the most sophisticated in the world and all in incredibly short time frames. For example, China and India now dominate global cell phone usage.

Consumers have accepted and embraced this leap into the future. Thus, countries that would once have been considered 'poor relations' such as South Africa, Chile and Finland are leading the way in digital communication and mobile development. Many of the developed countries are struggling in trying to integrate the Internet and online with the established old line, traditional media. Thus, we see widely varying levels of integration across the globe. Most of these cannot be explained in any other way than communicators struggling mightily, trying to make some sense out of systems that didn't even exist as recently as 10 years ago.

That in part, we argue, is why research and understanding of integration and integrated marketing communication have developed so unevenly around the globe. The issues faced in integrating offline and online communication, such as what the USA, Canada and Australia are trying to do are radically different from those that are focused primarily on digital, built on telecommunication backbones where traditional research applications are often irrelevant. Those emerging markets such as China, Korea and Singapore have the most experience with these new media forms. At the same time, in developed markets, practitioners and academics alike are trying to deal with the slowly emerging digital and interactive systems while trying to rid themselves of historical and traditional media concepts and approaches based on mass marketing from the 'good old days'. It is this traditional, mass media delivered, outbound or 'push' system in which almost all marketers have been trained, colliding with the new, inbound and customer-controlled systems of web search, new media and instant, electronic word-of-mouth. These we term the 'pull' systems that are just developing.

Integration and the issues of developing integrated marketing communication programs simply are not the same in these two systems. And, it is certainly not the same when one tries to combine traditional 'push' with the new inbound 'pull' communication programs. Questions arise such as: should the focus be on traditional 'push' or the newly emerging 'pull' or a combination of the two? That is one of the major challenges of academics who are trying to build a theory base for IMC while it is still developing, and not always with the same speed or in the same ways around the world.

Developing a concept for this special issue

When we look at the IMC evolution, we see a maturity pattern similar to that of other marketing management frameworks. For example, when Peter Drucker wrote about the marketing concept in 1954, he was reacting to environmental changes that were making the product orientation increasingly irrelevant. Many academic concepts evolve in a more-or-less predictable way as shown in Figure 1. This figure traces the evolution of

thinking and research in IMC, from the environmental monitoring (Step 1) to the observations and initial concepts (Steps 2 and 3) resulting from the environmental monitoring (articulated in the Schultz et al. 1993 book), to attempts to define IMC (Step 4). Much of the early IMC research focused on specifying the processes within IMC management and identifying obstacles to IMC implementation (Step 5). Over time, the call for measuring IMC outcomes (Step 6) was seen as the key to more widespread adoption and adaptation of the IMC framework. Today, we see several issues (Step 7) that we believe will frame the next steps in the development of IMC. These issues as well as a revisiting of selective initial concepts and definitions form much of the content of this special issue.

Historically and traditionally, special issues of academic journals such as the *Journal of Marketing Communications* rely on the permanent editors and the selected special editors to identify the general areas in which papers are sought, evaluated and published. The special issue editors commonly have certain specific areas they believe would make relevant contributions to the field. These are then used to encourage submissions in the call for papers. The topic areas are thus identified, the call is issued and then the editors sit back, hoping to receive relevant and pertinent papers on the topics they have identified. Sometimes they do. Often times they don't. Authors sometimes stretch existing papers to fit the call and other times, authors have different ideas about what is needed in the particular topic area. Thus, editors occasionally have an abundance of qualified papers from which to choose and sometimes they scramble to fill the issue. It was this 'hit or miss' call method, where the actual content is not under the direction of the special editors, but under the control of the submitting authors we sought to avoid in developing this special issue on IMC.

The two of us have long and varied experience in IMC and from many different perspectives. Both of us have been there since the beginning. Both of us have worked extensively in markets other than the US and UK. Thus, we felt we knew the major topic areas that should be included. We also had an idea of who the most capable authors might

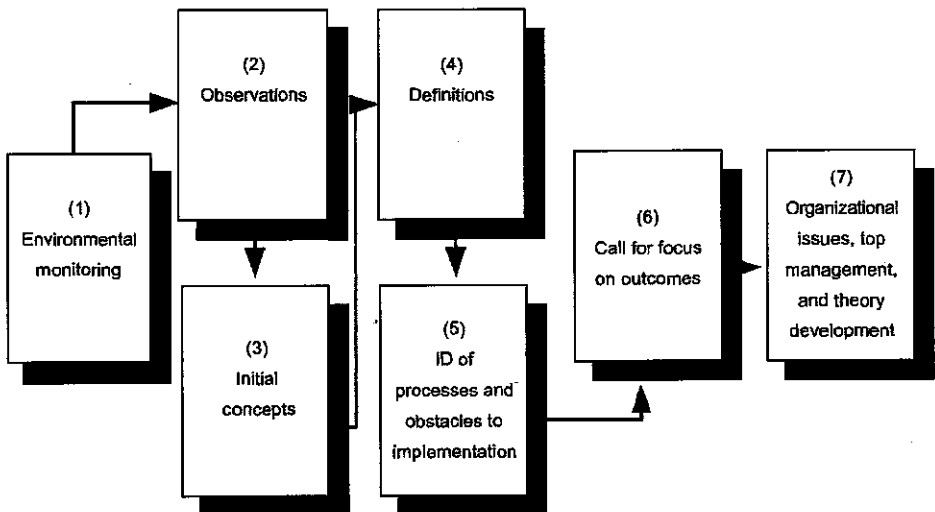


Figure 1. Development of IMC.

be. But, in spite of our own expertise, we started this special issue in the same way one might start the development of a research paper, with a literature review.

We started with what we hoped would be a global literature review of IMC. We were limited unfortunately since we both speak only English. Thus, while we tried to look at other contributions in other journals in other languages, we will confess what we did was a very English-language-centric review.

One thing we did do was to look far beyond what had been published in the mainstream journals. We reviewed conference proceedings, both academic and practitioner. We tried to identify the major topics that have not yet been resolved in IMC research and theory development. We tried to determine more on where the field was going rather than on where it had been. This review led us to a broad range of topics, from a broad array of authors. From this literature review, we began to identify IMC topic areas that we felt had not been adequately covered in the literature and even some that had not even been addressed but we felt were critical to on-going success. Clearly, an acceptable, or at least well-accepted, definition of IMC has not yet been developed. Nor, has the measurement of IMC programs or the relationship between brands and IMC been clearly articulated. All of these were considered. Figure 2 illustrates what we saw as the topics that most needed additional development to build the on-going maturity of IMC theory, research and practice.

We were helped considerably in this review process by two new areas of emerging IMC research. Those are: (a) how IMC is being taught in colleges and universities around the world; and (b) the resources used in those courses (i.e. books, articles and other learning materials). Three papers, one currently in press, were very helpful. In 2004, Kerr,

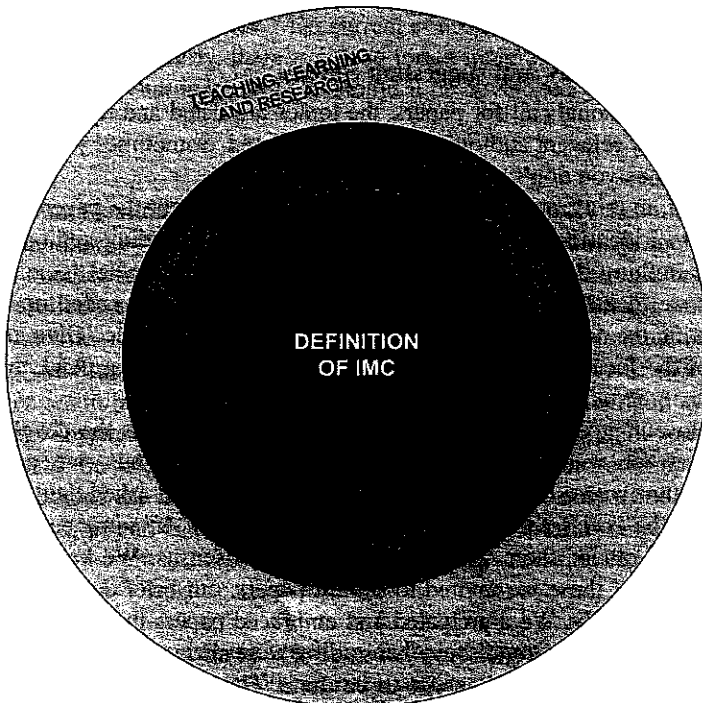


Figure 2. IMC topics for development.

Patti, and Chien conducted a syllabi review of the teaching of IMC in Australia and New Zealand. That paper was published in the *Proceedings, Australia and New Zealand Marketing Academy Conference* and provided a base level of what IMC really meant to the academic community in that geography.

Spinning off that initial study in Asia-Pacific, Schultz, Kerr, Patti, and Kim (2007) expanded the teaching universe to include 17 countries. They too used the course syllabus as the basis for understanding what academicians believed constituted IMC. That study was based on the title and location of the course, that is, in what school or department it was located, the texts instructors selected, the course title and, from the syllabi, the specific topics which were to be covered. This gave us a very clear view of what the academic community believes are currently the key elements in IMC, particularly since professors tend to teach what they think is important as evidenced by their classroom topics and lectures.

A third study that used much of the same syllabi review approach was used for guidance. That paper, 'An inside-out approach to integrated marketing communication: An international analysis' (Kerr, Waller, and Patti 2009) will be published by the *International Journal of Advertising* in 2009. The authors used the syllabi analysis approach to identify the key issues of IMC and how they thought those concepts and approaches could or might lead to the development of a more comprehensive theory base.

All this provided the fodder for the topics we thought should be included in any type of special issue on IMC for the *Journal of Marketing Communications*. We then shared our topic areas with Philip Kitchen, Editor, and Patrick De Pelsmacker, former Deputy Editor. Both these professors have wide and extensive experience in researching, writing and teaching IMC. Thus, we felt we were on solid ground with the topics. Next came the issue of how to generate papers in the areas we selected.

Finding the right authors and suggesting content

As before, in a traditional call for papers, the topics are listed and the editors hope there will be response by relevant authors in the areas selected. Sometimes you get a hit or lots of hits. Other times you don't.

We decided, in this case, we wanted to make certain we got the papers we wanted in the areas we had identified. We did that by identifying the leading author or thinker in that area and inviting that person to develop a paper for the special issue. Fortunately, every author we identified agreed to participate. So, the process ended up being rather simple. Identify the topic. Find the relevant author for the topic. Give them a brief description of the focus of the article we hoped they would develop. And, then, let them go to work.

Inherent in our process of topic and author identification was the development of a précis of what we wanted each invited author to cover. Thus, we provided each prospective author with a brief overview of the topic areas and asked them to respond in their papers to the issues and questions in these overviews. In some cases, the authors agreed totally. In others, there was negotiation and consensus. We knew all along that given the insights of those we invited to submit papers, our brief descriptions would be taken as guidelines only. We anticipated and embraced papers that expressed ideas that went beyond our suggestions and some that said we were asking for the wrong thing. In the end, there was consensus on what was to be done. Thus, we, the editors, got what we wanted and the authors got what they wanted – a win-win situation in terms of editorial content. Below is a summary of the overviews we provided to prospective authors.

Overview of suggested content for invited papers

Definition

The definition of IMC continues to challenge development and implementation of the concept. Many have argued that IMC lacks a theory base, but, until we can define what we mean by IMC, both academically and professionally, it is difficult to develop theory or even theoretical underpinnings. Today, given the changes in the communication systems and the marketplace, this definition issue becomes even more important. As consumers increasingly gain control of the systems, what does that mean for integration and an integrated approach? In this paper, we would like the author to address the issues of developing a relevant and useful definition of IMC in today's marketplace, citing the reasons for the difficulty and suggesting how a definition might be developed. If the author wants to provide a definition for discussion and consensus, that would be an added benefit.

Brands and branding

Branding has become one of the key elements of marketing in the post-modern world. Yet, there is little agreement on how brands and branding can, should or will be developed in an interactive marketplace. Our historical approaches to brands and branding place heavy emphasis on advertising and promotion. That methodology seems questionable today, and perhaps even inadequate, in a 'push-pull' marketplace where customers have access to massive amounts of information about the brand, the company, its products and in which social networks have, in some cases, replaced brand networks. In this paper, we would like the author to discuss how brands can and should be developed, maintained and expanded in today's marketplace. What do we know about brands and branding in an interactive marketplace? What do we not know? Do current concepts and approaches still work and are they still workable? Clearly, there is a need for an integrated and aligned approach to brands and branding. What is it and how should it be developed going forward?

Measurement

Marketing communication planning and results have historically been measured on a function or a medium-by-medium basis – one measure for advertising, another for public relations, yet another for sales promotion and so on. The new electronic communication systems have fallen into the same trap, one measure for web, another for word-of-mouth, another for mobile. Yet, consumers seem to use all these communication systems concurrently, simultaneously and one would assume, synergistically. If this is true, what are the challenges in measuring the impact and effect of these integrated systems? How should synergy between communication forms be considered and measured? What measures should be used, that is, attitudinal shifts, financial returns, long-term or short-term? We hope the author of this paper will address not only these issues but also provide some insights and directions into how measurement solutions might be developed.

Media

Media, media proliferation and the resulting audience fragmentation seem to typify the twenty-first-century marketplace. Where once media was the backwater of marketing communication, it now has become the primary concern. The explosion of new media forms is only part of the challenge. Media planning, media buying and media development

have all become legitimate fields of endeavor with some now arguing for a return to the combined media/creative agency. How should or will media and media planning and buying develop in the 'push-pull' marketplace? Who does it – specialists, generalists, clients, agencies or others? What impact have the new media forms had on traditional media planning? Is there a common thread that permeates all forms of media that can be used by planners to develop truly integrated marketing communication programs? The author of this section has a plethora of challenges to address and hopefully some recommendations or suggestions on how media can take its rightful place as one of the key elements in the integrated marketplace.

Marketing theory

Traditional marketing theory grew out of a manufacturing concept, primarily focused on consumer package goods. The primary marketers of the twentieth century manufactured products and then found ways to distribute and then promote them in the marketplace. That is the basis for the 4Ps concept, which has dominated marketing thinking for the past 60 years. Yet, today, services or service-driven organizations dominate the marketplace. Many of the issues services-dominated organizations face are unlike those of the manufacturer, where integration of product and support services provides the base for 'solution-selling'. In this emerging interactive marketplace, how should marketing theory be adapted, adjusted or revised? The author of this section should address the issues that an integrated system imposes on marketing thought and practice. Are current marketing frameworks and their underlying theory still relevant? If they are, should they be adapted or adjusted to accommodate a marketplace where the customer is rapidly gaining control? Or, do we need to totally re-think the concept of marketing? These are challenging issues that need a coherent viewpoint stemming from an integrated approach.

Emerging markets

IMC was developed for and in a very highly sophisticated marketing system. It assumes a number of marketing variables, that is, established distribution channels, stable and extensive financial systems, competition, yet with semi-controlled competitors and so on. In the emerging markets that are so critical today, many of these assumed systems and processes either do not exist or are only in the developmental stage. How does IMC relate to and develop in these emerging new markets? Are the existing methodologies and processes appropriate for these markets or do they need to be adapted and/or adjusted? The author of this paper should address how IMC can be used in emerging markets and what needs to be adapted or adjusted to make the concept more relevant.

Culture

IMC was developed in and for western markets which all focus on western thought patterns, that is, research, analysis, segmentation and categorization. Thus, the IMC concept is culturally based and most likely culturally biased as well. IMC assumes that the market elements are separate and unique from products that are separate from customers who are also separate from media. Yet, in many markets, holistic systems are the norm, not the exception. What role does culture play in the development and implementation of an integrated marketing communication approach in these emerging markets? Can IMC develop in the same way and at the same speed in culturally different markets? The author

of this paper should identify the challenges inherent in the culture of the market and how it can impact the development of IMC in these often radically different markets. Ideally, the paper will suggest methods and approaches that might be used to make IMC more culturally relevant in markets around the world.

Teaching/learning

The primary disciplines of marketing communication such as advertising, public relations, direct, sales promotion and the like have developed separately and independently. Indeed, for the most part, our teaching and training has been activity-based – that is, how to develop advertising campaigns, how to prepare sales promotion programs, etc. Courses and entire curricula have been developed along those lines and faculty and students have pursued these programs to their ultimate end – a degree, diploma, certificate or other official recognition. Yet, IMC is most likely a form of the generalist-genre. How can we combine, coordinate, align and integrate all marketing communication activities? The author of this paper should address the issues of integration in the classroom and in the research cubicle. How should curricula develop? What methodologies should be employed to assure student understanding and professional practice? How should we teach IMC in the current and future marketplace and what should students be expected to learn? This is critically important to the future of IMC as future leaders need a firm foundation in the concept and some practical applications in performance.

As you will see in this special issue, most of those topics are addressed. But, not all. Quite honestly, we did not find some authors who could or would address some of these issues. So, we had eight topic areas and we believe we have more than adequately covered at least six of them in this issue. Thus, while we did not get all the papers we wanted, we believe those papers included cover all or most of the topics we initially identified.

International view

Because we sought the best minds in the world to develop papers for this special issue, you'll find a rather broad international view. You'll find senior professors who have spent years on the subject and others who are clearly the stars of tomorrow. Most of all, you'll find authors who are committed to IMC, not just as a sideline, but as the major focus of their research, writing and teaching. In short, we don't believe this assemblage of IMC authors has been, or could be, duplicated in any other publication, anywhere else. This is truly, 'one of a kind', and for that we are grateful to the authors who gave up their time to help us move IMC thinking forward.

Paper development process and the future

The process we used to develop this special issue was lengthy and sometimes convoluted. It required a great deal of up-front work by the editors, both special issue and permanent. It required the authors to write within a framework provided in the topic overviews. And, it required a tacit agreement by the authors that, even though their paper had been invited, they would still undergo peer review just like any other paper developed for the journal. So, the papers you will see have been vetted in the academic community. For some, the paper you see in this issue is the third revision. As a result, we think you will agree that these are some of the best, most insightful and relevant papers yet published on IMC.

As we go forward with the development of IMC, we hope you find this collection of papers helpful to you for their commentary on what we see as the key issues, as stimulation for future thinking and research and as material that will stimulate IMC students to become engaged, motivated IMC professionals. We're proud of what the authors in this issue have developed and we're pleased we had a chance to encourage them to provide their insights and wisdom to the rest of the IMC community.

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