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THE ROLE OF INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATION (IMC) IN CREATING AND MAINTAINING BRAND EQUITY

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of IT has contributed to the regulation of the market, increased segmentation of consumer tastes and preferences, and individualized patterns of consumption. Marketers use various communication tools to draw attention and increase the awareness of customers. The path to reach the target audience has changed. From the traditional means of communication like print, radio, and television the marketers have adopted other modes of Communication like Facebook, blogs, YouTube, Twitter, websites, and many more to fill the gap between the product and the target audience. Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) is a strategic tool that firms use to realize their brand communication goals. The paper focuses on the benefits and role of IMC in maintaining brand equity. It is the firms marketing communication that contributes to brand equity. Brand equity is the result of the firms marketing communications which creates brand awareness and a positive brand image leading to brand knowledge.

Keywords: *IMC, IT, Marketer, Communication, Brand Image.*

Introduction

The Marketing concept evolved from transactional and functional approaches to the current focus on relationship marketing. Earlier communication focused on persuasion which was a transactional marketing approach to inform persuade and remind the customers the relational approach to communication is much wider as it goes to persuade the consumers and the stakeholders to inform them and respond to their needs which leads to increasing the organizational brand value. In 1964 McCarthy simplified Borden's marketing mix by reducing the initial 12 elements to 4 variables commonly known as '4P's Model'. Marketers now are focused on building long-term relationships and improving their resources and competencies to create and sustain customer value, rather than focusing on transactions and products. The emergence of IT has contributed to the regulation of the market, increased segmentation of consumer tastes and preferences, and individualized patterns of consumption.

Dunkan and Moriarty (1998,1967) observed that especially in the service sector communication represents the central element of marketing activities. It is the very core of all the company functions. Planned, developed, and implemented marketing programs should be approached differently, according to Schultz and Schultz. Marketers use various communication tools to draw attention and increase the awareness of customers.

With a change in consumers' buying behavior in the era of artificial intelligence and multiple communication channels, there is a dire need to create a powerful communication tool that integrates the various channels of a firm to deliver a clear, consistent, memorable, and compelling message about the product. (Yurdakul, E., & Bozdağ, A. 2018). In the current technological turbulence, integration is becoming more and more important.

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The customer integrates all the messages that it receives from the organization regarding a product or a service. If the organization has transmitted uncoordinated, unorganized messages the customers will aggregate and integrate those according to some pattern. sometimes it so happens that the messages are not interpreted as required which ultimately harms the organization and its brand value. As a result, the company must be able to manage the process according to its interest and communicate the company's strategic goal to consumers to its interest and the strategic purpose it wants to convey to the consumers. The term marketing mix was first coined by Neil Borden of Harvard Business School in 1948. Schultz, Tannenbaum, and Lauterborn presented the idea of IMC in 1993 and suggested that it is time to abandon McCarthy's 4Ps and replace them with the 4Cs: consumer, cost, convenience, and communication. Later on, Duncan and Moriarty proposed a ‘Communication-Based Relationship Marketing’ model which focused on communication rather than persuasion. Professional development in marketing and advertisement has contributed to the creation of marketing communication.

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Integrated Marketing Communication

The American Association of Advertising Agencies defines IMC as "a concept that recognizes the added value of a comprehensive plan that evaluates the strategic roles of a variety of communication disciplines, and combines these disciplines to provide clarity, consistency, and maximum communication impact". Integrated marketing communication is defined by Jones & Schee, (2008) as a combination of direct marketing, general advertising, sales promotion, and public relations. Organizations consider IMC to be a key competitive advantage associated with marketing (Kitchen and Schultz, 2001; Weilbacher, 2001). IMC sends a consistent message about the brand(Sandra, Nancy, William BOOK 2018)**.**

IMC is a strategic tool that firms use to realize their brand communication goals. IMC strategy is 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 according to Schultz (2004a). According to American Marketing Association (AMA; 2017), IMC is 'a planning process designed to assure that all brand contacts received by a customer or prospect for a product, service, or organization are relevant to that person and consistent over time.

According to Kotler and Armstrong (2016) IMC 'involves carefully integrating and coordinating the company's many communication channels to deliver a clear, consistent, and compelling message about the organization and its products. It combines, integrates, and synergizes the various elements of the communication mix, and strengthens the one which is used to offset the weakness of others. The organizations are integrating their communication functions under one umbrella, IMC (Hackley and Kitchen, 1998; Smith, 2002). The relationship between publicity and advertising is mutually beneficial and creates a greater impact (Smith,2002). Shimp asserts that IMC can be defined in a variety of ways, but each definition suggests five significant features- influences behavior through direct communication, should start with the customer or prospect, then work backward to the brand communicator, using all forms of communication and all contacts sources to deliver messages, effective marketing communication which must build a relationship between a brand and its customers and cohesive brand image.

Rodríguez conceptualized IMC as:

An approach that involves a new way of conceiving and carrying out communication with the market, which requires effective coordination of the different marketing communication tools […] with the rest of the activities in the company that also influence the image that customers perceive about the organizational product or brand.

Duncan and Everett defined IMC as the coordinated use of all messages and media by an organization to influence its perceived value. According to Pickton and Broderick, an IMC is a management process that involves coordinating the efforts of all agents in analyzing, planning, implementing, and controlling marketing communication contacts, media, messages, and promotional tools focused on selected target audiences in such way as to derive the greatest economy, efficiency, effectiveness, enhancement and coherence of marketing communications effort in achieving predetermined product and corporate marketing communications objectives.

Integrated marketing communications (IMC) encompasses the management, organization, and control of all marketing communications focused on target audiences to achieve corporate marketing communications objectives. In IMC the messages to be conveyed to the target audiences through various communication channels should be mutually consistent. If more than one creative treatment - for example, a message or image - is used for integrated marketing communications, they should be consistent with one another. At every point where a stakeholder comes into contact with a company, an integrated communications program addresses all types of messages the company sends." (Moriarty 1994).

IMC is a way to view the whole marketing process through the eyes of the customer (Kotler 2003).

Benefits of Integrated Marketing Communications

Synergy is the principal advantage derived from marketing communications integration. The 2 + 2 = 5 phenomenon has been described as synergy. Various facets of marketing communication put together result in a synergy resulting in the 'whole' being more than the sum of its parts. The use of images and messages in television advertisements often extends to poster and magazine advertisements and point-of-sale displays, packaging, sales promotion, merchandise, and other promotional activities. Consistently, each element enhances and supports the others (David Pickton &Amanda Broderick). Due to the impact of information technology, changes took place in the fields of marketing and marketing communications, which led to the emergence of IMC. (Kitchenet al., 2004a; Phelpsand Johnson, 1996; Duncan and Everett, 1993)

Linton and Morley (1995) have suggested ten potential benefits of integrated marketing communications- creative integrity, operational efficiency, consistent messages, cost savings, unbiased marketing recommendations, high-caliber consistent service, better use of media, easier working relations, greater marketing precision, and greater agency accountability. Few of them are difficult to implement.

Generally, managers perceive IMC as a process that facilitates message integration and consistency, thereby facilitating the interpretation of customer information. In an IMC approach, the customer will understand the different information and not feel overwhelmed by the abundance of information. (McGrath, 2005; Stewart, 1996; Duncan and Everett, 1993)

The companies use the information held by retailers and other intermediaries to develop customer-oriented messages. The database records demographic along with the psychographic details of the customers identifying the loyal and the profitable customers. It helps to understand customers buying behavior, habit, and attitude to gain more loyalty.

Most organizations need to communicate with multiple target audiences or stakeholder groups, so campaigns should take both the brand of the product and the brand of the company into account. (Gyllingand Lindberg-Repo, 2006; Phelps and Johnson,1996; Nowak and Phelps, 1994).

Messages are delivered through different contact points, so an integrated marketing approach improves customer understanding. customers. On the other hand, messages that are not delivered in harmony negatively influence consumer purchases and recalls. According to Schultz, if a company employs a "communication czar", its reputation will be strengthened and customer and stakeholder loyalty will increase. The marketer needs to recognize more than one promotional tools to reach out to its different customer groups.

To develop customer segments using databases, the marketers of the twenty-first century should go beyond the usual marketing concepts such as the 4Ps (Johnson and Schultz, 2004; Schultz and Schultz, 2003; Hutton, 1996). The informed customers and the quest for more knowledge will be a competitive advantage for the company to interact with the customers.

According to Fill 2002, the marketer needs to adopt IMC. The first step in IMC focuses on promotional activities. In this, the marketer needs to ensure that there is consistency and thematic harmonization among the various promotional tools which are employed by the company. The next step is to bring about a functional coordination manga different parts of the organization purchase human resources finance corporate communication and so on. An IMC approach, therefore, requires a cultural shift in values and beliefs, which must come from within the organization for employees to act in a customer-centric and customer-driven manner. The findings of the study correspond with those of Kitchen and Schultz (2001): conducting market research to understand the customers in a better way; understanding individual customers' perception, motivation, and behavior; customer-centric approach; Ensuring that the chief customer officer/chief executive officer is responsible for maximizing customer value.

The 4Es and 4Cs of Integrated Marketing Communications

Integration is not easy to achieve but when it is achieved, the 4Es and 4Cs of IMC create the synergistic benefits of integration. The 4 Es of IMC-(a)Enhancing – improve; augment; intensify, (b)Economical – least cost in the use of financial and other resources; not wasteful, © Efficient – doing things right; competent; not wasteful, (d) Effective – doing the right things; producing the outcome required; not wasteful. The 4Cs of integrated marketing communications are: (a) Coherence – logically connected; firmly stuck together, (b) Consistency – not self-contradictory; in agreement, harmony, accord, (c) Continuity –consistent communication through time, (d) Complementary – synergistic, or the sum of the parts is greater than the whole

Role of IMC in Creating and Maintaining Brand Equity

IMC's crucial role is to convey a consistent message to customers through the effective use of promotional resources and by building long-term sustainable relationships. Vargo and Lusch (2004) suggested that IMC should replace diverse, limited-focus promotional tools. It should be used for initiating and maintaining a continuing dialogue with the customers and enhancing relationships for brand management. Marketing communication is the voice of a brand and it is through this that the companies can communicate with the customers concerning their product offerings. It is the firms marketing communication that contributes to brand equity. Thus, enabling the formation of brand awareness and a positive brand image (Keller,2001,2003). IMC enhances the firm's brand portfolio and positively influences brand equity.

Brand equity is the result of the firms marketing communications which creates brand awareness and a positive brand image leading to brand knowledge and in turn resulting in differentiated responses constituting brand equity (Keller,2003). IMC is a strategic business process that contributes to building brand value (Schultz, 2004).

Keller conceptualizes brand equity as "the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand" (1993, p. 2). According to him, high levels of brand knowledge increase the probability of brand choice. Brand knowledge is the awareness and image of a brand. Brand awareness is reflected in consumers' ability to identify the brand based on their memory. Keller defines brand image as "perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory" (1993, p.3).

When managers conceptualize brand equity from the consumer's point of view, they are better able to assess how their marketing program improves the value of their brands. The ultimate goal of most marketing programs is to increase sales, but first, it is necessary to build brand knowledge so that consumers respond positively to marketing initiatives (Keller, K.L.,1993). Integrated marketing communication is described in terms of "contacts". A contact is anything that gives a customer or prospect information about the brand, such as word of mouth or experience using the product. It is through this "contact", customers can influence a firm's brand equity. Several sources of competitive advantage have been identified as being tied to brand equity (Aaker 1991; Bharadwaj, Varadarajan, and Fahy 1993; Keller 1998). Connecting a company's efforts with its customers' positive reactions is the role of marketing communications (Duncan and Moriarty,1998 Duncan,2002). The first step to building a strong brand is to establish and maintain a brand identity (Aaker 1996; Keller 2003).

It is difficult to match the brand image with the brand identity as the communication system is very complex. Brand identity establishes a relationship between the brand and the customer through value proposition (Aaker 1996). The next step following the creation of a brand identity is explained by De Chernatony (1999). In his view, an organization should consider the suitability of the intended positioning against the brand's identity. IMC enhances brand equity which is the outcome of a well-defined and operationalized brand identity. Therefore, the firms should focus on defining and developing brand identity. Brand identity needs to be effectively communicated to individuals. The Feedback from customers and prospects will further help the brand owners to define and redefine their IMC strategy.

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