

# **Integrated Marketing Communication: What are the barriers to integration?**

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## **Abstract**

It is generally accepted within mainstream marketing circles that integrated marketing communication (IMC) is a desired state within organisations. This is despite the fact that, as in many areas of marketing discourse, there is still no clear accepted definition of IMC. In recent years, some scholars have argued, rather controversially, that in this post-modern world, integration of marketing communication is impossible (Christensen, Torp & Firat 2005). This paper, through a case study of a major Australian health care organisation, reviews the struggles to integrate communications, not just in a narrow marketing sense, but across the organisation. This paper offers new insights into the reality of implementing communication programmes in complex organisations and highlights the key barriers to integration of marketing communications faced by organisations.

## **Introduction**

Current marketing philosophy views Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) as imperative for organisational success (Chitty, Barker & Shimp 2005) and it has been trumpeted as *the* major communications development of recent times (Kitchen & Schultz 2003). Indeed, across universities, courses now teach integrated marketing communication as part of a Marketing Degree. However, as in many areas of marketing, just defining the process is difficult as there are many disparate definitions of IMC. According to Varey, (2002)

IMC is the strategic analysis, selection, execution, evaluation and control of all communicative actions that can effectively and efficiently enable and facilitate productive exchanges in the provider's stakeholder relationship network.

IMC is generally seen as requiring co-operation across all disciplines within the marketing field, including advertising, sales promotion, personal selling and publicity (Chitty, Barker & Shimp 2005). However, others argue that IMC is only the "tip of the integration iceberg" and what is needed is a total re-integration of marketing (Duncan & Moriarty 1997). Arguing for "Integrated Marketing", Duncan and Moriarty (1997) suggest that integrating the marketing communication function is futile if contrary, more powerful messages are being sent by other actions of a company. And while this cross-functionality may seem difficult enough, the reality for most organisations is that integration does have to move beyond the confines of marketing to include other areas of organisational life in order for major corporate objectives to be achieved.

One area which has gained attention as a particularly challenging but necessary nexus for integration is using marketing techniques to attract potential staff. This paper will use a case study approach to look at the reality of integration during a specific IMC campaign targeted at attracting more nursing staff for a large hospital, and suggest that while IMC is desired, its

implementation is often more complex and tenuous than some mainstream marketing scholars may have led us to believe.

### **Using IMC to brand corporations**

In recent years the concept of applying marketing techniques to the corporation has become more widespread with related notions of stakeholder relationship management (Murphy et al. 2005), employer branding (Ambler & Barrow 1996; Barrow & Mosley 2005; Davies 2008; Gunasekara 2002; Hogan 2002; Kimpakorn & Dimmitt 2007; Lievens 2007; Moroko & Uncles 2005; Sprague 2004; Willock 2005) and corporate branding (Balmer & Gray 2003; Harris & de Chernatony 2001; Ind 1997; Roper & Davies 2007) gaining currency. The corporation increasingly has to manage itself – for all its stakeholders - as a brand (Olins 2002). Promoting the corporate brand to attract workers is seen as particularly important by managers, with the well-reported shortage of skilled workers. In Australia, the proportion of those aged 65 and over increased from 12.6 per cent in 2001 to 13.3 per cent in 2006 and it is projected that it will double to 25 per cent by 2047 (Costello 2007). Projected population data shows that the next decade will experience a shrinking of the working population and if the low unemployment rate stays at its current level - 4.3 per cent in June 2007 (Australian Bureau of Statistics), there will certainly be a lack in supply of a suitable workforce. The need for companies to differentiate themselves in the employer marketplace is becoming critical (Hogan 2002).

Corporate branding can clearly be seen as a cross-functional process ranging across public relations/communication management; marketing (Adamson 2004; Simms 2003), advertising (Berthon, Ewing & Li 2005), human resources management (Brandon 2005; Martin et al. 2004), general management and quality management. Therefore the process of can be viewed as an ideal area for study into the reality of IMC and integration generally for organisations. The convergence of the issues of identity, reputation and the corporate brand is seen a crisis in strategy (Schultz, Hatch & Holten Larsen 2002) but also an opportunity.

While mainstream marketers have long championed the IMC cause, a perhaps more “offbeat” approach to integration has arisen in recent times, which acknowledges the need for the handling of difference and variety within the context of an integrated communications project (Christensen, Firat & Torp 2008). These authors noted that beyond a general call for horizontal co-ordination, the nature of such processes is rarely specified in the literature (Christensen, Firat & Torp 2008). Indeed it has been argued that in the post-modern world, IMC may be impossible (Christensen, Torp & Firat 2005). Given the apparent lack of literature which looks specifically at barriers faced by organisations on the road to IMC, this paper proposes the following research question: What are key barriers to successful integrated marketing communication?

### **Methodology**

As has been discussed, many scholars advocate integrated marketing communication. However, few studies have looked in-depth at the process and practice of integrated marketing communication within organisations. This exploratory study sought to go behind the walls of an organisation to determine the key barriers to successful IMC, using a single case study approach, within a large, for-profit private hospital in Australia. The case study

incorporated mainly qualitative data from in-depth interviews and focus groups with nursing employees, managers and directors at different hierarchical and experiential levels within the organisation and prospective nursing employees outside the organisation.

“The purpose of case study research is usually systematic and holistic, to give a full and rich account of a network of relationships between a host of events and factors (Gummesson 2003, p. 488).” In line with Gummesson’s (2003) definition of a case study, certainly this paper does not look at isolated variables but wants to look at the interplay of factors within an organisation through the different hierarchies. The case study under consideration in this study is *instrumental* (Stake 2000) in that it provides insight into integrated marketing communication and also attempts to make generalisations associated with IMC. The complexity of the IMC process has been discussed. It has been noted that IMC is a cross-functional process that goes across many academic and practitioner disciplines, requiring integration, and therefore a survey may not capture the richness and nuances of information that a qualitative-based case study has the potential to capture.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

Within this case study, the challenges that IMC represents for an organisation were certainly evident in interviews with key staff involved with the process, particularly the human resources manager and marketing and public relations manager. In fact, from the interviews conducted, it could be said that barriers to IMC existed because of misunderstandings between professional groups.

In speaking with the marketing and public relations manager it was clear there was a real desire to be “strategic” and integrated. However, this was impeded by the reality and frustrations of working across departments and the sheer size of the workload requirements, particularly with the then recent acquisition of new hospitals by the parent company. The marketing and public relations manager (MPR Manager) certainly was aware of the importance of her spending time and money on corporate branding to recruit staff, using IMC, because of the serious situation of not being able to appropriately staff or even keep wards open due to the skills shortage.

So how important is it [using the marketing budget to attract more nurses]? I have said to [the Executive Director] I don’t want to spend time on this, don’t get me wrong, but I don’t want to lose my job because we couldn’t fill wards either– so he said, okay if it’s that serious, yeah sure...

So for me it’s not hard to put together as long as I don’t have to run the whole thing – it’s bringing everybody together saying to people I don’t care what’s happened in the past or why you have this rift going on here – that’s not what you’re here to do you’re here to find a way to work together and work on one thing not on a 100 things for two months of the year. (MPR Manager)

The human resources manager also made mention of the challenges involved. When discussing the decision to use a non-nursing person to call up potential nursing recruits from a recruitment expo, she made a point that “nursing people are not good at marketing”.

*So that was the reason?* [ie, not to use a nurse to make the calls]

They're useless at it and they don't want to cold call and they don't want to...the fact that recruitment is across marketing, it's across HR, it's across training and development. It's caused me a lot of headaches and a lot of fights...I guess probably the grad programme is run by [the Director of Clinical Services] so it is very much her territory. (HR Manager)

The "territorial feuds" were certainly mentioned by both the HR manager and the marketing and public relations manager but were not commented on by the directors in the organisation, who perhaps felt they had more power and were not responsible for the hands-on implementation of employer branding policies.

The HR manager felt that relationship marketing to recruits was one of the case hospital's real points of difference and would help the organisation in its fight for talent. The HR manager said that she had fought to make this change to the recruitment process and had instituted follow-up calls to anyone who had expressed an interest in a position. However, it was a struggle to have this innovation implemented "because of the various players – "it's like it's not my territory – it's in your territory".

There appears to be a clear cultural divide and lack of understanding between the professions of nursing on the one side and those charged with employer branding functions (HR and PR/Marketing) on the other. This was evident in comments from the manager in the key positions of HR and also the PR and Marketing Manager.

Well when you tell nurse managers you are going to be marketing, head hunting people, cold calling, and talking people into positions they think I am on another planet. (HR Manager)

The HR Manager acknowledged that the nursing profession perhaps felt uncomfortable with less traditional forms of recruitment but that it shouldn't stop the organisation from trying. For example, the HR Manager was considering teaming with or sponsoring a reproductive health education organisation at a "Sexpo" exhibition (because she had discovered through research that many young nurses actually visited this exhibition) as a way of cutting through the clutter of recruitment advertising. While recognising the conservatism of the health profession, the HR Manager seemed to have a tenacity which meant she would achieve her recruitment goals, despite conservative protests or considerations, because she thought the organisation would benefit. There was almost a feeling of "fighting the good fight". "We need to be that radical – Sexpo is one example – but we need to be that radical...Cold calling and head hunting..." In the opinion of the HR Manager, this approach contrasts with the attitude of nursing professionals who appear to prefer hospitals not to be too aggressive in their employer branding campaigns.

The attachments to different professions and challenges of working across departments have also been researched in the area of culture and health care. A recent multi-perspective study of healthcare professionals by Morgan and Ogbonna (2008) noted that respective loyalties of professional subcultures may be stronger than loyalty to the organisation and may impede lay managers' authority to influence practices. Their study looked at two large healthcare organisations in the UK and examined the differing views of doctors, nurses and "non-clinical" managers. They found that, in the context of professional organisations, complex, multiple cultural values are frequently hierarchical and are commonly interpreted differently, with differentiated, fragmented and collective meanings (Morgan & Ogbonna 2008). They

even found that within sub-cultures there was fragmentation. Gummesson (1991) echoes this point, pointing out that a company does not consist of one unified culture with variations arising in groups, professions, functions and countries. With a similar theme, in the disciplines of communications and marketing, the concept of integrated communication has been proposed as a way of avoiding contradictory messages and improving an organisation's "corporate story" (van Riel 2002).

The output of a wide range of communication specialists within organisations...does not always result in coherent communication messages. These various specialists are naturally inclined to consider their own departmental interests rather than the strategic interest of the total organisation (van Riel 2002, p. 163).

### **Conclusion**

While some mainstream marketers have prescribed integrated marketing communication as the cure-all for common marketing challenges, this paper has shown that the reality for many organisations is that integration must be attempted beyond the relatively narrow confines of marketing communication. For an interdisciplinary activity such as corporate branding, which clearly requires IMC, marketers must interact not only with human resources departments but also with other professions and senior organisational directors. The barriers to implementation of a successful IMC campaign identified in the research have included sub-cultures within organisations, territorial feuds, a lack of time and resources and the discomfort with marketing felt by traditional professions such as nursing.

This study also has found empirical evidence that Christensen, Firat and Torp's (Christensen, Firat & Torp 2008) proposal for "flexible integration" may be more achievable within organisations than the traditional notion of controlled IMC, simply because of the disparate voices and divisions that exist within and between organisational departments. Clearly this paper has limitations, given its case study approach. However, it is suggested that future research should attempt to really understand the complexities faced by organisations, rather than offering IMC platitudes.

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