

THE USE OF IMC CONCEPT BY ADVERTISING AGENCIES: RISE AND DECLINE

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents a conceptual analysis of the development of integrated marketing communication concept. It is argued that in the early 1990's advertising industry saw IMC as an opportunity to prove its value by offering an integrated approach to managing various communication functions under centralised managerial control. It was an attempt to consolidate the budgets by offering a "one-window" approach to outsourcing communication services. However, the approach faced certain difficulties in proving its value and the allure of the IMC paradigm for agencies declined. As a result, by the early 2010's the term was used more often to refer to in-house communication strategy rather than to describe agencies' service approach.

Keywords: IMC, integrated marketing, integrated communication, PR

INTRODUCTION

This paper endeavours to provide a hypothetical explanatory framework for answering the question that has for decades preoccupied the minds of those who think and write about the concept of integrated marketing communication (IMC). Paraphrasing Percy and Rossiter (2001), this question can be formulated as follows: "if IMC is such a valuable concept, then why there is such a large amount of evidence to suggest that truly integrated marketing communication is still the exception rather than the rule"?

As early as 1991, Schultz noted that "that nothing had received as much publicity and discussion at learned meetings, while seeing little real activity, as had the concept of IMC", and he also noticed that not much changed by 1997, when, according to his observations, "IMC still appeared to be in a pre-paradigm as opposed to a post-paradigm state" (Schultz & Kitchen, 1997). Despite the abundance of scholarly articles which dealt with theory building and identification of key issues within IMC paradigm, integration is still not the norm. Although most mainstream marketing texts and textbooks on marketing communication have generally adopted the IMC approach, its prevalence in practice is not as strong as it had been projected in the late 1990's (Schultz & Kitchen, 1997, 1999; McLaughlin, 1997; Schultz, 1999; Wood, 1997).

But why does it take so long for the industry to truly adopt IMC? This questions has been asked for at least twenty-five years, and despite a continuous flow of both academic and professional publications that highlight the growing need for more holistic thinking around IMC, messages consolidation and speaking with one voice, even as late as of 2017, P. J. Kitchen, one of the most vocal proponents of the IMC concept, notes that "the journey toward integration from a consumer or corporate perspective has scarcely begun".

To provide an answer to this question the paper examines the concept of integrated marketing communications from a particular angle: as a tool used by communication agencies in the 1990's-early 2000's to get a competitive advantage. We begin by reviewing the historical context of the communication industry in the second half of the XX century. In section two we briefly explain how PR entered the domain of marketing communications in the form of marketing PR, thus creating a challenge for advertising agencies. In the following section three we describe how advertising agencies responded to the emerging challenges by utilising the concept of IMC (which originated in academia) and explore the phenomenon of IMC from a theoretical perspective. We proceed to reviewing the concept and analysing various limitations which obstructed its development and wider implementation, focusing on indicating the barriers to further development of IMC within communication agencies, which eventually led to the concept going out of agencies' mainstream fashion. We then conclude by analysing the legacy of the concept of IMC on contemporary realities of communication industry, focusing in particular on its ongoing relevance for corporate communication practitioners and a rationale for its further development.

Historical context

Communication management – any type of communication activity undertaken by an organisation to inform, persuade or otherwise relate to individuals and groups in its outside environment — has evolved over the past decades. Although the roots of communication management can be traced to the times of ancient Greece and Rome all the way to the 1900s, when corporations hired publicists, press agents, promoters and propagandists for their communication campaigns, in this article we focus primarily on the history of the industry after the Second World War, when more or less modern market environments started to take shape. This “modern” era of communication management can be characterised by the growing role of communication agencies. Due to the nature of competition between agencies new technologies, techniques and approaches were being constantly developed, and competing paradigms of managing communication emerged and replaced each other (Lears, 1994; McDonough & Egolf, 2002).

One of these strategic approaches was the concept integrated marketing communication, or IMC, which was developed in the late 1980's - early 1990's. It is defined by the American Association of Advertising Agencies (AAAA) as a concept of marketing communication planning that recognizes the added value of a comprehensive plan that evaluates the strategic roles of a variety of communication disciplines – for example, general advertising, direct response, sales promotion, and PR – and combines them to provide clarity, consistency and maximum communication impact through the seamless integration discrete messages.

The concept of IMC to an extent disrupted the realities which formed in the US after the WWII, when professional expertise was brought into the area of business communication in two distinct professional disciplines: advertising and public relations. Prior to the arrival of IMC both advertising (as a part of marketing) and public relations had developed as separate communication disciplines. Although organisations realised that in order to exist and thrive they needed to focus on both the issues of public concern (PR) and promoting products to markets (marketing communications or advertising in a broad sense), both disciplines had been developing independently for decades, with advertising being a more profitable and influential industry with much higher budgets (Cutlip, 1994; Tymorek, 2010).

In this paper we suggest to look at the concept of IMC not only as an approach to strategic management of communication (which has been studied previously in depth, see, for ex., Duncan & Caywood, 1996; Duncan & Everett, 1993; Christensen et al., 2008; Proctor & Kitchen, 2002; Schultz et al., 1994 etc.). Instead we examine IMC as a concept that originally was developed within academia, and later was attempted to be used by advertising agencies as an instrument to get competitive advantage; or at least something that was used as a marketing tool popular among communication agencies in the late 1990s-early 2000s.

We believe that looking at IMC not as a strategic management approach, but as a marketing gimmick used by agencies in their market (corporate clients) can produce some important insights. This angle can add to our understanding of the relevance of the IMC concept not only as the basis of the synergy in the multiple areas of communication, but also as a trend in the development of marketing communication.

Fads and fashions in marketing communication

The question of whether IMC may be no more than another management “fad,” no different from Total Quality Management (TQM) or reengineering or Efficient Customer Response (ECR) has been asked previously by many academics and practitioners (Kitchen, 1996). However, these concerns were usually rejected, as researchers would conclude (after interviewing agency executives) that IMC did not appear to be a fad, but was “being driven into client organizations due to real business needs and is not the “philosophy of the day” (Schultz&Kitchen 1997).

In our opinion the question is not whether the concept of IMC has some validity in it (we actually believe it does), but whether there are enough stimuli and will for communication industry key actors to overcome the well-known barriers on the way to integration. In our opinion, such a will was evident in communication agencies in the 1990s-early 2000s, but by now agencies, which continue to recognise the importance of integration, are no longer the locomotive of the IMC movement.

A hypothetical explanation for this can be found in the evolution of the communication industry from the perspective of economics. Communication industry can be examined as a field where economic actors (communication agencies) compete for the budgets of clients (business organisations) by continuously developing their services and offering new, more sophisticated ways of providing these services to their clients in order to obtain a competitive advantage (Aharoni 1993).

For a communication agency the main way to attract new business is to offer an innovative methodology of developing communication strategies for clients. These innovative methodologies are the “know-hows” of the industry that basically allow agencies to promise higher effectiveness and efficiency of their approaches due to some unique competence or expertise — special knowledge about communication campaign management (Halinen 1997).

Agencies would come up with different ideas, and those concepts which resonated with the current trends and market demands would become successful and form communication management paradigms of particular periods of time. The post-war paradigms that are worth mentioning

followed a particular change pattern: concepts that focused on messaging were replaced by media planning concepts, and then by message-focused concepts again (Dymshitz, 2002).

For example, 1950's were the years of psycho-analysis with its ideas of hidden persuasion and motivation to consume. In 1961 this concept was largely replaced by the idea of Unique Selling Proposition, offered by Rosser Reeves (Reeves, 1961) from Ted Bates agency (New York), in his book «Reality in Advertising». Next decade was the period of new methodologies of media planning, associated with the Minimum Effective Frequency Theory by Herbert E. Krugman (1972). In advertising, the effective frequency is the number of times a person must be exposed to an advertising message before a response is made and before exposure is considered wasteful. This was in turn replaced by the focus on Psychographic Descriptions, epitomised in VALS — Values and Lifestyles — approach to messaging strategy (Mitchell, 1984). Late 1980's were the years when the industry was dominated by approaches focused on globalisation and corporate communication management.

All the “old” approaches were not refuted by the “new” ones, rather, they faded away from the arena of competition, losing their value as innovative communication management approaches that could be used by agencies to achieve competitive advantage. It does not mean that the concept of USP or MEF were “fads”, it merely means that these concepts could no longer add extra value to whatever agencies were doing. As paradigms were being replaced by newer ones, the old approaches would lose their allure, and become regular tools which attracted limited attention as elements of communication agency positioning. What agencies once used as key point of differentiation, or as an approach which could give competitive advantage, later became common tools of communication without much hype surrounding it.

In our opinion the concept of integrated marketing communication (IMC) followed more or less the same pattern: being originally developed within academia as an innovative strategic concept, it was initially promoted by communication agencies to address the challenges at a particular period in time. However, by now IMC largely lost its novelty quality which in the past enabled it to attract interest; instead it became a universally recognised and commonly used approach for in-house organisational communication management, which is known to be challenging in its implementation and measurement (Kitchen, 2017; Mortimer & Laurie, 2011).

Drivers for IMC development

The concept of IMC was the product of its historical context: by the late 1980s the industry faced another period of disruption, associated with a new set of challenges. The advertising industry, which was the locomotive of communications business, was going through hard times explaining to the clients the value of its services and the reasons why the clients should be paying their fees.

Advertising agencies' business model was centred around two major types of services: creative ideas (message development) and media placement (media planning and media buying). However, clients were beginning to realise that message development usually happens only once a year, and media plans are not updated more often than once in three months, simply because trends in media consumption change slowly. It was hard for agencies to give rational reasons why clients needed

to pay agency fees in between these development periods (Belch & Belch, 2012; Dymshitz, 2002; Shultz & Kitchen, 1997).

Another challenge was to explain why creative development and media planning services had to be provided by the same agency, when these two processes were not logically connected. The response to this challenge was the emergence of separate service companies: creative boutiques on the one hand, and media buying houses on the other (Coffee, 2017).

The challenge was also amplified by the overall crisis that the industry was facing in the 1980's. Compared to the previous decades, advertising was losing its magic power of universal promotional instrument. New communication channels and a constantly growing number of media led to a decline of effectiveness of a single message placement. Also new generation of consumers (baby-boomers) were not as naive as their parents, they were able to decode advertising messages more effectively, were better at ignoring them and overall were not as easily manipulatable. Combined these trends led to the situation when traditional advertising was getting more expensive and less effective (Belch & Belch, 2012).

Shultz and Kitchen (1997) summarise these key drivers for the development of IMC by pointing out an increased number of advertising agencies coupled with their inability to embrace the new emphasis placed on communication. These factors have encouraged rapid penetration of public relations, direct marketing and sales promotions in the industry of marketing communication. Direct marketing offered a measurable, database driven and relationship oriented alternative to mass messaging offered by advertising. It focused on direct messages with a call for actions and traceable response, which was aligned with the key trends of increasing segmentation in consumer preferences (Durkin & Lawlor, 2001; Eagle & Kitchen, 2000; Schwartz, 2001; Tedlow, 1990), easier access to consumer databases which took direct marketing to a new level, allowing massive customer data holding and manipulation (Kitchen and Schultz, 1999; McGoon, 1999; Reich, 1998; Duncan, 2002; Maddox, 2001), recognition of the importance of consumer loyalty and long-term relationship (Gonring, 1994; Reich, 1998; Schultz, 2002).

Public relations also started to compete in the traditional field of advertising — consumer markets. Before the 1980's PR was not really focused on mass markets, it was more of what now is called “corporate PR”. However, in the 70's-80's a major change in the U.S. households investment pattern created a unique situation where the stock exchange became a mass market (Lane & Jacobson, 1995). It was no longer an exclusive club, but a street market in which whoever shouts louder — wins. PR, with its toolbox that mixed media hype and sensations, was a welcome instrument that was considered effective in supporting sales of shares to households. This made many practitioners believe that PR can be equally effective in selling consumer products to these households, thus creating the concept of Marketing Public Relations — MPR (Harris 1991, Kitchen 1996). Agencies started to bring PR to achieve marketing objectives: the publicising of news and events related to the launch and promotion of products or services. ‘Marketing public relations’ (MPR) involved the use of public relations techniques for marketing purposes which was found to be a cost-effective tool for generating awareness and brand favourability and to imbue communication about the organisation's brands with credibility, which also answered the challenge of building and increasing a brand's image-based equity (McLaughlin, 1997; Schultz, 1999; Wood, 1997).

This trend towards ‘integrating’ marketing and public relations was noted by many in the field, including Philip Kotler, one of the most influential marketing figures of modern times. Kotler commented that ‘there is a genuine need to develop a new paradigm in which these two subcultures [marketing and public relations] work most effectively in the best interest of the organisation and the publics it serves’ (Kotler & Mindak, 1978).

Until the 1980s, marketing and public relations were considered as distinct in their objectives and activities with each discipline going through its own trajectory of professional development. Marketing dealt with markets, while public relations deals with all the publics (excluding customers and consumers). Markets, from this perspective, are created by the identification of a segment of the population for which a product or service is or could be in demand, and involves product or service-related communication. Publics, on the other hand, are seen as actively creating and mobilising themselves whenever companies make decisions that affect a group of people adversely (Cornelissen, 2015). But the arrival of the concept of MPR took the PR industry to the advertising playing field, with an access to marketing budgets.

IMC in advertising agencies

This trend, combined with the challenge of explaining the value of a full-service agency, created a demand for a new paradigm of managing communication that would focus on strategic planning and coordination. The idea initially was developed in the academic circles, as Clarke Caywood (2012) affirmed, “IMC emerged out of an academic department that, for several decades, had been recognized as the number one advertising program”.

In our opinion, the advertising industry saw an opportunity in proving its value and achieving an advantage over the growing budget share of PR-agencies (with the MPR concept) by offering an integrated approach to managing different functions under managerial control of advertising agencies. This approach, the integrated marketing communication approach, recognised the ‘added value’ of a comprehensive plan that evaluates the strategic role of a variety of disciplines (advertising, direct marketing, sales promotions and public relations) and combined these disciplines to provide clarity, consistency and maximum communication impact (Duncan & Caywood 1996). Understood as “the notion and the practice of aligning symbols, messages, procedures and behaviours in order for an organisation to communicate with clarity, consistency and continuity within and across formal organisational boundaries” (Christensen et al., 2008, p. 424), it justifies centralised control of all communication functions in a business environment that otherwise can for calls for participation, involvement and decentralization (Christensen et al., 2005).

The basic concept of integrated marketing communication is based on the synergy of individual instruments of marketing communication, which are mutually reinforcing and complementary, and their effect is greater in comparison with the separate use of individual instruments of marketing communication (Duncan & Everett, 1993), which in turn leads to lower cost of communications (Fill, 2001). From the practical perspective IMC attempts to combine, integrate, and synergize elements of the communications mix, as the strengths of one are used to offset the weaknesses of others. Smith (2002) suggests, for example, that publicity and advertising support each other and create greater impact in a cost-effective manner.

Across their differences, the definitions of IMC all converge around the notion of control. While Schultz et al. (1994) at Northwestern University's Integrated Marketing Communication program, for example, focus on the management of the sources of information to which customers are exposed, Duncan (1993, p. 23) talks about "controlling or influencing all messages which customers and other stakeholders use in forming an image of, and maintaining a relationship with, an organization". And while the purpose of such control measures varies from issues of sales and brand value (e.g. Keegan et al., 1992) over predictability (Proctor & Kitchen, 2002) to profitable relationships with customers and other stakeholders, the promise of IMC is to provide the overarching perspective and tool for a synchronization and coordination of all corporate messages. Although some IMC-scholars emphasize that the role of the corporate communication department is to counsel, mediate, support, and add value to the business units, not to police them (Gronstedt, 1996), IMC is first and foremost a marketing-inspired vision on inspection, regulation, and control. In fact, it may be argued, along with Cornelissen (2001), that the reason why the IMC discourse appeals to managers is because it legitimizes the organization and control of all communication functions. Since the key word here is alignment and centralised control, advertising industry volunteered to lead the movement, centralise (and control) the processes. IMC was a new paradigm (Kitchen & De Pelsmacker, 2004) and a new way to develop marketing communications. (Kliatchko, 2008). For agencies this was an attempt to consolidate the budgets by offering a "one-window" approach to outsourcing communication management services.

Advertising agencies as the key communication integrator

In our opinion, by the end of 1990's IMC was mostly considered to be an approach to agency services. This idea is also reflected in the research and academic literature of the time. For example, Schultz and Kitchen (1997) in their paper on IMC acceptance emphasised the importance of "tackling not companies, but advertising agencies". They focused their research on understanding how the concept of IMC was diffusing by considering how senior advertising agency executives perceived, utilized, and developed IMC. It is symptomatic, that the first question that they asked in their paper was about the amount of time agency devoted to IMC programs on behalf of client firms, whereas the second question was about the effect of IMC on client budgets. Their research confirms our hypothesis: it was felt that the agencies were happy to implement the IMC approach, however, the agency saw the client executives as one of the main barriers to IMC.

Kitchen and Schulz (1999) replicated the study a year later across the UK, Australia and New Zealand, also focusing on advertising agency acceptance, involvement and development of IMC. Again, and the agencies' executives' perceptions of the main barriers to IMC were very similar in terms of identifying the client's staff and organisational structure as being important.

The 2008 study by Kitchen, Kim and Schultz (2008) which compared IMC implementation by practitioners in UK, US and Korea also showed that the agencies were rather willing to put together strategic campaigns but were dependent on being given that responsibility by their clients.

Analysis, conducted by Laurie and Mortimer in 2011 seems to produce similar conclusions, but with further evidence of agency disappointment in the concept, which was formulated by one of the participants in the view that "IMC is an antiquated construct and the world has moved on from the "matching luggage" connotation that it seems to have".

Kitchen et al. (2004) found that agencies would adopt an integrated approach if it was a requirement of their clients, and it was therefore necessary for the client organisations to become integrated themselves. Four years later, in a follow-up study, results indicated that agency executives were able to create strategic campaigns but were still dependent on being given that responsibility by their clients (Kitchen et al., 2008). Further support for this view was provided by an IPA industry report (IPA, 2006) entitled “Magic and Logic”. This report concludes that both clients and agencies have joint responsibility to adapt to the changing environment but that agencies cannot develop as quickly if clients are not adopting best practice.

As a result, as early as by 2009 Kitchen and Schultz (2009) suggested that too many studies have examined the role of the communication agency in the implementation of IMC while it is now accepted that the client businesses are the prime movers.

All the evidence seems to point in the same directions: academics confirm the potential of the IMC concept, the agencies are eager to provide integrated services, but the clients seem to be rather reluctant to adopt the idea.

Corporate scepticism about IMC agencies

Indeed, corporate practitioners were rather slow in their adaptation of IMC, and even slower in their willingness to accept agency’s leading role in the process of integration. Even if the idea of IMC through corporate management initiative was accepted as the operational concept for companies, focus on the problems of “barriers” to implementation remained standing. It implied that the IMC project, and its underlying communication ideal, is fundamentally valid and sound – only difficult to put into practice (Christensen et al., 2008). Thus, while the literature has discussed, for example, how turf battles, ego problems, managerial parochialism, “functional silos”, and lack of horizontal communication between departments prevents the exchange of information necessary to facilitate an ongoing integration of corporate messages (Gronstedt, 1996; Smith, 2002), these problems were assumed to be remediable through changes in management practices, e.g. formal responsibilities and lines of command (Schultz, 2002).

One-stop service providers

However, IMC not only demands an integrative approach within the client organisation (which presents its challenges) but also requires a particular relationship with the agencies for the benefit of the client. As we proposed earlier, advertising agency mainly saw the concept of IMC as a means to centralise control over clients’ budgets, which would assume that an agency would execute several communication instruments within the integrated approach, and the client would use one agency to implement IMC.

This raised the question of whether the clients were willing to buy all the services from one agency. Linton and Morley (1995) advocated that IMC should be provided by the full-service agencies since this would guarantee creative consistency. This is the very approach that agencies would initially advocate, but it seemed to have limited success. “Despite grandiose one-stop shopping notions in the 80s, the “full-service” advertising agencies had begun to take erosion in one of their core competencies a good decade later” (Green, 1992). The matters were made worse by the

clients, who found it rather hard to understand why they need to entrust everything to one organisation (Schultz, 1993), with rather few taking the risk.

Another important trend, that is observed in every industry, including communication, is the continuous division of jobs and specialisation. So it was extremely hard for such a “full-service” agencies to be equally competent in all disciplines (advertising, direct marketing, sales promotions and public relations) and to successfully compete with specialised boutiques or niche companies.

“A simple rule of thumb of remembering no one agency is best at everything, and nothing in life is free (like when media agencies offer ‘free’ PR or social media support,) will help clients reach the right decision”, as an agency executive is quoted to say by Mortimer and Laurie (2017). Indeed, many agencies compete for IMC budgets and put themselves forward for as much of the campaign as possible, i.e., following their own self-interest, even if that area is not necessarily where their strengths lie. This approach is understandable from a financial perspective in the short term but is annoying for both clients and specialised agencies, and is causing issues in terms of trust and collaboration.

Multiple agency integration

Many clients doubted that one agency could be equally good in all the services, and perhaps “coordinated cherry-picking” — selecting the best practitioners in each field is perhaps a better, although more time-consuming alternative (Penn, 1995). Clients apparently believed that the client must drive the integration process (Schultz & Kitchen, 1997). This created major issues for the agency which sees IMC as a way to argue for budget consolidation.

Of course the idea of one-stop shopping had the alternative — agency grouping and coordination with the clients’ interests in mind. As Mortimer and Laurie (2017) found while interviewing an advertising executive was that agencies “who try and do it all and manage to do it well are few and far between”. Indeed, a multi-agency team would be a more reliable solution, as long as the ways of working were instigated to support it.

There were two major approaches to support the multi-agency solution: clients could do this by either using the All Agency model (organise collaboration of agencies themselves) or the Lead Agency model (one agency takes responsibility for integration across all the agencies). The latter would theoretically give the “lead agency” almost the same financial benefits as the “full-service approach”, but market forces and competition tend to work against both kinds of integration.

The old competition and rivalry between PR and advertising functions for budget and control, which illustrated the old antagonism between the two, played some role in it as well, preventing agencies from organising themselves in integrated manner (Brown, 1997). As Gray quoted, “normally both PR agencies and ad agencies feel they should be the strategic guardian; so by definition, they tend to be anti what the other wants in order to gain the Strategic ascendancy” (Gray, 1994, p. 33). In fact, Ewing et al. (2000) found that clients considered agency politics as being one of the main barriers to IMC implementation, as agencies of different disciplines, e.g. advertising, public relations, may not always operate in the best interests of their clients.

Another reason why PR, direct marketing and advertising did not mix that well was mainly because of rather serious differences in culture. “Culture is deeply embedded and, as in any established industry, there are power structures which are resistant to change (Mitchell, 1993, pp. 26-27). The traditional dominance of advertising, which had the biggest share of the communication budget to spend, was also the guardian of the brand identity and communication strategy. Below the line agencies and PR agencies were focusing on more transactional relationships. There were very few people on both the clients’ and the agencies’ sides equally competent in all the disciplines, those who were truly informed and had the in-depth knowledge of all the communication disciplines to use them all successfully (Cook, 1994, pp. 23-24; Marshall, 1994, pp. 32-33). Consequently, within the IMC paradigm public relations was reduced to the activities of product publicity and sponsorship, ignoring its wider scope in communicating to employees, investors, communities, the media and government.

Finally, the charging methods were to blame too for slowing the implementation of IMC. From the early days the commission system encouraged agencies to direct their clients to an advertising-based, rather than integrated solutions (Schultz, 1993).

Either way, Child (2012) found that clients often felt let down due to lack of cooperation and collaboration across different agencies. This argument was rebutted, in the same study, by agencies, who stated that clients wanted competitive pitches between agencies at the same time as requesting cooperation between them, making integration across agencies very difficult. Both sides agreed that more trust and respect was needed for this relationship to work. (Mortimer & Laurie, 2017).

Shift of power from agency to client

Trust was exactly what seems to be lacking in the client-agency relations to make IMC more widely used. A US survey by Forbes (Dan, 2014) confirmed that clientes are increasingly bringing strategic decisions in house and perceiving agencies less as partners and more as suppliers. In the same year, a report entitled ‘The Naked Truth’, also identified an increasing lack of trust in the industry and proposed that communication between the agency and client needed to be more transparent and direct (Leake, 2014). A UK industry report (Thomas, 2015) confirmed that agencies felt less valued and excluded from important strategic discussions and were being given short-term tactical work instead with tight deadlines.

The result was that integration moved predominantly in-house, with clients managing multiple vendors (All Agency approach) — in some major markets companies have an average of 24 agencies working for them, with a quarter of them having more than 50 agencies (Caplin, 2016).

Laurie and Mortimer (2017) note that “changes in the industry have resulted in shifts in power towards the clients and led to the client/agency relationship being pulled away from the business alliance model towards the traditional agency relationship – where agencies are instructed what to produce with fewer opportunities to build relationships and show initiative” .

This is leading to a fundamental change in how marketing communications is undertaken within the client organisation, with many departments sharing behavioural data and making decisions in-

house without agency input. This has resulted in the balance of power changing between the client and the agency, with the client now not only having the power to reward and to punish but also the expert power that had previously belonged to the agency. This shift of expert power from the agencies to the clients may be one of the main reasons why agencies are being forced to step back into a more traditional agency relationship where the client is in control and the agency is seen as a supplier rather than a partner (Wang et al. 2013)

Laurie and Mortimer (2017) conclude that “at the moment, clients seem to have all the power and are pulling the client/agency relationship into the direction of a traditional agency format, where more control and monitoring is necessary to keep all the agencies in line. Agencies are losing this fight because they are unsure what their role is and they are unable to build a business alliance with their client because of a lack of trust and commitment on both sides”.

With the integrating role performed by the client, agencies are left with the implementation role, and their strategic counsel with the accompanying benefits of full-service approach with greater creative consistency appeared to be of little demand from the client. In the end for the agencies it simply means that they do not get to benefit from centralised control over clients’ integrated budget, and thus there is little to no economic incentive for them to further support the concept of IMC.

As a result, advertising agencies that offered one-stop IMC approach lost their focus of business and turned into managing and consulting services, which started to compete with their own research centres. Stripped off of their implementation functions, they were left with only one major function — coordination. But then they needed to prove that they were better in coordinating than their clients’ in-house departments and brand-management centres. Given that the brand-management was done largely in-house, the only activity that the agencies were left with was overseeing the following of brand book requirements in coordinating various messages — something very well known from the 1960’s.

General scepticism towards IMC

If agencies are no longer the major force behind the IMC development, then it is the client who should support further adoption of the integrated approach. However, the clients today are not only sceptical of the agencies’ ability to provide one-stop IMC services or even “Lead Agency” services; clients are generally suspicious about the benefits of IMC approach in general.

IMC has often been criticised for the lack of measurement to the effectiveness of programs and proven financial benefits of utilising this approach. While urging that more attention should be paid on measuring “outcomes” rather than “outputs” of marketing communication activities, Schultz and Kitchen (2000) raised concerns that many marketing activities cannot be measured, and the value of communication effects and impacts are even more tenuous. Proving that IMC approach produces time and cost efficiencies was viewed as uncertain (Kitchen & Schultz 1997). In 2002 Semenik acknowledged that “measuring the complex interaction of all the promotional mix elements is very, very complicated and may be beyond the methodological tools available at this time”. (p. 545)

This scepticism is not new for both academia and industry. Scholars and practitioners have not been impervious to the limitations of integrated communications (Miller and Rose, 1994). This critical perspective of IMC is based on the view that considers IMC a management fashion, with weak theoretical foundation, not more than a collection of specific concepts traditional marketing, presented in a new form (Cornelissen, 2001; Gould, 2004).

The point of synergy

When scholars of integrated communications acknowledged the difficulties of managing receiver perceptions of corporate messages, they still seemed to assume that this is essentially an issue of planning and control (Schultz, 1996; Schultz et al., 1994). The assumption is that under proper planning and efficient control integration will inevitably provide the benefits of synergy. However, one of the major questions is where the integration and the intended synergy actually happens.

From the direct marketing perspective it happens in the minds of consumers (“outside-in approach”), driven by the buyers or potential buyers of goods and services. From the perspective of PR — integration and synergy happen in the minds of brand managers, who plan communication campaigns with the idea of integration in mind (“inside-out approach”). This latter approach theoretically could be managed internally with the focus on the bundling together promotional mix elements so they in essence “speak with one voice.”

Direct marketing “outside-in” approach with its drive towards measurability is more logically consistent in insisting on the wider use of advertising for stimulating direct response and further database based relationship development. According to this view, by creating and nourishing stakeholder relationships, new customers are attracted and then interacted with to find ways to satisfy their needs and wants (Kitchen et al. 2004).

However, proponents of this approach mistakenly believed that it could be used for promoting any goods, including FMCG’s. Contrary to this belief, the whole idea of taking the consumers with personalised messages through all the stages of the decision making process was somewhat questionable. IMC advocates insisted that consumers go through a number of steps before making a purchase: 1) Problem/Need recognition, 2) Information search, 3) Evaluation of alternatives, 4) Purchase decision and 5) Post-purchase behavior. But in reality this model describes the behavior of an extremely loyal consumer - loyal to the point of the obsessional neurosis condition - these patterns are only observed in 3-5% of leading brands in capital goods product categories, and less than in 1% of FMCG’s brands (Dymshitz, 2002).

The PR idea of integrating messages from the brand-management positions seems even less logical. In the beginning, when the major focus of PR was on corporate communications, PR managers almost ignored end consumers, or at least they were not expected to significantly contribute to the products’ promotion. However, after the 1980’s success of the marketing PR concept and investor relations, there was a widely spread belief that consumers can be persuaded to buy goods just because these goods had been manufactured by a particular company. Unfortunately, using public relations techniques for marketing purposes did not prove to be a cost-effective tool for generating awareness and brand favourability. Companies quickly found out that this approach had its limitations. Techniques that worked on the stock market to convince people

to buy shares of a particular company did not work quite that well on consumer market (Dymshitz, 2002).

In reality the whole integration process happens neither in the minds of consumers nor in the minds of brand managers, but in the process of integrated marketing communication itself. For corporate managers it would mean that the concept of IMC boils down to coordinating all promotion messages and rigorously following brand-book standards in all promotion materials.

Overall challenges of control

A more recent revelation in integrated marketing communication is the change in the role of the customer within the business world. As we have mentioned previously, the main promise of IMC is greater control over different instruments of communication. But the irony of contemporary reality is that companies have less and less control over communication. It is no longer about whether it is the company or the agency who should endure consistency across all communications. Due to the fast-paced growth of technology, customers are rapidly gaining more power through online media and word of mouth; now enhanced with capabilities of reaching a much wider audience through the use of social media. The whole notion of centralised approach to communication coordination seems to be less and less appropriate.

Contemporary consumers frequently interpret and use corporate products and messages differently from their original purpose, reshape, and adapt them to personal use, and modify and sometimes pervert their meanings in ways not imagined by their creators (Cova, 1996). This can be observed in consumer networks and online “brand communities” (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). These consumer collectives link through activities they share temporally or through the use of communications technologies, for example, resources on the internet such as chat rooms and blogs. In these contexts, they play with, extend, replicate, and often redefine and re-signify corporate symbols and thus take an active part in the determination of brand images and identities (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Kates, 2000). Sociologists, such as Maffesoli (1996) and Giddens (1991), use the term (neo)tribes to identify these networking consumers. Despite efforts to infiltrate them by planting some members, organizations are unlikely to be able to control the dynamic of communications among members of such consumer collectives or brand communities. This gives way to a wider trend of power shift towards consumer and growing influence on uncontrolled messages in brand communication.

Another trend is the rise of key opinion leaders and online influencers in marketing communications. Organizations try to form alliances with celebrities, and through their influence (primarily online) try to affect the way their products are perceived and talked about. But influencers often have a lot of freedom in the ways they use or converse about these products, and the conversations are further interpreted and played with by their fans and followers.

Consequently, there is more “play” between marketing messages and consumers, where each construes and “re-writes” the other’s intentions and meanings (Muggleton, 2000; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Prahalad, 2004). This does not necessarily mean that marketing communications are less persuasive, just that the process of persuasion takes place at a more sophisticated level than assumed by conventional writings on integrated communications. The consumer will have to

be provoked through communications to build own persuasions, rather than communications attempting to directly persuade the consumer (Ferguson, 1999; Sweet, 1999). Thus, integrated communications efforts toward congruity of all messages that emanate from the organization may create problems for the organization in a mature market. When its drive toward clarity of voice confronts the desire and ability of savvy consumers to create their own perceptions and stories (Kozinets, 2002), the organization may become perceived as overly one-dimensional and patronizing (Holt, 2002; Thompson, 2004).

Traditional approaches to integrated communications that see a necessity of high determination of meaning and control of communications toward a coherent message miss the possibility of effective interactions with mature markets. Therefore, as markets around the globe continue to mature, traditional approaches will hurt rather than help organizations' capability to connect with their markets (Christensen et al., 2005).

Today consumers are seeking not providers but partners (Firat et al., 1995), leading to concerns such as mass-customisation (Pine, 1992), rather than mass-production. In this respect, integrated communications is analogous to mass-production; contemporary communications need a mass-customisation appeal (Peppers & Rogers, 1993). In such an environment, efforts to control and "integrate" the content and forms of communications will likely fail and be counter-productive.

Instead, communications are likely to be more successful if they seek to contribute to a culture of partnership in designing and articulating both the needs and the images and products that (re)present them. Thus, while "integration" is a noble and still more tempting ideal of communication, it is not a process that can be planned, executed and controlled by the sender. Attempts to do so anyway in the complex world of today may produce what Leitch (1999, p. 7) calls "a resource-hungry monster" unable to adapt to new situations. Accordingly, models and frameworks of integrated communications will have to account for flexibilities required in responding to or conversing with a multiplicity of players in and outside of the imagined boundaries of the organization, taking into consideration their tendencies not only at the time of an (assumed) original point in the conversation, but also as the conversation progresses over time. (Christensen et. al 2005, Cornelissen 2009)

For this reason, contemporary communication cannot adhere tightly to principles of IMC. Instead, openness towards fluidity and a certain degree of indeterminacy must be nurtured if organizations wish to cope with the postmodern world. Along with tolerance toward variety within the organization, organizations need to develop a tolerance for meanings negotiated together with consumer communities, such as brand communities, in the market. That is, consumers must not be perceived simply as targets, but as collaborators or partners in generation of meanings for the organization's offerings (Christensen et. al, 2005). This requires not so much processes of integration and control, as in IMC, as it does processes of playful engagement, networking, and negotiation.

CONCLUSION

The above listed reasons created a situation for the next disruption in the industry - when agencies realised that IMC failed to become a competitive advantage for consolidating the budgets. Since

then the allure of the paradigm was steadily declining, and by early 2010's the term largely went out of fashion. A search at the website of the top-20 world's communication agencies revealed that only one of them (MullenLowe Group) uses the term IMC to describe their approach. Other agencies in the list may mention "integrated campaigns" as one of their services, or include them in the list of case studies, but do not emphasise it. This observation points to the fact the term IMC is not widely used by communication agencies any more as a competitive advantage or an innovative approach.

The focus has shifted to new paradigms, which include a focus on technologically determined disruptions, such as social media and Big Data. The technological and social environment in which organisations operate has changed considerably over the past two decades since the 1990's, and the demands of different stakeholders such as customers, investors, employees and NGO and activist groups have forced organisations to put considerable effort into integrating all the communication efforts.

This integration is also important when one considers the multiple stakeholder roles that any one individual may have, and the potential pitfalls that may occur when conflicting messages are sent out. Individuals may be employees of an organisation, but also at the same time its customers or members of the local community in which the organisation resides. As a result, internal communication to employees cannot be divorced from external communication, and vice versa.

New technologies and social media have also erased the dividing line between internal and external communication. Organisations are also facing increased demands for transparency about their operations. In their efforts to respond to these social expectations and to present themselves as coherent, reliable and trustworthy institutions with nothing to hide, organisations across industries and sectors still embrace measures of coordinated approach.

Therefore the value of using coordinated approach to managing organisational communication has not disappeared neither from the academic research nor from practice, and the validity of the integration remains universally recognised. The examples would be the new IMC focus on the content and content marketing, as well as relatively recent attempts to bring the concept of IMC into the era of new media (Bruhn & Schnebelen, 2017) or linking IMC to the communication-in-use concept (Finne & Grönroos, 2017).

We can conclude that contemporary approach to managing business communications still inserts the various communication disciplines into a holistic perspective, drawing from the concepts, methodologies, crafts, experiences, and artistry of all of them. This is still true for both B2B and B2C companies, but the processes of specialisation led to the situation where fewer agencies claim that they are able to provide full-service IMC approach.

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