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Working Paper

An Exploratory Study into the Perceptions, Acceptance and Usage of Integrated Marketing Communications in the Not for Profit Sector

Introduction

This working paper outlines a research project into Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) and its perceptions, acceptance and usage in the not for profit sector. There has been much discussion on IMC in terms of its definition, constructs, diffusion and theoretical foundation. Much of this research however focuses on for profit organisations, using quantitative research methodologies. There have been calls for studies in different contexts (Eagle, Kitchen and Bulmer 2007, Reid 2005). This study builds on earlier research by the authors and involves qualitative research in not for profit case study organisations.

The objectives for this research are:

1. To undertake case study analysis with not for profit organisations to explore adoption, and evidence of IMC in: management decision making; organisational processes; organisational approaches to communicating with key stakeholders
2. To draw initial conclusions on the perceptions, acceptance and usage of IMC in relation to the practice of not for profit organisations

Literature Review

IMC Development

IMC has created considerable academic discussion yet there is still not one agreed definition. Schultz (2004) stated that “Integrated Marketing Communications is a strategic business process used to plan, develop, execute and evaluate coordinated, measurable, persuasive brand communications programs over time with consumers, customers, prospects, employees, associates and other targeted, relevant external and internal audiences. The goal is to generate both short-term financial returns and build long-term brand and shareholder value”. The concept of IMC was introduced in the early 1990’s and since then many research studies have been undertaken to aid greater understanding of IMC and its adoption and diffusion in practice (for example Duncan and Everett 1993; Gould 2004; Kim, Han and Schultz 2004; Kitchen 2005; Kitchen, Brignell, Li and Jones 2004; Kitchen and Li 2005; Kitchen and Schultz 1997; 1998; 1999; Kliatchko 2005; 2008; Lee and Park 2007; Nowak and Phelps 1994, Reid 2005; Swain 2004). Two key issues appear to have been problematic in the development of IMC - definition and theoretical foundations. The debate concerning definitions of IMC still continues in academic circles and there is disagreement as to whether IMC is in the domain of the marketing communications mix (Eastin and Daugherty 2005; Grove Carlson and Dorsch 2007; Lee and Park 2007) or a more strategic organisation wide activity (Fill 2005; Kitchen 2005; Kliatchko 2005; 2008; Schultz 2004).

A more recent definition of IMC is Luxton, Reid and Mavondo (2015) who identify the importance of IMC in helping an organisation gain competitive advantage as, “IMC is a market-relating deployment mechanism that enables the optimization of communication approaches to achieve superior communication effectiveness, which has other downstream benefits (e.g., brand and financial performance).”

Whilst IMC continued to generate a significant amount of interest the term “integrated marketing” was used by Duncan and Moriarty (1997) when they published an Integrated Marketing audit, relating to communication. This audit has been used in IMC empirical studies (Reid 2005). Duncan and Moriarty (1998) developed this further to consider the Communication-Based Marketing Model for Managing Relationships, although this appears to have been neglected somewhat in the IMC literature until the mid 2000’s (Gronroos 2004; Kitchen et al 2004) when links between IMC and Relationship Marketing became more prevalent.

Criticisms of IMC began to emerge concerning the validity of it as a theoretical concept (Cornelissen and Lock 2000); however others argued that the empirical work being undertaken was beginning to set the foundations (Gould 2000; Kitchen and Schultz 1997; 1998; Schultz and Kitchen 2000a).

IMC Measurement

Difficulties defining IMC and its constructs have hindered the development of measurement tools and frameworks. Whilst there are difficulties, some key frameworks have been utilised in later studies. Nowak and Phelps (1994) identified a framework of tactical, strategic, behaviour and image oriented communications which was adapted and used by Grove, Carlson and Dorsch (2002; 2003; 2007) when measuring tactical IMC. Schultz and Kitchen (2000b) identified four stages of IMC, from tactical co-ordination of promotional elements, to redefining the scope of marketing communications, to application of Information Technology and finally financial and strategic integration. Duncan and Moriarty (1997) created an Integrated Marketing Audit in relation to communication which considers core competencies in relation to marketing communications plans and actual practices, communication network surveys and content analysis which has informed further studies (Reid 2005, Winter and Sundqvist 2009).

The issue of IMC measurement and outcomes is a key area for research (Kliatchko 2005; 2008; Reid 2005; Schultz and Kitchen 2000b;). Academics are continuing to develop constructs and this is still an active research area, with for example, Kerr and Patti (2015) developing a strategic integration model that measures organisational proficiency and levels of IMC.

IMC in the Context of Not for Profit

There is very little evidence of IMC being studied in depth in charities and the not for profit sector. Henley (2001), based in the USA, identified that the challenge for IMC in the non-profit context is a big one, “they (non-profits) usually have multiple non-financial objectives, which can be difficult to measure. In addition, the potentially conflicting needs of multiple constituencies, including clients, board members and donors must be balanced”. Henley (2001) concludes that the role of IMC within the non-profit context is highly important and that “Each and every message conveyed by the organisation in its print and electronic communications and by its volunteers and its staff must be synergistic and cohesive. It is only through this cohesive approach that the public, already inundated with mass communications, can begin to understand the organisation and its message”. This work was further developed by Henley, Wymer and Self (2013) and the importance highlighted in light of competition and reducing budgets.

Herstein, Mitki and Jaffe (2008) utilise a case study approach to identify and explain the stages of developing IMC by the Israel Cancer Association, during their campaign to promote the fight

against breast cancer. Herstein, Mitki and Jaffe (2008) identify a framework showing the different tactical communications used to communicate to different stakeholders - namely three stages (research, prevention and rehabilitation and treatment) and four targets within each (macro, micro, sector and joint) although this is somewhat tactical. More recently Dahl, Eagle and Low (2015) have explored how IMC and social marketing may be combined and identified key differences of customer focus, IMC application, the usage of IMC and the required behavioural outcome.

Methodology

This study has utilised five case study organisations and builds on earlier research by the authors. The charities are all based in the North East of England and focus on some form of education and fundraising (technical education, general further education qualifications, 3rd world education and support, sciences). All of these organisations agreed to participate in several stages of the research – 1) an interview with a decision maker for marketing, 2) a review of marketing communications collateral and 3) interviews with other staff as appropriate. The semi-structured one to one interview with the member of staff (or outsourced resource) responsible for marketing communications management was structured utilising the themes from the Duncan and Moriarty (1997) audit (used by Reid 2005 and Winter and Sundqvist 2009). To review the marketing collateral of the case study organisations the Nowak and Phelps (1994) model (used by Carlson, Grove and Dorsch 2003; Grove, Carlson and Dorsch 2002; 2007) was used. Further meetings with staff, where appropriate and possible, were used to triangulate the results.

Through the use of the frameworks it is expected that initial conclusions about IMC in not for profit organisations can be made. The suitability of the frameworks for further studies can also be explored.

Discussion of Results

The extensive literature on IMC has provided many definitions, constructs, interpretations and discussions on implementation and measurement issues. There is however still no consensus on what IMC is, or indeed if it exists. Through drawing conclusions from the extensive literature review this research will contribute to the knowledge on IMC. Furthermore very little research has been undertaken in relation to IMC in not for profit organisations. It is here where this paper is expected to provide an insight. The empirical research and the interview responses are currently being analysed and it is anticipated that results will be presented at the Conference in July 2016.

Initial results previously suggest that there is some awareness of IMC as a wider part of marketing communications and that where knowledge exists efforts are made to achieve integration. There does however appear to be common problems, for instance lack of context setting, weight of influence that messages are expected to have on stakeholders and expectations in terms of understanding and responses of stakeholders. This will be examined further.

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