

DMEF 2008 Direct/Interactive Marketing Research Summit

Competitive Paper Extended Abstract

Creative Strategy in Direct and Interactive Marketing and

Integrated Marketing Communications Instruction

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Professionals in direct and interactive marketing (DIM) and integrated marketing communications (IMC) have worked to reach a profitable balance between science and art as well as technique and creativity. At its best, DIM in IMC combines the freedom to explore new worlds of creativity with the discipline of measured response. This paper offers an overview of direct and interactive marketing creative strategy concepts, presented in ways that encourage effective teaching and learning. Specific examples of how the concepts can be presented in class using active learning are also provided.

Marketing educators should strive to provide students with the knowledge and skills needed for effective integrated marketing communications. Some marketing professionals express concern that graduates do not know how to execute theoretical concepts in practical situations. Thus an interdisciplinary approach that mirrors the IMC profession makes most sense. The key to managing that process in the classroom is to present IMC as a whole concept with several parts rather than distinct practices that get cobbled together to form an overall IMC plan.

Indeed previous research on effectively teaching concepts in IMC includes using a broad perspective (Scott, 2001) and an interdisciplinary approach (Everett, Siegel, & Marchant, 1999). However, a study on marketing curriculum and delivery found that in general, IMC is taught in a typical classroom lecture environment without utilizing active learning (Schultz, Kerr, Kim, & Patti, 2007). Active learning enriches the classroom experience and has a positive impact on student outcomes (Drea, Tripp, & Stuenkel, 2005).

Applied marketing courses, such as direct and interactive marketing, should include experiential activities that apply knowledge and foster skills development (Schibrowsky, Peltier, & Boyt, 2002). Further, instruction in direct marketing should also include developing technical

skills and practical learning opportunities. In general, a solid approach to direct and interactive marketing education includes linking classroom experiences with industry expectations.

Integrated Marketing Communications

Integrated Marketing Communications encompasses *general advertising, direct marketing, sales promotion* and *public relations*. None of the four elements of IMC is inherently superior or inferior; they all have important functions in an integrated campaign. The campaign should focus on a “big idea” and a graphic look that threads through all four elements. This maximizes the chances that consumers will get the message and then have the message reinforced and layered in their memories without the “cognitive dissonance” that arises from mixed messages or incongruous graphic elements.

Using active learning in the IMC classroom highlights these concepts. Students identify a company they do business with that, upon their reflection and learning, they can assert has an IMC campaign. Students describe the company and then provide examples of that firm’s general advertising, direct marketing, sales promotion and PR efforts. For example, for Dell they might highlight Dell’s ads on television that have minimal direct response elements (general advertising); Dell’s mailed catalogs and sponsored search efforts (direct marketing); Dell’s limited-time special offers and package deals (sales promotion) and Dell’s efforts to utilize outdated computers to help those in need through the Christina Foundation (PR).

Creative Concepts in Direct Marketing

The essential character of direct marketing lies in its *action orientation*. To sell, or to invite a step toward a sale, direct marketers include a call to immediate action and an easy-to-use response device. Direct marketers make specific offers: they tell prospects what they are going to get and what they have to do to get it – be it a product in exchange for a price or free information

in exchange for a phone call. In addition to action orientation, direct marketing has several other important characteristics. It is: targeted, personal, measurable, testable and flexible.

For active learning, students watch direct-response TV and develop a log that helps them identify patterns such as the amount of time the phone number or web site is on the screen. They also look for repetition as well as selling formulas such as those used by Ron Popeil or discussed by the late Al Eicoff. Then they evaluate their logs and explain what they have learned about how DRTV differs from general advertising and how the two disciplines are starting to merge with higher production values in DRTV and direct response elements in general advertising.

Creative Execution in Direct and Interactive Marketing

Just as most copywriters and graphic designers do not get involved in directing and filming direct response TV spots, there is no compelling need for every direct marketing creative to “do it all” in interactive media. Even so, some writers and designers will carve this out as a specialty, and most creatives will at least have the opportunity to contribute concepts, copy and art for interactive media ventures. Advice for creative people regarding Web sites includes: offer multiple ways to search, plan for constant updates that entice visitors to return, make the site easy to follow, and use direct marketing knowledge as a competitive advantage online.

For active learning students evaluate various websites using an extended version of the criteria mentioned above. Part of the critique involves highlighting effective use of direct marketing techniques online and making suggestions to rectify problem areas.

Conclusion

Direct and interactive marketing and integrated marketing communications efforts can best be orchestrated by a cross-functional team using a comprehensive promotional plan. Bringing this concept to the marketing, advertising or communications classroom is instrumental

in graduating students with a holistic view of IMC via DIM. Since a primary goal of direct marketing education is to develop effective teaching strategies it is only reasonable to focus on how to best prepare students for a career in IMC.

Given marketing students learn best when presented with activities that apply course concepts to real-world scenarios (Karns, 2005), making extensive use of active learning exercises, such as the ones outlined above, is both motivating and constructive. Utilizing such an approach should also help to bridge the gap between traditional academic delivery of course content and professional preparedness expected in the contemporary IMC marketplace.

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