

Creative Strategy in Integrated Marketing Communications

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The concept of *Integrated Marketing Communications* (IMC) makes absolute sense – so much so that novices in the field may wonder what all the commotion is about. IMC suggests that marketers look at the customer first – his or her preferences, buying patterns, media exposure, and other factors – and then expose that customer to products and services that fit the customer’s needs via a mix of communication methods he or she finds attractive and credible. As Don E. Schultz, the late Stanley I. Tannenbaum, and Robert F. Lauterborn asserted in their book, *The New Marketing Paradigm*, IMC challenges marketers to “start with the customer and work back to the brand.”

Why was this revolutionary? Not because it was a new or controversial concept, but because a whole culture of agencies, in-house departments, and consultants had grown up around the notion of separation for advertising, direct marketing, sales promotion, and public relations efforts, rather than the harmonious, customer-centered planning process that IMC requires.

At its worst, this old-style culture leads to arguments among professionals as to how a media budget will be split: how much for general advertising, how much for direct marketing, and so on. Such “turf wars” have very little to do with what the *customer* wants or needs. They rely on chauvinistic notions that “my method is better” – that direct marketing is inherently superior to sales promotion, for example, or that general advertising is more refined, and therefore more appropriate, than “pushier” direct marketing techniques.

Because of the paradigm shift required in order to implement IMC, advertising professionals and their counterparts in direct marketing, sales promotion and public relations continue to work to come to grips with this concept. As with other deep cultural changes, intellectual acceptance may long precede the ability to embrace the gains and losses inherent in this new way of doing things. While the evolution continues, this conceptual framework may help creative people to understand IMC and use its tenets to their advantage.

The Four Elements of IMC

Integrated Marketing Communications encompasses *general advertising, direct marketing, sales promotion* and *public relations*. Some IMC campaigns feature aspects of all four elements, while others may eliminate one or more elements for strategic reasons. The American Association of Advertising Agencies defines IMC as follows:

Integrated Marketing Communications is a concept of marketing communications planning that recognizes the added value in a program that integrates a variety of strategic disciplines, e.g., general advertising, direct response, sales promotion and public relations and combines these disciplines to provide clarity, consistency and maximum communications impact.

In an integrated campaign, *general advertising* shines at strengthening brands and brand equity while *direct marketing* builds relationships and dialogue, and provides the means to close sales. *Sales promotion* provides short-term buying incentives for both consumers and the trade. *Public relations* – mainly publicity in this case – offers third-party endorsements and extra reinforcement for the paid advertising messages. None of the four elements 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.

The Creative Process in Integrated Marketing Communications

The best integrated marketing campaigns begin with the disciplined application of creativity theory. We all are gifted with the ability to exercise the creative process.

However, optimizing our results requires us to understand and apply that process patiently, and step-by-step.

The Italian sociologist Vilfredo Pareto said that an idea is merely a new combination of old elements. Take a kaleidoscope, for example. It contains myriad bits of color, forming into many different patterns as the kaleidoscope turns. The pattern is never the same twice, yet it combines all the same ingredients. The Bible says that “there is no new thing under the sun” – only unique ways of relating old elements. Creating a marketing idea, then, is the result of a step-by-step process designed to identify relevant elements and arrange them in new and effective patterns.

Creativity Formulas

There are as many written creativity formulas as there are technique checklists for copy and art. Some of these step-by-step processes come from advertising “creatives,” while others are advanced by academicians through their study of the history of ideas.

Following are capsulated version of two such helpful creativity formulas.

1. James Webb Young’s *A Technique for Producing Ideas*:
 - Gather raw materials
 - Mental digestion
 - Incubation
 - Eureka!

- Testing
2. The late Eugene B. Colin's *How to Create New Ideas*:
- Pick a problem
 - Get knowledge
 - Organize knowledge
 - Refine knowledge
 - Digest
 - Produce ideas
 - Rework ideas
 - Put ideas to work
 - Repeat the process until it becomes a natural habit

A quick read through these idea-generating formulas shows that the basic process follows a predictable pattern: outlining the problem, gathering information, evaluating information, walking away from the problem to let the mind do its work, enjoying one moment when ideas strike, weighing the pros and cons of various ideas, and then implementing the best idea.

Brainstorming

One of the most effective resources for idea generation is brainstorming. While it's possible to "brainstorm with yourself," most creative experts agree it's not preferable.

Working with others lets you benefit from different perspectives, experiences, and thought processes, and also builds excitement and enjoyment. Here is a brief, step-by-step plan for effective brainstorming.

1. Identify a specific question that brainstorming will attempt to answer
2. Select a neutral and nonjudgmental facilitator
3. Gain agreement that all participants are to be considered equals during brainstorming, no matter what their usual status in your organization
4. Shake things up with a new location, new space configuration, music, lighting or other elements designed to change perspectives
5. State your question beginning with the phrase “In what ways can we...” and begin brainstorming, with people calling out their ideas one by one
6. Encourage participants to build on the ideas of others
7. Use the resulting “laundry list” of ideas for a later refinement process based on budget, logistics, timing, uniqueness, target market and other factors

Creative Strategy and Positioning

In a good marketing plan, creative objectives and strategies are clearly articulated. And before the first word is written or a single line drawn, the copywriter and art director should accept and understand the *creative strategy statement* for the job they’ve undertaken. While many agencies and companies employ more comprehensive creative

strategy formats, an informal creative strategy can be used as a minimum entry point.

Such a “simplified creative strategy” must include descriptions of:

- **The target market** – demographics, psychographics, segmentation strategies and characteristics. Smart marketers often discuss both the general target market and one specific prospect – described by name and in so much detail that the copywriter is able to write “one on one” to that person.
- **The competitive benefit** – What your product or service delivers uniquely and meaningfully to individuals in the target market. Ideally this section will also include support for the benefit – sometimes called “permission to believe.”
- **The objective** – In general advertising, objectives focus mainly on informing, persuading or reminding people about the product or service. In direct marketing, it usually focuses more specifically on attracting leads and/or selling products. Sales promotion objectives concentrate on maximizing short-term incentives, while public relations objectives – when they are part of an IMC plan – generally have to do with generating non-paid publicity.

Discipline yourself to agree with your creative partners, clients and/or account people on at least these three concepts, and you’ll stand an excellent chance of delivering creative work that all agree is “on strategy” the first time around.

In addition, a well-written *positioning statement* helps creative people to focus on the members of their target market with strong and specific messages that answer the

prospective buyer's question, "What's in it for me?" You can create a simple positioning statement by filling in these blanks:

To the (TARGET CONSUMER), (NAME OF BRAND) is the brand of (COMPETITIVE FRAME) that (BENEFIT).

Here is an example of a positioning statement using this format:

To (FAMILY FOOD SHOPPERS WHO ARE CONCERNED ABOUT DIET), (MAZOLA) is the brand of (MARGARINE) that (TASTES BETTER THAN ALL OTHER LEADING HEART-HEALTHY SPREADS).

Creative Concepts in IMC

While some creative strategies and tactics are unique to certain elements of IMC, there are other concepts that apply across the board. These include print ad how-tos such as headline writing, layouts and illustrations and tips for readability.

Headline Writing

Observe people flipping through newspapers and magazines, and one thing becomes readily apparent: each article or ad has only a split second in which to engage the prospect's attention – just as do the articles themselves.

The headline is considered the most important element of a print advertisement. Thus, a smart copywriter will invest all the time and care necessary to make each headline irresistible. A good headline flags down qualified prospects and lures them into the body copy. A good headline has no extra words to slow the reader down, and every word in it is working hard to get the message across. A good headline is in active voice.

One of the best ways to master this skill is to work for a daily newspaper writing news story headlines. Journalists are taught to answer six questions in each news presentation: Who, what, where, when, why and how? These are the questions people want answered immediately about most any situation or opportunity – and thus they are powerful idea starters for headlines. It may also help the fledgling writer to consider some of these headline methods as idea starters:

- Give news
- Tell how-to
- Inspire curiosity
- Pose a challenge
- Pose a question
- Appeal to the reader's self-interest

Layout and Illustration Types

Many of today's print ads – if they are not direct-response oriented – fall in to the category of “poster” or “fashion” layouts. They include little more than a headline, a dominant picture that bleeds off the page, a line or two of copy or even no copy at all, and a logo. This type of ad can be quite effective at building a brand image or at reminding customers and prospects about a dominant, leading product. But if your advertising is aimed at informing or persuading the reader, or at obtaining leads or sales, the layout will have to make room for some copy and possibly one or more response devices. Typical layout types and their characteristics include:

- Standard – Dominate visual at the top of the ad, headline, body copy and logo.
- Editorial – Looks like an article in the publication where it is placed. Copy-heavy; few if any visuals.
- Poster or Fashion – Dominant visual bleeds off the page. Headline and logo; little to no body copy.
- Picture-Caption – Headline at the top; pictures with captions to lead the reader through a story or process; logo at bottom.
- Comic Strip – The ad takes the form of a comic strip with the copy in “balloons” indicating the spoken words of the characters; logo at bottom.
- Picture-Cluster – Like the standard layout except with a montage of photos instead of just one.
- Direct Response Ad – With coupon and/or prominent toll-free number and/or referral to a Web site. Should have persuasive copy that is long enough to

convince the reader to take the next step by asking for more information or purchasing the product.

Typical illustration types used in print ads include:

- Product alone (Example: a hot car)
- Product in use (Example: prepared food product – not just the box it comes in)
- Product with people (Example: person using a computer – not just the computer itself)
- Results of using product (Example: person with toothy white grin – not the whitening strips that did the job)
- Comparison or contrast (Example: Huge stack of laundry done with one container of concentrated laundry detergent across from much smaller stack done with one container of regular-strength competitor)
- Trade character – (Example: the Lonely Maytag Repairman)

Readability

To make your copy readable, follow a few basic rules. These include:

- **Serif vs. sans serif type** – Serif typefaces (the ones with the “swiggles” on the letters like Book Antiqua) are easier to read for long blocks of copy. Sans serif typefaces (the plain ones like Arial) have a sleeker and more modern appearance

and are best used for headlines and short copy blocks. On the World Wide Web, however, sans serif typefaces are preferred for all copy because the serif “swiggles” can become muddled in an online presentation.

- **Type styles** – Don’t use more than two type styles in any one presentation unless you are highly expert at type selection and presentation. Don’t use ALL CAPS much as they are the equivalent of shouting and are difficult to read. Watch out for reverse type (light colors reversed out of dark backgrounds). They may be attractive in a design sense, but they are very difficult to read in blocks of copy.
- **Type size** – Body copy smaller than 8 pt. may be difficult for anyone to read – especially older individuals. Readable body copy is usually in the 10-14 pt. range. Anything larger than 14 pt. is called “display type” or “headline type” and should be used for headlines and subheads.
- **Leading** – Leading is the space between lines of type. Adding at least a point of leading between lines increases readability.
- **Writing tips for readability** – Forget what your English teacher told you about long paragraphs with topic sentences. Advertising paragraphs are short – no more than seven lines in most cases. Advertising sentences are short. One and two-word “sentences” are sometimes used for emphasis. Select “juicy” words that pop “word pictures” into your reader’s mind – but never use a complex, three-syllable word when a simple one will do. “House,” not “habitat” or “love,” not “affection” for two quick examples.

Creative Concepts in General Advertising

The Big Idea

Very few people in your target market are going to slow down long enough to “figure out” your ads if they are not simple and clear on first viewing or reading. For this reason, general advertisers find it effective to focus each of their campaigns on one “big idea” that is executed across all media. This “big idea” is sometimes called a tag line. It may appear as the headline of a print ad, or at the bottom of the ad near the logo. It could be the “hook” of a television or radio jingle, or a tag line at the end of such a spot.

The “big idea” should focus on making your product or company’s competitive benefit real and actionable to your target market. It shouldn’t be in marketing language – it should be in the language of your target consumers. Examples of classic “big ideas” include AT&T’s “Reach Out and Touch Someone,” General Foods International Coffee’s “Celebrate the Moments of Your Life,” Nike’s “Just Do It,” and Dell’s “Be Direct.” You will notice that the longest of these is nine syllables. That is by design – that’s about all a targeted customer can remember without trying.

Television Basics

General-advertising television spots seldom run more than 30 seconds these days, and your average viewer isn’t paying full attention. Thus you need to focus on one main idea in your ad, ...there’s no time for multiple concepts or a progression of ideas. When

developing a TV spot, think the whole thing through in video first – not words. TV’s main strength is its visual aspect and the ability to demonstrate things, while copy is secondary in this medium. Creating a TV ad today is much like writing and producing a mini-movie or a video for MTV.

Because so many TV ads these days are subject to “zipping” (fast-forwarding past the ads on tape or on TIVO), “zapping” (flipping around other channels during the commercial break) or “flushing” (losing the viewer while they visit the bathroom) – it’s important to get your viewer’s attention right away. This can be done by various methods – lots of motion, total silence, using arresting sounds or voices, arousing curiosity, and so on. In addition, it’s important that if you are showing words on the screen, your announcer is also saying those words – otherwise viewers may suffer from cognitive dissonance and won’t retain either set of words. But if you are demonstrating something on-screen, it’s fine to talk about something else – viewers can see what you’re showing them and don’t need to have that reinforced so literally.

Here are a few of the typical TV formats you might consider:

- Demonstrations such as product-in-use or a torture test
- Before and after or side-by-side comparison
- Slice of life (often blended with problem/solution)
- A set of vignettes showing various product uses or various types of people using the product
- A short movie with the product blended in

- Testimonials or celebrity endorsements

Radio Basics

Whereas television is all about visuals, radio has no visuals – they are left up to the listener’s imagination. While television commands the viewer’s attention at least some of the time, radio is often used as a companion medium or as background noise while driving, working or relaxing. Radio copy should be conversational and personal – written one-to-one. It’s vital to get the listener’s attention right off the bat with your ad, to...otherwise it will remain as part of the background noise. This can be done with a unique voice, a call to attention, selecting out the audience, with music, or sound effects, among other methods. General-advertising radio spots may be as long as 60 seconds, but as with television, they can only get across one main idea per spot.

A few typical radio formats to consider are:

- Straight announcer (recorded in advance)
- Announcer or on-air personality (done live)
- Dialogue between two people (often blended with problem/solution)
- Jingle – either for the whole spot or blended with an announcer
- Celebrity endorsement (often with announcer lead-in and/or ending)

Retail Advertising Basics

Most effective retail ads in daily or weekly newspapers or on television or radio are comprised of four important elements:

1. Store image – Ads should “look and sound like the store” and have the same “look and feel” as other company promotions.
2. News/timeliness – Retail ads are meant to drive traffic, and thus should feature a certain time-limited sale or offer, new product arrivals, special events or other reasons to visit now.
3. Specifics – Retail customers “shop the ads” and want to know what colors and sizes your turtleneck sweaters come in, what they are made of, the brand name, and so on. Model numbers, series numbers, and other specifics also help customers know what to expect when they get to the store.
4. Price – People in the market for a \$100 CD player likely want neither a stripped-down \$29.99 version nor a souped-up \$500 job. They want to know the price range of the item your promoting before taking time to visit your store. If you’re having a sale or other price promotion, be specific about that as well.

Out-of-Home Basics

Outdoor advertising gurus caution that your general-advertising billboards should contain no more than 7-10 words for maximum effect. Sometimes all you need for billboard

copy is the “big idea” for your campaign. The most arresting billboards include a dominant, attention-getting visual – but keep in mind that billboards should be in harmony with the “look and feel” of the rest of your ads and promotions. You may be able to sequence your ads so that the first one in a series asks a question, and the next one answers it. Or you may use billboards for a teaser campaign with a bit more added each week or month until the new product, store or event is fully revealed to the viewer.

Creative Concepts in Direct Marketing

How Direct Marketing is Different

The essential character of direct marketing lies in its *action orientation*. General advertising may inform, persuade or remind prospects about products or services, but it does not sell. 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’re going to get and what they have to do to get it – be it a product in exchange for a price, free information in exchange for a phone call, or some other quid pro quo. In addition to action orientation, direct marketing has several other important characteristics. It is:

- Targeted
- Personal
- Measurable

- Testable
- Flexible

While most any medium can be utilized for direct-response purposes, this section details some how-tos for several of the most prominent direct marketing media: direct mail, catalogs, and broadcast.

Direct Mail

A direct mail package that sells a product or service should take the place of a retail store experience for the customer. For example:

- The outer envelope serves the same function as a store window – to select the audience and entice them inside
- The letter takes the place of personal sales – using “you-oriented” language to speak directly to the buyer and answer the buyer’s objections
- The brochure takes the place of the product display or demonstration
- The reply device takes the place of closing the sale

One of the “pros” of direct mail is that it allows for a variety of formats – everything from postcards to multi-dimensional “bulky packages.” In addition to the four “classic package” elements mentioned above, a direct mail package may include such pieces as:

- Business Reply Envelope to make it easy for the prospect to respond
- Premium slip to highlight a free offer
- Publisher's letter to overcome specific objections
- Involvement device such as stickers to indicate selections on the reply form
- Reminder slips
- Article or ad reprints
- Testimonial flyers
- Questions and answers
- Samples
- Computer disks, videos, DVDs or CD-ROMs

Less personal and more promotional than the classic envelope-enclosed direct mail package – but also less expensive in most cases – is the self-mailer. This piece does not come in an envelope – it's folded and/or stapled to encompass all the elements of the letter, brochure and reply device. Postcards are used more and more as mailing costs increase and people's attention spans decrease – they can drive traffic to a Web site where full information is available, remind subscribers that it's time to renew, or complete other simple and straightforward communications with customers.

Catalogs

When Montgomery Ward and Sears reigned supreme in the world of American catalogs, their thick “wish books” served the purpose of a general store by mail. But as Americans

gained mobility and suburbs spilled into what had been remote farmland, many more shoppers were able to visit cities, towns, and outlying malls to make their purchases in person. Thus, catalog merchandisers were forced to find new reasons for being – resulting in today’s “niche marketing” landscape.

To succeed in today’s competitive catalog realm, each firm must discover and fulfill one or more unmet needs of a target group of consumers. That special niche can be determined through:

- Research to see what catalogs are already in the marketplace and where gaps exist
- Consumer research to determine their unmet needs and wants in terms of merchandise mix
- Exploration of niches based on factors other merchandise such as better selection, finer quality, more affordable price or appealing presentation

Catalogs are merchandise-driven, and it’s wise to put your most appealing merchandise, and/or the items with the best margin, in what are called the “hot selling spots.” These are, in order of strength:

1. Front cover
2. Back cover
3. Inside front cover spread
4. Center Spread

5. Inside back cover spread
6. Spread near the order form
7. On the order form itself

Copywriters often are invigorated by the prospect of a new catalog concept, and the first time through is exciting – what with discovering the merchandise and the target market, setting the tone of the catalog, and so on. But much of catalog copywriting can become a bit dull and repetitive – so writers in this field need to find ways to keep themselves fresh.

These methods could include:

- Keeping an eagle eye on the competition
- Using the catalog's products yourself and observing the reactions of family and friends as well
- Making friends with the merchandisers to get their perspective on products' unique aspects
- Thinking like a consumer – what would excite someone about this item?
- Pay attention to results and do your best to increase sales
- Don't stay in your cubicle – check out customer service, the shipping department and other areas of the company to stay in touch with the overall business

Broadcast

Direct response TV and radio spots are – by and large – longer and more laden with copy and benefits than their general advertising counterparts. Keep in mind that these spots must overcome inertia to the extent that a prospect picks up the phone, goes to a retail store, or visits a Web site in response to your promotion. Direct response spots often are created on a shoestring, unlike the expensive general-advertising productions that are broadcast for major brands.

Products that perform well in direct response TV spots include those that shine in demonstration, have wide appeal, are not available at retail, and have an acceptable price range – usually not much more than \$9.95-\$39.95. More expensive products can be sold using a two-step approach of lead generation with follow-up by phone or personal sales.

Formats for direct response spots often are similar to those described in the general advertising section, but they must be structured to make a sale. They include considerable repetition, and need plenty of time to get ordering instructions across including the appropriate toll-free number and/or Web site.

On the radio, personalities such as Dr. Laura and Rush Limbaugh – while expensive to work with – can yield exceptional results when they endorse products on their own talk shows. Radio spots often employ much more humor than direct response television spots – in part because humor offers a palatable way to employ repetition of important points and response information.

Creative Concepts in Sales Promotion

As with public relations, in many cases you will find yourself working with sales promotion specialists to enhance your efforts at spotlighting products or services. In this situation, it is imperative that you ensure the sales promotion program they develop is in keeping with the brand image, “look and feel” and overall campaign theme you have developed for your general advertising and direct marketing efforts.

The most prominent example of sales promotion is the coupon. A typical mistake in developing coupons is to forget to include benefit-oriented material along with the “price deal” or other promotion. Your targeted customers won’t care about getting \$5 off the regular price of a product unless the product itself intrigues them. Your sales promotion efforts have to help sell the product’s attributes and benefits to optimize results.

Sweepstakes and contests are other typical sales promotion efforts. Because of the laws, rules and controversy surrounding sweepstakes and contests, it is wise to engage the services of a company that specializes in running these promotions. Be sure, as always, however, that the theme and prizes they come up with are in keeping with your product’s brand image, and appealing to your target market. For example, a grand prize of a Ford Focus or F-10 pickup truck might be very exciting to the 18-25-year-old market, while older and more well-heeled empty nesters would be more intrigued by their own version of the “dream car” – a BMW Z-3 or equivalent.

Creative Concepts in Public Relations

Public relations experts often deem their field more compatible with the management function of business than the marketing function. They consider themselves “the right hand of the CEO,” rather than mere “publicity seekers.” On the other hand, when we discuss public relations as one of the four main aspects of Integrated Marketing Communications, we are focusing mainly on seeking publicity – which is indeed part of the public relations arsenal.

Public relations efforts can be extremely cost-effective. What’s more, having a third party (a magazine, newspaper, TV show, etc.) say positive things about a product or service is very powerful. The other side of the coin is that since coverage resulting from public relations efforts is not paid for, it is also not controllable. It takes media savvy and careful cultivation to optimize relationships with reporters and minimize chances that a long-sought PR opportunity will turn into a negative story.

While respecting public relations professionals to ply their own craft, IMC creative types will be wise to work with the PR team to ensure that the news releases, special events and media contacts they make are in keeping with the overall brand image and campaign theme being promoted via general advertising, direct marketing and sales promotion.

If you embark on your own publicity program, understand that most news releases will not be acted upon in any meaningful way without follow-up and cultivation of the

reporter and/or editor involved. It is important that the same PR professional makes these contacts over time to develop a cordial relationship with each journalist. It is vital that this PR professional take calls and return calls from journalists in a timely manner, too – and not hide from the media if controversy arises.

You should take time to read the publications and watch the shows where you would like coverage for your product so that you can make constructive suggestions on where you might fit in – the “Forever Young” segment on NBC’s Today Show, for example...or the weekly executive profile in a regional business publication. And remember that legitimate media outlets are completely separate from their advertising departments and that journalists will not take kindly to suggestions like “We’re a big advertiser – we’d like to see you cover this story.”

Get to know the publication’s schedule and don’t call a reporter who is “on deadline.” Realize that reporters and editors at legitimate publications and broadcast outlets do not have to give you approval of your expert’s quotes or the photos they take – indeed, they make take offense if you ask. Try to come up with information or angles that will intrigue reporters and editors as well as their readers and viewers – if you don’t get past these gatekeepers, your story will never see the light of day.

Here are some tried-and-true themes to consider for your news releases.

- New Products

- How-to Information
- Controversy
- Celebrity Involvement
- Human Interest
- Timely Information

Putting it All Together

Integrated Marketing Communications efforts can best be orchestrated by a cross-functional team using a comprehensive promotional plan as their “bible.” Mutual respect, open communication, and an absolute commitment to focusing on the target consumer – rather than on internal squabbles and turf wars – will help ensure that this team is successful in identifying and executing the ideal mix of general advertising, direct marketing, sales promotion and public relations.