

Direct and Interactive Marketing in IMC Education:

Marketing vs. Mass Communication Approaches

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Special session:

The State of IMC Education: What About Direct/Interactive Marketing?

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As the marketplace shifts away from the traditional focus on mass communication, practitioners/employers from business and communication realms agree that Integrated Marketing Communications is important and necessary to their work. But are educators creating graduates that are adequately prepared? The current research examines how two broad disciplines, marketing and mass communication, treat the teaching of Integrated Marketing Communications and how they incorporate (or fail to incorporate) direct and interactive marketing methods into that coverage. This paper first briefly reviews the state of IMC as a field of research, then considers practitioner approaches and educator viewpoints, and finally takes an exploratory look at how marketing and mass communication educators introduce the topic of IMC to their students. More specifically, IMC course syllabi were examined as well as introductory textbooks in marketing, mass communication, public relations, and advertising to determine how each discipline introduces the IMC concept to students generally, and more specifically how they address direct and interactive marketing as part of that process.

The academic literature suggests that IMC as a concept has developed beyond mere coordination of promotional and communication activities into a strategic and holistic approach to reaching and persuading customers. According to Cook (2004), IMC has evolved from first meaning ‘coordinated’ marketing efforts, to then meaning ‘harmonious’ activities (‘one voice’), to ultimately mean ‘completeness’ in terms of a holistic approach. The true value of the IMC process is synergy, which happens at the customer level via media *consumption* rather than at the firm level through media distribution (Schultz, 2006). Duncan (2005, p. 5) describes IMC as “an ongoing, interactive process” and points out that “interactive, two-way communication is just as important as one-way mass media messages.”

From a professional's perspective, practitioners have generally embraced the concept of IMC, with advertising agencies in particular adopting the approach as "both sound practice and a source of added revenue" (Stammerjohan et al. 2005, p. 55). Early on, Rose and Miller (1994) found that communication professionals, regardless of discipline, accepted and supported IMC as a necessity, and Kitchen et al. (2004) note the concept of IMC "has now become an apparently integral part of the marketing and corporate communication strategies of many companies" (p. 1417). Grove, Carlson, and Dorsch (2007) concede that although there is no agreed-upon definition of it, "organizations have embraced IMC as a means to effectively and efficiently target and attract the splintering mass market through the transmission of a unified message across all 'contact points' between organizations and their consumers" (p. 37).

Integrated Marketing Communications has been studied extensively in academic research from both theoretical and practitioner standpoints and has enjoyed widespread acceptance as a practice (Stammerjohan et al., 2005), but little has been written about IMC from an educational perspective. How is it taught, how does this differ by discipline, and how are growing areas such as direct and interactive marketing addressed? There appears to be some agreement that educators need to be teaching IMC principles in both business and communication realms in order to produce qualified graduates. In fact, Moriarty (1994) noted "cross-discipline management skill is the biggest barrier to IMC" (p. 44). Do educators thus have a responsibility to nurture such cross-disciplinary skills? Educators from both advertising and public relations appear to agree that advertising and PR employers are demanding skills not necessarily covered in their individual programs (Roznowski, Reece, & Daugherty, 2004). A recent study conducted of Fortune 500 marketing and communications professionals found that 96 percent of respondents agreed that regardless of specialization, all marketing and communication students

should be taught the principles of IMC (Roznowski et al., 2004). But what is known about the approaches currently being used by educators in various domains?

For this study, a two-fold approach was administered. First a content analysis from a sample of IMC syllabi was conducted to determine if discipline differences were evident. Although not intended to be fully representative of all IMC courses, the search attempted to make a preliminary comparison between the two disciplines in terms of the course content and coverage. The search produced a total of 41 course syllabi (35 for marketing courses and 6 for communications courses). Terminology, incorporation of IMC concepts, and the intermingling of philosophical perspectives from the marketing and communication disciplines were explored. Next, Study 2 examined how the concept of IMC is initially introduced in introductory courses in marketing, mass communication, public relations, and advertising in an effort to identify basic conceptual differences by discipline. The focus of this content analysis was to compare and contrast how each discipline initially defines Integrated Marketing Communications as well as the space dedicated to coverage of IMC and the general focus of the topic. If a textbook included IMC as its own chapter, the inclusion or exclusion of important marketing communication topics was also investigated. Topics included direct marketing, interactive marketing, advertising, public relations, sales promotion, personal selling, optimization of the mix of tools, budgeting, measurement and objectives of IMC. Finally, observations were made regarding each textbook's approach and focus on IMC.

The findings of this research supports one of the conclusions reached by Schultz, et al. (2007, p. 28) that “for the most part, units identified as IMC are generally nothing more than marketing, advertising or promotional management programs re-fitted with IMC terminology” and in the field of mass communications the coverage, or lack thereof, of IMC in introductory

courses indicates the likelihood that many graduates will not be completely prepared when they enter professional life. Although marketing textbooks have, for the most part, incorporated the concept of IMC, a more holistic approach to the topic is still needed. Direct and interactive marketing tools and techniques in particular are largely neglected by current approaches both in IMC courses and in introductory courses across the disciplines studied. As Patti (2005) laments, “one wonders what happens to all of the talk about interdisciplinary teaching, multidisciplinary collaborations on research projects, and jointly sponsored academic programs” (p. 8). Perhaps a field like IMC, which is interdisciplinary in nature both in terms of its conceptual underpinnings and the many tools it employs, is ripe for just such a multidisciplinary approach.

Despite the inconsistencies in educational approaches to IMC, there has been general agreement among practitioners across disciplines that IMC is important and necessary (Roznowski, Daugherty, & Reece, 2002). In addition to the obvious importance of IMC in marketing firms, Kitchen et al. (2004) note “as major participants in planning, coordinating and implementing integrated marketing communications, advertising and public relations agencies play a critical part in the whole process” (p. 1421). Thus, the study of IMC should create a skill set that is valuable to practitioners/employers from graduates of marketing, mass communication, public relations, and advertising programs alike. And based on the recommendations of academic research on IMC, this skill set should include approaching IMC from a holistic, customer-centered viewpoint, with an understanding of both traditional methods of communication as well as new technologies that allow for a more personalized dialog with the customer (i.e., direct and interactive forms of marketing). The results of the current research suggest that educators are not adequately introducing students to the concept of IMC.

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