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Barriers to the implementation of Integrated Marketing Communications: The client perspective.

Discussions on Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) in the academic and practitioner journals are gradually changing from examining definitions and justifications to sharing good practice, with an acceptance that IMC is the only way forward in the multi-platform digital environment in which we now need to operate. Despite this growth in confidence, agencies report that the initiative in implementing IMC has to come from the client and barriers such as lack of understanding and organisational structures are preventing this from happening. But what do the clients think? There has been very little research into clients' perception of IMC and its implementation. This study addresses this issue by examining the views of senior personal across both the client and agency sides of the industry. These views are obtained by analysing quantitative and qualitative feedback from an online questionnaire. Results show that the client is aware that IMC needs to be at the strategic level of an organisation and does perceive its implementation as difficult. The main challenge they face is in influencing other departments within the organisation to co-operate. The implications of these findings are explored further.

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There is evidence to suggest that our understanding of IMC is evolving. Kliatchko (2008), who provides an overview of the development of research from 1990 to 2006, proposes that discussions have moved on from definitions and justifications to more specific areas such as the relationship between IMC and Branding and the importance of Internal Marketing. He provides a definition which is built upon this developing knowledge.

> *"an audience-driven business process of strategically managing stakeholders, content, channels, and results of brand communication programs"*

One of the main themes in the definition that has gained acceptance is that the process must be customer-centric, which acknowledges the shift of power that has taken place over recent years due, to a great extent, by changes in technology. This is achieved through the use of extensive databases that provide information on customer purchase behaviour and consumer insight through interaction and dialogue. The definition also states clearly that true integration takes place at strategic level and involves a number of different stakeholders. This is supported in a study by Laurie and Mortimer (2011) which found that agencies were beginning to acknowledge IMC as encompassing all levels of the organisation, i.e. at a strategic level, which is an advancement from opinions voiced only a few years ago (Kitchen et al, 2008) when IMC was mainly perceived to be "Coordination of the various communication disciplines". This strategic shift is seen as fundamental to the achievement of true integration.

This increasing understanding has resulted in a general acceptance across the industry that IMC is here to stay. As Bidlake (2011) states "the debate has shifted from whether integration is a good thing to how to deliver it" (p.3). However many client companies are not adopting IMC fully and research suggests that they need to take the lead on this. Kitchen et al (2004) found that agencies would not adopt an integrated approach unless it was a requirement of their clients and it was therefore necessary for the client organisations to become integrated themselves. In the Kitchen et al (2008) study it was suggested by agency executives that they were able to put together strategic campaigns but were dependent on being given that responsibility by their clients. An industry report of note was published in 2006 by the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising ((IPA) and other industry bodies entitled "Magic and Logic". This report concludes that both clients and agencies have joint responsibility to adapt to the changing environment but that agencies are limited in their advancement if clients are not adopting best practice.

An understanding of the views of clients and the challenges that they face is therefore crucial as it is clear that agencies do not have enough influence or power over the clients to instigate such an approach. This insight into the client world is presently lacking in both the academic and practitioner literature. Kitchen and Burgmann (2010) acknowledge that "As most IMC research has been conducted with regard to advertising agencies, little is known about actual IMC application within client firms" (p. 7). Kitchen and Schultz (2009) also suggest that too many studies have examined the role of the agency in the implementation of IMC while it is now accepted that the client businesses are the prime movers in development of integrated programmes. It is therefore important to examine the clients' perspective on IMC in more detail.

Barriers to the implication of IMC

A number of barriers to the implementation of IMC have been suggested in the literature. A study by Eagle and Kitchen (2000), based in New Zealand, found that clients identified two main obstacles. Firstly, staff were ill equipped and needed to develop new skills and expertise to work in this integrated manner. Secondly, existing organisational structures made integration difficult. These two themes have been acknowledged in more recent studies. Holm (2006) suggested that the subjects taught to people involved with communications at a tactical level were quite different from those taught to staff operating at a strategy level and consequently it was difficult for these two groups of people to find common ground and work together towards agreed goals. Agency executives have also found that a lack of client knowledge and inappropriate organisational structures have made it difficult to work on IMC campaigns with their clients (Schultz and Kitchen, 1997; Kitchen and Schulz, 1999). Clients have been found to be reluctant to change working habits and responsibilities when faced with the perceived complexity of planning and coordination that IMC requires (Fill. 2009). Luck and Moffatt (2009) suggest that this is because client organisations find the concept difficult to understand. Consequently, instead of taking the time to implement comprehensive and fundamental changes they prefer to undertake small-scale adjustments which often provide disappointing results leading to disillusionment.

The purpose of this research is therefore to contribute to this small but increasingly important area of research by re-examining the client perspective on IMC. More specifically this study explores clients' understanding of IMC and the challenges and obstacles that they face in implementation.

Methodology

This paper is part of a larger piece of research which was designed to compare the views of clients, agency staff and academics on IMC. It was undertaken by creating an on-line questionnaire which was distributed to individuals who had an interest in IMC, whether from the client, practitioner or academic point of view. The link to the on-line survey was distributed in two main ways to reach the required target audience, adopting a snowballing sampling method. Contacts within all three categories of participants were utilised and encouraged to pass on to similar colleagues. The link was also kindly published in Campaign magazine on 9th December 2011 in their special supplement "What next in Integration". Eighty two people responded to the questionnaire with 33 people from the agency side of the business and 23 from the client side. Out of this total of 56 people, only 9% identified themselves at being at "entry level" of the organisation. The rest of the participants saw themselves in the categories of middle or senior management, board level or owner. We were therefore satisfied that we were reaching people who not only had an opinion on IMC but also some influence.

The questionnaire consisted of a number of statements which have been taken from the literature of the subject and the participants were asked to agree or disagree with the statement and then explain their response. This provided the study with both some overview of opinions in terms of statistics, although obviously the numbers are small, and also some rich qualitative data. The statements were written, piloted and rewritten in some cases, to ensure that there was no jargon or unnecessary terms that might mislead the participants. The pilot study did reveal that some participants found the statements to be rather controversial, which was our intention in order to get people to respond and join into the debate.

Three of the statements were relevant to clients' understanding of IMC and barriers to implementation and therefore, for the purpose of this paper, the results from those statements are presented along with comments. The three statements are as follows:

Q1 Client organisations find the concept of IMC difficult to understand. Instead of implementing fundamental changes they undertake small-scale adjustments which can provide disappointing results and lead to disillusionment.
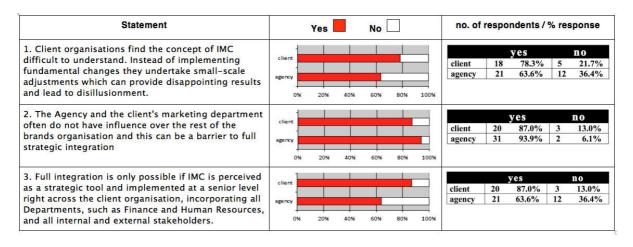
Q2 The Agency and the client's marketing department often do not have influence over the rest of the brands organisation and this can be a barrier to full strategic integration

Q3 Full integration is only possible if IMC is perceived as a strategic tool and implemented at a senior level right across the client organisation, incorporating all Departments, such as Finance and Human Resources, and all internal and external stakeholders.

The first two statements were chosen to reflect the barriers that had been identified in the literature in terms of levels of knowledge and understanding and organizational structures. The last statement provided an opportunity to examine the clients understanding of IMC and therefore provide some validation and triangulation with Q1. The statements were designed to encourage clients to respond by providing qualitative feedback as well as the yes or no answer and were successful in achieving that goal.

Results and discussion

Table 1: Three statements with results

Statement	Yes ■ No □	no. of respondents / % response
1. Client organisations find the concept of IMC difficult to understand. Instead of implementing fundamental changes they undertake small–scale adjustments which can provide disappointing results and lead to disillusionment.	client / agency	yes: client 18 78.3%, agency 21 63.6% / no: client 5 21.7%, agency 12 36.4%
2. The Agency and the client's marketing department often do not have influence over the rest of the brands organisation and this can be a barrier to full strategic integration	client / agency	yes: client 20 87.0%, agency 31 93.9% / no: client 3 13.0%, agency 2 6.1%
3. Full integration is only possible if IMC is perceived as a strategic tool and implemented at a senior level right across the client organisation, incorporating all Departments, such as Finance and Human Resources, and all internal and external stakeholders.	client / agency	yes: client 20 87.0%, agency 21 63.6% / no: client 3 13.0%, agency 12 36.4%

Question 1

The quantitative results indicate that client understanding of IMC is still a barrier with 78% of the clients agreeing with this statement, compared with 63% of agencies. However the client comments suggest that small changes do not always create disappointing results.

I feel it is dependent on what the small changes are. Fundamental changes are not always beneficial for a company and can hurt more than heal.

I guess this may vary from organisation to organisation but this is not my experience

This is very much influenced by the level of experience in the organisation....sometimes organisations think they can apply new ways, only to find out that there are cultural, functional, and other barriers that reduce the effects and implementation

The comments suggest that organisations are trying to implement IMC, perhaps in stages, and finding challenges in doing that. There seems to be a recognition that it is difficult and needs to be approached with care. Statements from the agency staff supported this view. For example:

Not necessarily difficult to understand, but difficult to implement.
Hard to get all parts of the business to buy in.

These findings support previous studies where clients' lack of understanding or relevant skills has been identified as a barrier (Eagle and Kitchen, 2000, Holm, 2006). It is perhaps surprising that these levels have not increased in line with academic and practitioners' knowledge (Laurie and Mortimer, 2011). In fact the results suggest that agencies perceive clients' understanding to be higher than the clients do themselves. This is of interest as many of these previous studies are based more on the perceptions of agency staff of clients rather than asking the clients directly (Kitchen and Schulz, 1999). The actual level of understanding for both agencies and clients is explored further in Question 3.

Question 2

Both the clients and the agencies see the challenge of having influence over other departments within the organisation as being an important issue, with 87% of clients and 93% of agencies identifying it as such. These statements would suggest that in some situations the Marketing department does not have the remit to influence other sections within the organisation who they may not have authority over. If they do not have the support of the CEO or someone at board level this is very difficult to achieve. Even then it is possible that the CEO is not knowledgeable about Integration, as indicated in the quotations below.

In its essence, the statement is true that even marketing departments do not have the influence over their internal stakeholders....especially in organisations in which marketing has been reduced to functionalities and strategic marketing thinking is absent (which, I believe, is true for very many organisations)

Often departments within a business work independently, however it is down to the marketing department to drive the strategic direction (with the support of the CEO)

Partly true but even if the formal responsibility and budget ownership is not there, influencing and education can still achieve the integration

Too often in my experience, CEOs, FDs and non-execs think they know best when it comes to marketing strategy. Their thinking on marketing issues is often outdated. (from my experience in service-based sectors)

Full integration can only be achieved at this strategic level where both internal and external stakeholders are contributing to the development and communication of brand values (Luck and Moffatt, 2009) and consequently this lack of involvement of internal audiences would seem to be a significant barrier. Technology has made it very easy for any individual to communicate with thousands of people at the touch of a button. This communication can be

misunderstood, misinterpreted and misrepresented leading to a "buzz" in a matter of minutes. It is therefore increasingly important that all staff members understand their responsibilities in communicating clear corporate and brand values in all they say and do. This influence over internal audiences is obviously linked to the organisational structure and the lines of authority. If there is not an IMC ambassador at board level then the importance of marketing may be a difficult concept to communicate and turf wars and infighting can be the result. Fill (2009) argues that marketing communications is often seen as a cost rather than an investment and finance-led corporate objectives and short-term goals create many obstacles.

Question 3

The results would suggest that the clients are more aware of the need to integrate IMC at the strategic level than agencies are, with 87% of the clients agreeing with the strategic statement compared with 63%. The rather contrasting results from Question 1 and 3 may be an indication that clients appreciate the strategic element of IMC but find it difficult to operationalize and implement. The influence that the marketing department can have over others is again evident. There is also some indication that some clients still see the integration level being at marketing rather than the strategic level in a similar way to agencies (Laurie and Mortimer, 2011).

...But of course this is very difficult to achieve in practice, given that the marketing function is rarely the core department, capable of wielding the influence to drive this approach.

Does not need to include all departments only relevant ones (Marketing, Product, Brand, to some extent Sales)

The whole company should live and breathe the same objectives and culture

Conclusion

The literature is increasingly showing that the role of the client is crucial in the implementation of IMC and yet clients are the unknown quantity in the industry compared with academics and agency executives. This study goes some way to addressing the balance. It updates our knowledge in terms of what clients think about IMC and the challenges they face in implementing it. It seems clear that clients understand the strategic approach required for implementing IMC but feel ill prepared or concerned about how it should be implemented. The important challenge that faces them is getting their voice heard when they do not necessarily have the authority to instruct or influence other departments within the organisation. The role of the CEO is obviously crucial here in providing support but financial restrictions and unpredictable futures may inhibit him or her in introducing fundamental and controversial changes in the organisational structure and culture. Internal communications is obviously the key here and needs to be perceived by clients and agencies as an important element to the successful implementation of a strategically led IMC approach. New technologies have brought many barriers down between people due to the ease of communication and have been used extensively by organisations to have a dialogue with customers. Perhaps it is time for the marketing department to employ these skills and expertise to communicate to fellow work colleagues and involve them in the branding of their organisation. It may also be the role of the agency to support the marketing departments in convincing management that an IMC approach is necessary to compete successfully in the future.

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