

Integrated Brand Communications

A powerful new paradigm

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Carolyn Ray
Director
Integrated Communications
and Planning

The case for a new view of integrated communications

It wasn't too long ago that many in the industry were flagging Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) as a revolutionary concept. However, it's fair to say that while IMC is theoretically sound, it has not stood up to the promise and hype in practice.

IMC is based on the principle of integration, which holds that all communications emanating from a single strategic platform will generate a significantly greater return on the communications investment than would be the case with traditional independent media executions.

In a client-agency relationship, the theoretical benefits are clear. For the client, there is the potential for significant synergies and stronger connections with their customers. For the agency, there is the promise of a more complete partnership with the client that provides a greater share of the total marketing communications budget.

However, three underlying currents have undermined the potential of IMC.

1. The very agencies that innovated the concept are constrained by media bias.

If an advertising agency is shaping an integrated marketing communications plan, it is a fair assumption that the plan will revolve around advertising. While an important medium, advertising is not the only component of a successful integrated marketing plan. It is extremely difficult for organizations that earn fees through media-driven efforts to provide clients with unbiased integrated media plans.

2. Clients themselves are poorly structured to truly execute an integrated communications plan.

Most marketing communications organizations are structured around individual media with managers given a mandate to manage specific media budgets. The tendency to build silos makes it difficult to build IMC plans internally.

3. The IMC process begins too far down the value chain to be effective.

Many companies are often more focused on 'action' and tactics rather than strategy. In many cases, internal pressure to show marketing 'activity' displaces 'big picture' planning. As a result, we often see tactical communications plans shaped by tactical specialists working in silos. These plans need to be shaped first on the strategic level for the benefits of integration to be fully realized.

Toward a new paradigm

Enter Integrated Brand Communications (IBC) – a holistic communications strategy that integrates all communications activities – such as public relations, advertising, investor relations, interactive or internal communications – to manage the company's most precious asset – its brand. Since Integrated Brand Communications flows from Brand Value Management, it is central to the notion of managing brands to optimize value.

The starting place for Integrated Brand Communications is the business, not marketing communications. Integrated Brand Communications begins with understanding the role of brand within the business model and determining how brand can help grow and sustain the business. However, this first means that we must view brand as a financial asset and identify the key drivers of brand value so that we can influence, control and measure them through an integrated communications effort.

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Integrated Brand Communications engages the highest levels of management because it brings strategy, finance and marketing communications together to manage the brand to optimize its value. It serves as a catalyst for uniting executive, financial and marketing management and ultimately helps to remove internal barriers that may have prevented an integrated communications effort.

Integrated Brand Communications: The Process

The primary value of Integrated Brand Communications is that it provides management with a comprehensive process for leveraging brands to sustain and grow the business. To begin shaping an Integrated Brand Communications program, we need to adopt a strategic approach that is focused on building stronger connections with clients or consumers.

There are ten steps necessary to build a successful Integrated Brand Communications program:

Step 1: Start with understanding the role of brand in your business.

“Brand” is defined as a relationship that secures future earnings by creating customer loyalty. Given this, the starting point for Integrated Brand Communications involves analyzing the role that brand plays – and can play – in securing greater loyalty across the business. To determine the value of brand, audits for business strategy, customers, employees and key stakeholders should be undertaken.

This step involves challenging long-held assumptions regarding the key drivers of the business. Beliefs such as: “price is our only added value,” “ours is simply a commodity business,” “we can’t alienate our distribution partners,” and “our brand plays no role, it is all about relationships,” need to be re-examined in the light of what is possible, rather than what has always been.

Step 2: Understand the factors that contribute to brand value.

For years, executive management has sought a means to quantify the return on marketing communications investments, only to be told that it is impossible to isolate this data. With Integrated Brand Communications, this is no longer true. This process provides management with the tools needed to judge brand asset investment performance relative to all other asset investments made by the enterprise.

Some companies choose to do this through Brand Valuation, which derives an objective measurement to benchmark brand value. However, the value of “valuation” in the integrated brand communication process is not necessarily the raw number that is calculated. Because Brand Valuation identifies the contributing factors to brand value, it helps to develop and measure the impact of communications activities on the brand, or to forecast “what-if” planning scenarios. By measuring the relative change in brand value from assessment period to assessment period, we can objectively quantify the return on investment on funds used to build and promote the brand and determine the overall effectiveness of the integrated communications program.

Step 3: Understand whom you need to reach.

Once the role of brand has been explored, the next critical step is to identify key target audiences. To prioritize this effort, it is necessary to distinguish between targets that drive the success of the business and targets that simply contribute to, or influence, its success. In some cases, if you successfully influence your driving audiences, the resulting business performance will be strong enough to motivate your contributing audiences to take notice and respond.

Getting people to change the way they think about you is no easy task. You must deliver precisely targeted messages that rise above the clutter and compel them to alter their assumptions.

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The primary challenge is to design a brand strategy that connects with your driving audiences and a communications plan to connect with your contributing audiences.

Step 4: Frame your BIG idea.

Big ideas define unique value propositions. Communicating sameness is a waste of valuable resources. Communicating meaningful distinctiveness is a catalyst for growth. Big ideas stem from a clear understanding of audience needs, marketplace dynamics and your business strategies. Big ideas match your unique skill set with the needs of your driving audiences.

Great big ideas satisfy four fundamental criteria. They are: relevant in connecting with audience needs; differentiated and stand apart from competitive propositions; credible in their believability; and have the stretch to grow with your business as it evolves.

Step 5: Understand how far you need to shift perceptions in order to own the big idea.

As they develop a loyal relationship with a brand, audiences move through a process of progressive involvement. During that process, perceptions may develop that could hinder their ability to respond to your distinctive promise. These “perception barriers” must be overcome to convey your big idea.

Some barriers are more difficult to surmount than others. If your barriers are awareness-related, greater exposure to your message may be all that is needed to fix the problem. However, if you face questions of credibility, you must actually change the way your targets think about your value to them.

Step 6: Build the messages to shift perceptions.

Getting people to change the way they think about you is no easy task. It requires a communications effort that is capable of penetrating the formidable walls people erect as protection against daily information overload. To make them take notice, you must deliver precisely targeted messages that rise above the clutter and compel them to alter their assumptions.

A compelling message that delivers a powerful, big idea can generate communications success even with modest media budgets. Before you spend, make sure the messages are right. It will help to optimize the return on investment.

Step 7: Understand the role of each medium in making the shift and sustaining momentum.

Once you have the messages, you have to pick the most appropriate delivery vehicle. As a general rule, each progressive stage of involvement requires more individualized communications to meet the needs of your audience.

Advertising and PR are powerful awareness-building tools. They are also helpful in instilling a sense of relevance. High-touch media – such as collateral, direct and interactive – are better for relevance and instilling a clear sense of differential value. Once the purchase decision is made, direct interaction is the most effective tool for shaping satisfaction and encouraging loyalty. The challenge is to leverage the relative power of each medium to build an integrated solution that will work the best for your unique audience communication requirements.

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Step 8: Determine the optimum media allocation.

The ultimate execution challenge is determining the optimal media mix to propel target audiences toward developing an intense loyalty to your brand. The trick is to optimize the power of your message within the limited means of your budget. This will help generate a compelling return on investment, securing increased funding in the future.

Creative media planning to optimize existing budgets will be an important skill that influences your success, especially in year one. Then, with demonstrated results, the case can be made to invest appropriate funds for brand building in year two and going forward.

Step 9: Measure results.

The investment case can only be made with a clear sense of the facts. Convincing financial management to view integrated brand communications as an investment, rather than as an expense, requires that you demonstrate a relative return on that investment that can be judged relative to all competing investments.

By exploring the effectiveness of messages and media through qualitative input, you will have the tools needed to optimize the approach in subsequent years.

Step 10: Revisit Step 5...and repeat the process again...and again...

Integrated Brand Communications is an organic process, one that can be fed, nurtured and made stronger through active involvement. Once you have measured your initial results, return to the program's foundations and examine opportunities for enhancement.

Return to your messages and explore opportunities to make them more compelling. Return to your media assumptions and determine if you're reaching your targets. Return to your budgets and determine if you've allocated them as effectively as possible. And finally, return to your assessment tools and determine whether they are generating the insight you need to grow and manage your program.

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We offer a range of services including brand valuation, research, strategy, naming and verbal identity, corporate identity, packaging design, retail design, digital branding tools, and internal, corporate, investor, and marketing communications.

We enable our clients to achieve greater success by helping them to create and manage brand value.