

# **Integrated Internal Marketing Communication (IIMC)**

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The primary purpose of the paper is to extend the notion of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) to an organisation's internal marketing and consequently show how the concept of internal communications may enhance profitability resulting through employee 'buy-in', commitment and 'trust'. Additionally, the paper also takes the view that if internal marketing is to be considered a useful construct then the tools and programs used should reflect those of traditional marketing approaches. In doing so, the study recognises that there exist internal market segments requiring separate marketing efforts and communication programs in an integrated approach. Hence the study attempts to propose four major imperatives within a conceptual framework for implementing Integrated Internal Marketing Communication (IIMC) program in the internal market: (i) create the appropriate atmosphere for communication, (ii) application of IIMC tools, (iii) measuring the IIMC program and (iv) feedback for corrective action.

**Keywords** Internal Marketing, Internal Communications, Integrated Marketing Communications, Internal Branding

## **Introduction**

The fundamental reasons offered for the popularity of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) among marketers is that it is good for the bottom line and a necessity in today's fractured market place. Nonetheless, despite the evolution and increased critical evaluation of IMC, it remains neither universally understood nor universally accepted as a useful construct. Furthermore, IMC is not consistently applied as a marketing principle and according to Hutton "...has resulted in 'superficiality', 'ambiguity' and 'blurred focus'..." (Hutton 1997, p. 8).

The purpose of this paper is to develop a conceptual framework which extends the notion and value of IMC as a communications process targeting only a firm's external market. By directing Internal Integrated Marketing Communications (IIMC) towards their employees, firms are able to promote employee satisfaction, trust and commitment, thereby strengthening the firm-employee relationship and ultimately affecting profitability by enhancing customer satisfaction (Herington, Johnson and Scott 2006).

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## **Background to IMC**

IMC has been variously described in terms of a process, a marketing orientation, an organisational structure, a set of marketing tools, a basis for accountability and a philosophy. In fact it is all of these. However, according to Robert Lauterborn who helped coin the IMC label, "...what IMC has come to mean to too many people is little more than two-from-Column A, one-from-Column B media selection" process (Lauterborn 2003, p. 14). Schultz, agrees that the focus has been one of "... trying to integrate disciplines rather than customer or prospects communications" (Schultz 1997). In addition, focusing IMC efforts on the integration of a firm's external marketing communications disciplines ignores the gains in competitive advantage to be had from a horizontal integration across a firm's total communications efforts, including that of its internal market.

Viewing IMC as a customer focused process is the first step to developing a common understanding of its purpose and value. Because the purpose of any business is to develop a customer, and profitability is defined as a function of customer behaviour, then customer orientation is not only logical but essential. IMC integrates everything that impacts customer behaviour, not just the organisation's conscious outgoing marketing messages. It begins with product development and includes packaging, pricing, selection of distribution channels, channel management, customer relationship management and total quality management. It "...involves the multi-dimensional, interactive, continuously measured communication that connects the brand or product and the customer..." (Lauterborn 2003, p.15). In addition, Cravens et al. identify four attributes that set IMC apart from traditional promotional strategies. They are comprehensive, drawing on all of the media, tools and technologies available to affect behaviour; unified in voice; they share the same or related targets; they have co-ordinated execution of all the components of the organisation; and IMC programs emphasise productivity in reaching the designated targets when selecting communication channels and allocating resources to marketing media. (Cravens et al. 2000, p. 230)

These views about IMC share three key attributes which are fundamental to its value as a marketing concept. They recognise that IMC is about the connection between the brand and the customer and that communication in all its forms facilitates this relationship. Implicit is the understanding that "...marketing is the whole business from the point of view of its final result, which is from the customers' point of view...marketing today, is not a function, but a way of doing business... marketing is everything and everything is marketing..." (Harris 1993, p.13). Most significant in this approach is the implicit recognition that purposeful and coordinated management of customers and their relationship with the organisation is at the heart of building brand equity, which at a time of brand proliferation is critical to success.

Previous studies have shown that employees who are familiar with and committed to an organisation's market orientation and brand values play a critical role as 'part-time marketers' (Gummesson 2000). According to Gummesson, all customer oriented employees, not just those associated with marketing, help to deliver the brand promise. They can influence

customer relations, increase customer satisfaction, customer perceived quality and ultimately revenue. Therefore, directing integrated marketing communications towards a firm's internal market is itself a critical part of achieving sustainability and profitability.

## **Internal marketing and integration of internal communications**

In recent times marketing professionals and scholars have given considerable importance and attention to Internal Marketing (IM). According to Lings (2004) much of the literature on internal marketing contains a variety of interpretations of the domain of internal marketing, its aims and its focus. For example, Berry's (1981) interpretation of internal marketing is based on the perspective of treating employees as customers, which can lead to changes in employee attitudes and in turn positively affecting customer satisfaction. Groonroos (1985) explained internal marketing as an instrumental behavioral strategy for developing the "state of mind" that allows customer service effectiveness and the building of relationship marketing. Ballantyne (2003) focused on the importance of networks and knowledge renewal while explaining the concept of internal marketing.

A number of researchers further attempted to provide empirical evidence that internal marketing can be considered interchangeably with internal marketing orientation to describe the effort to improve internal climate (Lings 2004; Lings and Greenley 2005; Gounaris 2006). Rafiq and Ahmed (2000) stated that internal marketing is targeted towards all employees in a holistic approach through inter-functional coordination, organizations change and competence. Few other authors (see, for example, Bruhn 2003; Tansuhaj et al. 1998; Lings 2004) have worked on linking internal and external marketing functions in the context of services marketing. Nonetheless, other studies have also provided both normative and empirical evidence on the prominence of Internal Marketing (IM) in today's organizations and how embracing it can create success for organizations (see, for example, Ahmed and Rafiq 2003; Lings and Greenley 2005; Chong 2007).

Today, the way organisations communicate with their internal markets, better known as Internal Communications (IC) (Tansuhaj et al. 1998; Thomson and Hecker 2000; Ahmed and Rafiq 2003; Kong 2007) is considered one of the most essential internal marketing considerations. Ahmed and Rafiq (2003) attempted to give a more acceptable and holistic explanation of internal marketing through the use of internal communications as a cultural framework and instrument for achieving strategic alignment while building customer service competence. This reflects the importance of internal communication in operationalising internal marketing concepts/activities and achieving organizational competitive advantage and success.

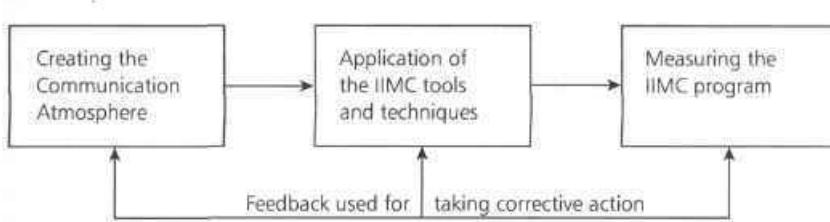
Schultz and Kitchen (2000) have further suggested that the marketing and communication manager of the 21<sup>st</sup> century must recognize that there are multiple markets, marketplaces, customers, channels and so on. Consequently, there has been a shift in emphasis from the individuality of advertising, sales promotion, personal selling and public relations to a movement towards Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC). Nonetheless, not only has the contribution of IMC remained a theoretic concern for academics, it has also

emerged as a practical challenge for marketers to move towards integration of the marketing communications messages and channels (Lee and Park 2007). Even though marketers and scholars advocating the notion of internal communication have realised that communicating internally merits close attention, the role of internal communication to foster employee 'buy in', trust, commitment and the necessity to integrate various internal channels of communications have received little attention in the academic literature. In fact, according to Ahmed and Rafiq (2002) one of the most important aspects of internal marketing is communication with employees. Chernatony (2001, as cited in Valister 2004) suggested that in order to coherently transfer brand values to the company's stakeholders, employees must develop a shared understanding of what the brand stands for, through implementation of a 'unified' communication approach.

Duncan and Everett (1993) in their study argue that without integrated perspective there is a danger that the communication messages received by customers (i.e. internal customers) will be inconsistent and subject to considerable variation in both content and style. This is similar to Asif and Sergeant (2000) study where the authors argue that the resultant decoding of the organization's message will be confused and fragmented and ultimately the message may fail to 'sell' the vision of the company to employees. Ahmed and Rafiq (2002) further argued that if organizations do not integrate the tools of communication effectively and fail to build and implement the right communication strategies to their employees then the brand meaning and values decoded by the employees may lack clarity and understanding. This may lead further to poor communication, which in turn may lead to confusion and lack of employee motivation and commitment. As a result we suggest that it is a significant necessity to integrate the internal communications effort within organizations to foster employee 'buy-in', trust and commitment.

### **Integrated Internal Marketing Communication (IIMC) - the imperatives**

The core vision and value of the majority of successful organizations across cultures is to maintain the highest standards of corporate behaviour towards employees, consumers and the society. That is, if firms take good care and maintain quality relationships with their internal customers/employees then employees in turn will be better equipped to deal with external customers. Nonetheless, from a practical point of view most organizations are more or less successful in their external market; however, there is criticism in recent years firms/organisations have not been successful in translating or selling the shared vision and values to their internal market. Further, organizations are also facing challenges with issues such as high employee turnover, lower level of employee satisfaction, labour unrest and lack of employee commitment especially in transitional and developing economies. One of the main reasons why a majority of organizations are not performing well in terms of retaining, satisfying and translating the core vision and values to their employees is the failure to implement appropriate integrated internal communication program to their internal market.

**Figure 1 Management imperatives for implementing IIMC**

Asif and Sergeant (2000) argue that communication offers the means of creating and implementing behavioural changes both within and outside the organizations. In addition, different authors have argued that at the intra-organizational level the communication process has been shown to have a variety of roles including; the creation of a unified corporate identity by improving the insight that individuals have of their organizations, encouraging the motivation and commitment of employees by ensuring an understanding of the company's objectives and goals and reducing the potential for misunderstandings, discrepancies and conflict within and between departments (see, for example, Young and Post 1993; Foreman 1997; Gilly and Wolfenbarger 1998; Asif and Sergeant 2000). Therefore, to support our analysis on the necessity to integrate internal communications effort and to provide framework for management actions concerning communications in the internal market, a conceptual framework shown in Figure 1 is proposed. The proposed framework suggests four major imperatives for implementing IIMC within organizations: (i) create the appropriate atmosphere for communication, (ii) application of IIMC tools, (iii) measuring the IIMC program and (iv) feedback for corrective action.

#### ***Imperative 1: Creating the appropriate atmosphere for communication***

Foreman (1997) argues that in an intra-organizational context, the first step towards conceptualising and managing the system of internal communication effectively is to create the atmosphere for communication. Asif and Sergeant (2000) gives additional insight by stating that the concept of creating communication atmosphere refers to the organizational context in which communication is developed and the overall ambience of the business. Therefore, in order to initiate integrated internal marketing communication program to foster internal branding within organizations, the primary stage should consist of developing an appropriate atmosphere for communication inside the organization. In order to achieve this organisation needs support and commitment from the top management and especially from the Managing Director(s). According to Bijoor (2003) the CEO of the organization is best positioned to contribute as a brand evangelist within the internal hierarchy. Therefore the Managing Director from day one should take the role of a brand evangelist within the boundary of organizations and sell the 'vision' and 'values' of the company to the employees. The Managing Director's

attitude should influence the behaviour of other directors, managers and staffs within the organization so that they understand clearly the vision, mission and goals of the company. Once the vision is offered to employees top management need to ensure that a culture of communication permeates the entire organization. This will help management to effectively communicate with employees to 'buy' in the vision offered by the organization.

Asif and Sergeant (2000) have argued that when a culture of communication pervades the entire organizations it encourages horizontal and vertical communication flows across the organization. Bijor (2003) further argues that the CEO needs to 'cascade' communication down through the ranks and every employee in turn needs to interact with the communication process, thus resulting in a multi-dimensional communication flow. For example, internal communication should not only be restricted to bottom-up and top-down flows but should be multi-directional in nature with ideas and viewpoints acknowledged and picked from any level and communicated in a multi-dimensional and realistic manner.

In addition, according to Asif and Sergeant (2000) for effective communication to take place a balance needs to be struck between formal and informal internal communication. Therefore, the appropriate atmosphere for communication will consist of frameworks and procedures that allow each formal multi-dimensional line of communication to be effective in both informing employees of the overall direction of the company and encouraging feedback from them. An appropriate communication atmosphere will also facilitate more personal forms of communication to encourage positive relationship building among different levels of employees of the company. Once the appropriate atmosphere for communication is initiated various integrated internal communication tools/techniques is to be applied to achieve the desired outcome.

### ***Imperative 2: The integrated internal marketing communication tools***

According to Ahmed and Rafiq (2002) various internal communication tools, whether internal advertising or other internally directed promotional activities, can be used to aid the 'buying into the programme' process by employees. But what is necessary for effective communication is co-ordinated use of communication tools. Young and Post (1993) supported this notion by stating that internal marketing communications have as much to gain from integration as those directed towards external communications. Therefore, in order to foster internal branding, employee satisfaction and commitment, various internal communication tools, such as personal selling, workshops, internal advertising, appropriate incentives and reward, need to be applied in an integrated approach.

According to Ahmed and Rafiq (2002) personal selling in the form face to face communications to individuals and groups have far greater impact than other communications methods. The managing director as well as respective directors of each department in organizations may initiate and arrange gatherings where employees, an entire group or a representative group, can ask the top management questions and give feedback. Face to face meetings will be crucial to solve labour unrest and during times of uncertainty and change in the company. In addition, the senior executives of the company

should also arrange meetings with management trainees so it helps the trainees to 'buy in' to the company vision and values in a positive way from the very beginning of their career. Ahmed and Rafiq (2003) suggest that if companies do not appreciate the existence of different employee segments and their different needs they will continue to produce messages that hold little meaning for the targeted segments. Therefore, feedback from the face-to-face meetings between top management and employees of different grades will help management to be more empathic in the design of their communications to employees. The face-to-face meetings can also run in the form of interactive workshops where the main objective of each workshop will be the selling of the vision and values of the company using a unified and consistent core message and showing that words of management are put into action for improving employee satisfaction.

Various forms of internal advertising may also be used as effective communication tools to foster internal branding and employee commitment within the company. Newsletters, company newspapers and company notice boards and conferences can be used in a co-ordinated way to communicate with employees. Interest in the new internal communication program, for example, will be generated by publicizing them in the company newspaper and on notice boards. This will be followed up by the setting up of conferences, newsletters and brochures giving further and detailed information.

Stauss and Hoffmann (2000) have argued that Business TV, possesses an extraordinary high potential to lift internal communication to a new performance level. Stauss and Hoffmann (2000) further suggest that Business TV helps to minimize different gaps that arise during the communication process. Therefore, the purpose of using Business TV as a tool of the internal marketing communications program is threefold. First, use of Business TV will help to sell the vision and shared value of the company to the large employee in a cost-effective way. Second, Business TV will help to close any gaps that remain from the application of the other tools of internal marketing communication used within the company. For example communication tools such as newsletters, brochures and company newspapers may be effective in creating awareness and curiosity about the message sent to employees but may not be as effective in building credibility of the message content. This is exactly where the use of Business TV will play a vital role for organizations implementing integrated internal marketing communications. It may help the employees to decode the message content that has been sent to them by management in a more credible way. Third and importantly Business TV will also aid in the development of multi-directional communication flow within the company. For instance, Business TV can be used to have interdepartmental interactive conferences to enhance horizontal communication flow.

According to Ahmed and Rafiq (2002) employees must be offered some benefits in order to encourage changes in behaviour. Therefore, in order for employees to 'buy in' to the vision of the company and change behaviour according to the core values of the company, use of motivational incentives such as continuous cash bonuses and awards should be used within the company. These incentives help to motivate employees toward behaviour that is consistent with the vision and values of the company and also to increase productivity of employees. Berry and Parasuraman (1992) have argued that firms intent on rewarding the best performers often focus too narrowly on

financial incentives. Therefore, in order to avoid a narrow focused reward system emphasizing only financial incentives, multiple forms of recognition programs should also be used in the company, such as career advancement and non-financial recognition. Most importantly, management should link the financial and non-financial rewards to the organization's vision and strategy so that incentives as a form of internal communication move the firm in the intended direction.

### ***Imperative 3 and 4: Evaluating the IIMC program and feedback***

Organizations need to continuously measure the effectiveness of the integrated internal marketing communication program (IIMC). The effectiveness can be measured by asking and getting feedback on some strategic questions, for instance, whether the IIMC program implementation was successful in changing behaviour of employees and whether the-behavioural change is consistent with the vision and values of the company. The actual measurement techniques that can be applied to get feedback from employees about the internal branding initiative may include techniques such as conducting surveys, focus groups, face to face meetings and using company publications through Question and Answer (Q&A) columns (see, for example, Young and Post, 1993). In addition, techniques such as encouraging employees to draw pictures about the company and asking to associate 'words' or 'phrases' about the vision and values of the company will indicate if the IIMC program was able to foster internal branding and employee commitment within the organization. The results from the IIMC program measurement should be used strategically and in a continuous process by the management to take any corrective actions and close communication gaps while implementing and executing the plan.

### **Future recommendation**

In order to sustain the effectiveness of the integrated internal marketing communication program top management should involve all levels of employees in all the step of the process, continuously communicate in a consistent manner under all organizational conditions and show full commitment to the program. Without involving all levels of employees in the communication process selling the shared vision of the company will be impossible. Therefore, every staff from operatives to managers should act as a communicator and facilitator for fostering the internal branding of the company. Further, management in future should be transparent while continuously communicating about the vision of the company but importantly in a consistent manner. Consistency in the message content while selling the vision of organizations as maintaining the highest standards of corporate behaviour towards employees, consumers and the society as a whole is essential. This in turn should help the employees to 'buy in' the shared vision of the company in a better way and giving them better understanding about the company objective and goals.

According to Young and Post (1993) finances improve or constrain the ability of implementing internal communication program. Therefore, full commitment from senior executives and especially the CEO/Managing

Director of the organization might result in greater financial resources for communications within the company. Young and Post (1993) have further argued that one way to allocate a budget is to compare allocations to internal communication with those to external communications. Thus, companies should also compare budget allocations between external and internal marketing communications and appropriately allocate a budget for each. In doing so, top management can implement its integrated internal marketing communication more effectively to foster internal branding within the company. Consequently, internal branding in the long run should also help organizations to be more internally market oriented; thus ultimately taking care of employees in a more empathic way so that employees in turn look after the external customers of the company (Herington et al. 2005).

### **Practical implications of IIMC**

According to Gronstedt "*Integrated communication occurs best when management's world view assumes that all aspects of the company - the quality of the product, the reliability of the service, the sincerity of employees, the content of advertising campaigns, the credibility of public relations activities - communicate in some way with customers*". (Gronstedt quoted in McElreath 1997, p. 178). Kotler agrees that the days of functional marketing are over. "*We can no longer afford to think of ourselves as market researchers, advertising people, direct marketers, market strategists - we have to think of ourselves as customer satisfiers - customer advocates focussed on whole processes*", (Kotler et al. 2001, p. 678).

However, organisations remain contested, political sites and corporate feudalism remains a powerful force with the potential to militate against IIMC. Individuals typically have emotional, financial and social investments in their current roles and homeostasis remains their priority. The successful adoption of IIMC may require a fundamental shift in personal values and a removal of the "pecking order" culture of many organisations. Structural adjustments to integrate the functions of departments that have typically been separate domains, such as marketing, human resources and public relations, may be necessary to provide a basis for integration. Unless a cross functional approach that captures every aspect of the business input, throughput and output is adopted, efforts at implementing an IIMC approach will be vitiated.

### **Conclusion**

To sum up, the framework presented in this paper gives direction for management in terms imperatives to implement Integrated Internal Marketing Communication Program (IIMC) within organizations. The outcome of effective implementation of IIMC is likely to foster internal branding (i.e. develop shared vision and values), employee satisfaction, commitment and trust. In order to initiate the integrated internal marketing communication program, the initial stage consists of developing an appropriate atmosphere for communication inside the organization through top management support, multi-directional communication flow within the internal hierarchy

and balance between the informal and formal communication. In addition, various internal communication tools, such as personal selling, workshops, internal advertising, appropriate incentives and rewards should be applied in an integrated approach in order to foster internal branding, employee satisfaction and commitment within the company. Additionally, the framework also gives insight about the need to continuously measure the effectiveness of the integrated internal marketing communication program (IIMC) and use the result of the measurements as a strategic feedback tool to take corrective action to close any communication gaps. It was highly recommended that in order to sustain the effectiveness of the integrated internal marketing communication program top management should involve all grades and levels of employees, continuously and consistently communicate under all organizational conditions and provide full commitment to support the program.

### **Further research**

The central thesis of this paper is that extending IMC to an organisation's internal marketing can enhance profitability by improving firm-employee relationships resulting from employee 'buy-in', commitment and 'trust'. While the paper advocates continuous feedback to measure the relative success of the IIMC program, and makes suggestions about the types of mechanisms that can be employed to gain this feedback, the mechanisms primarily support the measurement of individual communication program outcomes. As such the paper does not identify the key indicators of a strong firm-employee relationship or how the strength of these indicators can be measured.

Herington, Scott and Johnson (2005) proposed nine indicators of firm-employee relationship strength. These are: cooperation, balanced power, communication, attachment, shared goals and values, respect, trust, absence of damaging conflict and commitment. These indicators warrant further investigation in the context of the proposed IIMC model as they are precursors to long term relationship strength rather than mere feedback about individual program outcomes.

Similarly, working within the Public Relations discipline, Hon and Grunig (1999) found six elements that are indicative of a strong relationship with an organisation's key constituencies. These include: control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, commitment, exchange relationship and communal relationship. According to Hon and Grunig, administering a questionnaire based on agree/disagree statements about relationships with an organisation, enables the organisation to accurately measure their constituencies' relationship with the organisation.

Further, this paper takes the view that if internal marketing is to be considered a useful construct then the tools and programs used should reflect those of traditional marketing approaches. In doing so, the paper recognises that there are internal market segments, which require separate marketing efforts and communication programs. However, in the absence of any definitive work on the 'consumption of employment', further research needs to be carried out to determine the extent to which various elements of

traditional consumer behaviour such as motivation may be applied as useful constructs within the employment market.

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