

## **Universities Branding Process about Creating Value through Integrated Marketing Communications**

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### **Abstract**

Integrated marketing communication has been widely accepted by businesses around the world. This is a marketing communications system that allows organizations to better manage their brand images. Integrated marketing communication strategies are aimed at combining or integrating the elements of the communication mix, such as advertising and public relations in order to create a balanced and consistent marketing communications message that strengthens the brand. Integrated marketing communication, if managed correctly gives an organization a competitive advantage because of its cost effectiveness and its ability to maximize the impact of its product and services development and the communication of the organization's messages within the marketplace.

The market environment in higher education is extremely competitive. Universities need to become better with the coordination of their marketing communication programs. So universities create a strong emotional bond with their markets in order to be perceived as a relevant choice in their target markets' minds. Many universities experience difficulties coordinating their marketing communications programs and could benefit by integrating their marketing communication efforts to realize greater productivity within their recruitment, retention and development efforts.

**Keywords:** Universities, Integrated Marketing Communication, Branding, Marketing, Sustainability Competitive Advantage

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The emergence of integrated marketing communications (IMC) has become one of the most significant example of development in the marketing discipline (Kitchen and Schultz, 1999). Nowadays the market environment in universities are very extremely competitive (Daves and Brown, 2002; Mount and Belanger, 2004). Universities need to become better with the coordination of their marketing communication programs and create a strong emotional bond with their markets in order to be perceived as a relevant choice in their target markets' mind (Rosen, Curran and Greenlee, 1998; Armstrong and Lumsden, 1999; Mount and Belanger, 2004). Many universities experience difficulties coordinating their marketing communication efforts to

realize greater productivity within their recruitment, retention and development efforts (Sands and Smith, 1999).

The problem addressed in this study is the challenge that universities face in coordinating all their marketing communication efforts to better achieve their institutional marketing goals and therefore they need a management system to integrate all of their marketing communication efforts.

## **2. INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATION (IMC)**

Integrated marketing communications has been widely accepted by business around the world as a marketing communications system that allows organizations to better manage their brand images (Kitchen et al., 2004; Sheehan and Doherty, 2001). IMC, if managed correctly gives an organization a competitive advantage because of its cost effectiveness and its ability to maximize the impact of its product and services development and the communication of the organization's messages within the marketplace (Belch and Belch, 2001; Ireland, 2002; Low, 2000; Varey and White, 2000).

IMC was related to the different definitions in the literature. American Association of Advertising Agencies (1989) stated that "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 communication impact". Schultz (1991) said that "the process of managing all sources of information about a product/service to which a customer or prospect is exposed, which behaviorally moves the customer toward a sale and maintains customer loyalty. Keegan, Moriarty and Duncan (1992) explained that "the strategic coordination of all messages and media used by an organization to collectively influence its perceived brand value". Kotler et al. (1999) suggested that "IMC is the concept under which a company carefully integrates and coordinates its many communications channels to deliver a clear, consistent and compelling message about the organization and its products".

Gould (2000: 22) suggested that "IMC as a major strategic concept is not much different from other marketing or management concepts, methodologies or strategies that have arisen (e.g. the marketing concept, the product lifecycle, brand equity, or total quality management). All have an evolutionary, discursive and behavioral history in which the particular concept is defined and redefined, often many times. Never is there complete agreement on the meaning or value of any single concept."

Duncan (2002) noted that "a cross-functional process for creating and nourishing profitable relationships with customers and other stakeholders by strategically controlling or influencing all messages sent to these groups and encouraging data-driven purposeful dialogue with them". Schultz and Schultz (2004) reported that "IMC is a strategic business process used to plan, develop, execute and evaluate coordinated, measurable, persuasive brand communication programs over time with consumers, customers, prospects, and other targeted, relevant external and internal audiences". Kliatcho (2005) announced that "IMC is the concept and process of strategically managing audience-focused, channel-centered, and results-driven brand communication programs over time".

If we use a more limited definition we could say that marketing is a societal process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want through creating, offering and freely exchanging products and services of value with others (Kotler, 2003: 9). Smith et al. (1999) have defined IMC. They distinguish three definitions:

- (1) Management and control of all market communications.
- (2) Ensuring that the brand positioning, personality and messages are delivered synergistically across every element of communication and are delivered from a single consistent strategy.
- (3) The strategic analysis, choice, implementation and control of all elements of marketing communications which efficiently (best use of resources), economically (minimum costs) and effectively (maximum results) influence transactions between an organization and its existing and potential customers, consumers and clients.

Thus IMC has become a strategic issue and should, therefore, be treated in accordance with the nature of strategy and strategic decisions. The characteristics commonly associated with the concept of strategy and strategic decisions are, first, that strategy is concerned with the long-term direction of an organization or a company. Second, strategic decisions are likely about to gain some competitive advantage. Third, strategic decisions are concerned with the scope of the organization's activities. It is to do with what owners and managements want the organization to be like and to be about. This could and should include important decisions about visions, product range, withdrawal from or entering markets (Holm, 2006: 26).

For purposes of this research, the assumed definition of IMC will be "a strategic business process used to plan, develop, execute, and evaluate coordinated, measurable, persuasive brand communication programs over time with consumers, prospects, and other targeted, relevant external and internal audiences" (Schultz and Schultz, 2004: 20).

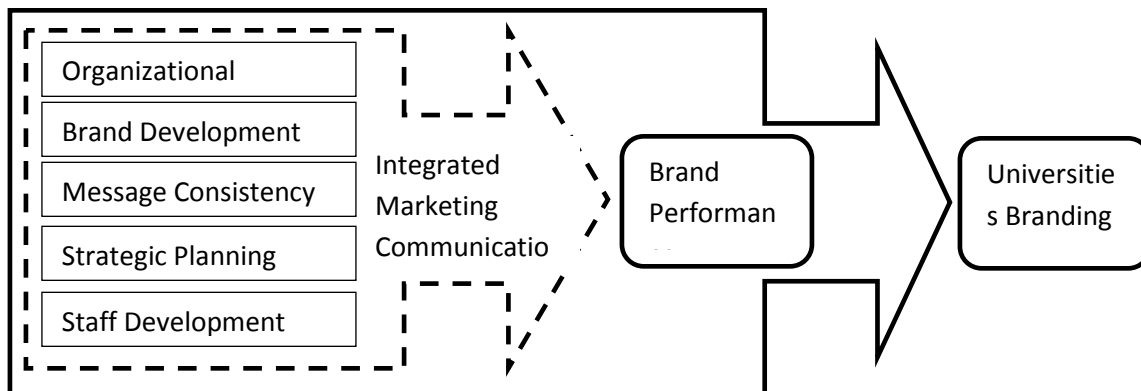
### 3. IMC AND BRANDING

Several authors have outlined how integrated marketing communications plays an important role in building and maintaining both customer relationships and brand equity (Ambler et al., 2002; Duncan and Moriarty, 1998; Jones and Blair, 1996; Keller, 2003; Madhavaram et al., 2005; Naik and Raman, 2003; Rust et al., 2004a; Schultz et al., 1994). Low's (2000) and Reid et al.'s (2001) studies outline the positive effect greater integration of marketing communications can have on brand performance. In subsequent research, Reid (2003: 245) highlighted "a positive relationship between brand-related (sales, brand strength, customer loyalty) performance and IMC". This point is supported by later research (Reid, 2005: 47) which illustrated how "there was a strong main effect indicating a positive relationship between the IMC process and brand outcomes" with brand outcomes being defined as (relative) sales performance, customer satisfaction and brand advantage (awareness, premium price and channel support offered). To date there have been a limited number of empirical studies which support the view that a greater level of integration with respect to marketing communications positively affects organisational/brand performance (Cornelissen, 2000; Low, 2000).

#### 4. IMC AND UNIVERSITIES

Nowadays the market environment in universities are highly competitive (Dawes and Brown, 2002; Mount and Belanger, 2004; Selingo, 2005). Technology is narrowing the visibility gap, ranking universities are growing in numbers, public funding is contracting, potential students are more sophisticated and international students are increasingly looking at other countries as an alternative (Klassen, 2000; McCormack, 2005). Universities need to become better at telling their story and creating an emotional bond with their markets (Armstrong and Lumsden, 1999; Mount and Belanger, 2004).

Studies indicate that IMC is a potential and important model for universities but has yet to be widely implemented in the universities field or adequately researched in the academic literature. Universities field has been in the commercial market place longer than most academics like to acknowledge. As private and public funding sources fluctuate in their generosity, universities are increasingly competitive in attracting new students and faculty who in their very nature are constantly thinking about new ideas and programs (Bok, 2003; Horrigan, 2007). In this study we propose the model shown below with universities branding process about creating value through integrated marketing communications (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Universities Branding Process**

We suggested that universities branding with an integrated marketing communications are depend on five variables as shown in Figure 1. These variables were determined as organizational resistance, brand development, message consistency, strategic planning and staff development.

##### 4.1. Organizational Resistance

In recent years, universities slowly adopt the concepts of branding and integrated marketing communications, and in turn, reconsider skill sets needed to manage these new strategies (Mount and Belanger, 2004). Brand development and IMC programs are difficult and sometimes painful discussion to have within the walls of universities (Jugenheimer, 1995; Ruch, 2001). It is easier for the academy to speak in terms of reputation and prestige that are built through investment over time (Brewer et al., 2006).

Maringe (2006: 469) describes that positioning thus involves three elements of developing a corporate brand or image, deciding on the market segments to serve and developing a communication strategy that accentuates the corporate capability to deliver to this market. Understanding choice and decision making of applicants feeds into this corporate positioning strategy through a clear identification of both the reasons for purchase behaviour of applicants. The ultimate image measurement for Brewer et al. (2006) regarding how effective a corporate has been with the development and communication of their service offerings is how prestigious the corporate is in the consumers mind. In fact, Temple (2006) suggests that what is referred to as university branding is actually corporate reputation and image (Horrihan, 2007).

#### **4.2. Brand Development**

Marketing research to universities are very important. Especially marketing research to inform their marketing communications strategies are important (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). Gatfield (2000)'s study on student's perception of quality showed a cultural difference between university market segments and recommended that corporates consider these differences when developing their communications strategy. The need to design messages differently to different market segments while communicating a consistent and relevant meaning for the brand is important for an corporate's brand development (Farr, 2003; Moore, 2004). Gutman and Miaoulis (2003: 105) explain that "an effective theme, consistent with the image the corporate is trying to project, ultimately allows for the creation and management of 'brand image'. A positive brand image can be a powerful influence in the decision to attend a university". They suggest that the brand represents all the cognitive and emotional factors that help define the corporate and that these associations need to be managed to develop a strategic marketing communications program. Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006: 333) state that although there have been a number of studies that examined image and reputation, the notion of branding has barely made its mark in university marketing. There are a number of concepts associated with branding that have still to be explored (Horrihan, 2007).

#### **4.3. Message Consistency**

Universities must develop consistent messages and images (Sevier, 2001). Consistency is a complex process. The parts are equal to the sum of the whole and indicators are needed to measure this complexity to inform strategic planning (Morrill, 2000). A marketing communications program should consider how to implement corporate standards while allowing for individual areas to create their own identity under a corporate umbrella (Sevier and Johnson, 1999; Kotler and Fox, 1985). Marketing communication efforts that create consistency and eventually strength in the brands over time (Mount and Belanger, 2004). Karrh (2000) suggests that the difference in beliefs held between market segments makes it more difficult to create synergy in an corporate image. The nature of the relationship between a university and its many and diverse constituencies and the care a corporate must take to manage a meaningful and consistent brand (McAlexander and Koenig, 2001). A consistent and meaningful brand image is critical in the current competitive university market continuously flooded with images and messages. To achieve consistency through an integrated corporate effort, university must have a

strong management team to coordinate the marketing and communications effort (Ramsden, 1998; Horrigan, 2007).

#### **4.4. Strategic Planning**

Strategic planning is vital for organizations. Because strategic planning eliminates the uncertainty of the future. Therefore, the strategic importance of internal audit. An internal audit will also allow the corporate to identify common marketing communications efforts as well as needed specialized activities (Liu, 1998). The audit should be used to inform the internal audience of the corporate's goals and receive feedback on its ideas. It takes an inclusive and persistent corporate effort to convince internal constituents that investment in universities and departments other than their own will also benefit them. The initial information gathered through the audit should be used to consider how groups can work together for individual and organizational goals (Liu, 1998; Sands and Smith, 1999; Horrigan, 2007).

#### **4.5. Staff Development**

Much of the strategic planning is directly by people elevated into positions of responsibility that typically have had little to no formal training in marketing or communications (Kittle, 2000). Many administrators climbed the academic ladder over time and their knowledge base is rooted in their academic discipline rather than a marketing communications background (Jugenheimer, 1995). Professional expertise in integrated marketing communications is needed in order for organizations to harness the strength of their organizations and effectively communicate with their markets (Maddox, 2005; Meister-Scheytt and Scheytt, 2005). Therefore, a cultural change is needed at universities before a strategic marketing communications program can be developed (Budros, 2002; Kempner, 2003). Today's current shrinking and competitive market has made it easier for the academy to accept the need for more aggressive marketing, but the debate continues to what type of marketing and communications is appropriate for an universities (Horrigan, 2007).

### **5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY**

In this study, the framework areas are organizational resistance, brand development, message consistency, strategic planning and staff development. These areas of study can be approached independently or combined in ways left to the researcher's conceptual design. A larger research scope may be applied for studying the sophistication level of the field's integrated marketing communications efforts. A quantitative analysis via surveying the universities landscape may offer insight into how the size of an corporate affects the policy decisions discussed. Recommendations for further research would contribute significant findings to applied studies..

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3<sup>rd</sup> International Symposium on Sustainable Development, May 31 - June 01 2012, Sarajevo

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