ABSTRACT

Work in Progress

The Evolution of IMC

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Donald Hurwitz, Ph.D., recently completed a five-year term as Chair of the Department of Marketing Communication at Emerson College, Boston, MA, where he is now Senior Executive in Residence. He can be reached at donald_hurwitz@emerson.edu.
The notion of “Integrated Marketing Communications” emerged about twenty-five years ago. Despite the common-sense understanding it presumes to elicit, the phrase has carried different meanings for different constituencies pursuing distinct purposes, which have varied over time. As a consequence, “IMC” has not ripened into a working construct to address the very real challenges that provided its original impetus.

This paper investigates the meanings and uses to which “IMC” has been put. To do so, it draws on articles that have appeared in the trade press and the academic literature, two journals devoted to the subject area and the descriptive/promotional literature of several academic programs established to pursue it. To the extent that identifying limitations of “IMC” as a functional construct serve as a critique, I also stake out an agenda for future development.

The outline of the story is this: “Integrated Marketing/Integrated Marketing Communications” emerged in the late 1980s in both the trade and academic literature. In the trade, IM, as it was often referred to, became a new label for an “old” field: direct mail marketing. As direct mail techniques burgeoned with the advent of databases and increasing competition, their reputation suffered; IM represented an attempt to rebrand the practice area, though it offered little beyond a contemporization of the name. In the academic arena, meanwhile, Integrated Marketing Communication represented a call to coordinate strategies across public relations and advertising activities. Over time, these had become anchored in different supply chains ported into different organizational departments and managed according to different organizational routines.

It appears a move was made to bring together strands of both these lines of interest at the Medill School at Northwestern University. There, Prof. Don Schultz established a research program and coursework organized around broadened notions of the “media/marketing channel
mix,” which validated the importance of expanding the marketing communication toolkit, while arguing “customer centricity” as the rationale for coordinating its elements. Variations on “strategic customer centricity” underpinned the formation of several new academic programs by around 2000, like the Master’s degree at Emerson and the B.S. at Ithaca, both labeled Integrated Marketing Communication.

By this point, however, the advent of web marketing--which might have fueled the drive toward expanded toolkits and the subsequent need for integration, strategic or otherwise--instead diverted attention from these and further subdivided the universe of marketing services providers. “Integrated Marketing Communications” disappeared from the trade press and the academic literature for the first decade of this century. It resurfaced about five years ago, in professional practice as a call to coordinate digital marketing across desktop web and mobile venues, and in the academy in new or redefined communications programs that housed a wider array of channel subject matter than ever and rhetorically equated “integration” with maintaining a channel agnostic posture.

Interesting as the institutional and semantic twists and turns of the phrase “Integrated Marketing Communications” might be to some, both our academic disciplines and professional practices to this day lack the hard-edged concepts necessary to grapple with the very real issues of channel proliferation, overwhelming but uneven volumes of prospect and customer data, heightened supplier competition, and the ensuing confusion about how organizations are to manage and direct resources to optimal effect. Probing how these can be addressed and developing protocols for doing so, driven by commitment to a sharpened notion of “integrated marketing communications,” represent relevant opportunities for educational programs for students, fodder for research programs for years to come, an arena of mutual interest that can bring together academics and professionals, and significant advancement of the contemporary professional practice of marketing communications.
Biography for

DONALD HURWITZ, Ph.D.

Don Hurwitz recently completed a five-year term as Associate Professor and Chair of the Marketing Communication Department at Emerson College, Boston, MA. He is now Senior Executive in Residence there, following twenty-five years as an agency-based, senior marketing communications strategist and executive.

After receiving his Ph.D. from the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois, Don began his career initiating the advertising program at Boston College. Opting to try his hand at agency work, he moved into account management and spent the next decade developing brand and promotional advertising for the likes of McDonald’s, TJ Maxx, New Balance and others. He then formed an early, integrated marketing strategy consultancy, serving clients like the Prodigy internet service, MCI and the Morino Foundation. During the dotcom boom he joined internet marketing agency Digitas, where as SVP he spearheaded direct and digital agency of record relationships with General Motors, FedEx and J&J. Hurwitz then shifted his attention to healthcare and education, developing applications of marketing databases and online courses. He joined Emerson College to spearhead revision of its undergraduate curriculum and to enhance its IMC offerings. The major was recently ranked #5 by USA Today among undergraduate Marketing Communication programs in the U.S.

Don reported on his curricular and experiential education initiatives since joining Emerson at previous summits. This year he returns to present his preliminary research on the evolution of IMC. Email him at donald_hurwitz@emerson.edu.