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INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATION AND ITS IMPACT ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

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Abstract:

In the current economic context, characterized by extremely fierce competition directed at winning or retaining various consumer segments, as well as by an unprecedented technological boom, the marketers' effort towards implementing new ways of communicating and bidding remains the only way to business success. Considered to be the most visible part of the marketing activity, integrated marketing communication tends to capture the attention of both providers and buyers especially, who need information from various sources to inform their purchasing decisions. Thus, the present paper aims to highlight the main tools which the specialists use in integrated marketing communication in their attempt to establish a permanent and efficient contact with both potential consumers and with actual consumers, as well as an analysis of secondary data sources regarding the impact false news broadcast through various media channels have on consumer perceptions.

Key words: *Integrated Marketing Communication, Media Communication Channels, Misinformation, Consumer Behavior*

1. Introduction

Consumers are daily assaulted by a multitude of stimuli, the vast majority of which are the result of marketing communication activities initiated by organizations operating on the domestic, international or global market. From TV, radio, internet or written media news to brand-driven techniques, everything is reduced to marketing communication, aiming at creating a unitary image of the organization, products and brand, with the ultimate goal of attracting and retaining customers.

The concept of integrated marketing communication, as well as the concept of integrated marketing, should be seen as being inter-correlated, while marketing communication is just one of the activities in the field of marketing.

Hugh Davidson (1997) pertinently captures the evolution of the concept of marketing from the departmental approach to the integrated approach, a method that

requires all components of a business to be combined and analyzed in their synergy so that the value provided to the customer is clearly superior and at a minimal cost (Table 1).

Starting from this integrated marketing approach, it can be said that regardless of the form of communication chosen by the organization, the goal is to convey a clear and unitary message, intended for a well-defined audience, in the most efficient manner (Brannan, 1998).

Table1: Main differences between departmental and integrated marketing approaches

The departmental approach	The integrated approach
Set overall five-year sales and profit targets	Review future markets, needs, technologies and
Develop individual supporting strategies and plans by department	Establish vision, priorities, competences, needed to win tomorrow
Combine departmental plans	Develop key strategies for value, innovation, competences, attitudes
Adjust five-year sales and profit targets	Convert into sales, profit and investment targets, and individual department strategy and plans
Characteristics of approach:	Market and competence-driven
Financially driven	
Department-based	Cross-departmental

Source: Davidson, H., Even More Offensive Marketing, 1997 in Tony Yeshin, Integrated Marketing Communications, p. 10.

What is the difference between promotion and marketing communication? The answer is obvious: the promotion implies the development of a “whole set of activities with extremely diverse objectives and means of action, including careful informing of potential consumers and intermediaries, specific actions to influence purchasing and consumption behaviors, to support the sales process” (Balaure et al., 1994).

Therefore, if the promotional activity is generally discontinuous, relying on a time-driven effort over a period of time (generally during company-initiated campaigns), marketing communication is characterized by communication techniques that can be appreciated as continuous (the brand, for example), which leads to the idea that the relationship between promotion and marketing communication is inclusive (Popescu, 2002).

Although the concept of integrated marketing communication has recorded a spectacular evolution since the last decades of the 20th century until now, it cannot be said that there is consensus or unanimity in what regards the approaches encountered in the literature. Regardless of the campaigns an organization might carry out or of the messages it sends to the target audience, all elements must be subordinated to the understanding of the so-called “hierarchy of communication effects” (Figure 1).

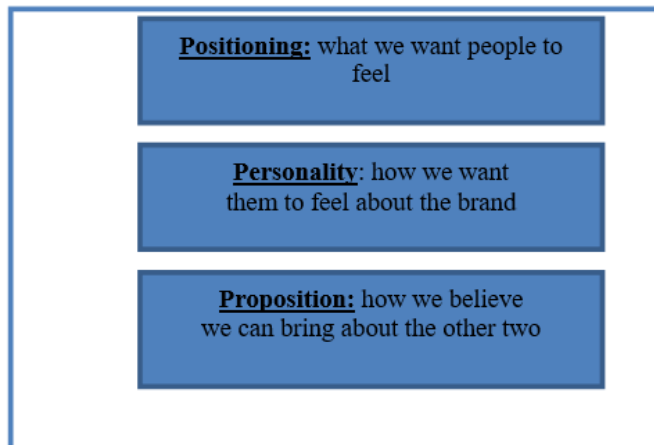


Figure1. The hierarchy of marketing communication effects

Source: Tom Brannan, *A Practical Guide to Integrated Marketing Communications*, 1998, p.15.

2. The marketing communication system

In 1989, the American Advertising Agencies Association defined Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) as: “A concept of marketing communications planning that recognizes the added value of a comprehensive plan that evaluates the strategic roles of a variety of communication disciplines (e.g. advertising, direct response, sales promotion, and public relations) and combines these disciplines to provide clarity, consistency and maximum communication impact” (Percy, 2008).

Another highly relevant definition belongs to Duncan & Everett (1993), who considered IMC to be the “strategic coordination of all messages and means of communication used by an organization to influence the perception of the value of a brand”.

Emphasizing once more the need for a synergistic approach to integrated marketing communication tools, Don Schultz and his collaborators define IMC as “a new way of looking at the whole, where we once saw only parts such as advertising, public relations, sales promotions, purchasing, employee communications and so forth” (Schultz et al., 1993).

A key definition of IMC belongs to Philip Kotler who, in 1999, referred to BMI as “the concept under which a company carefully integrates and coordinates its many communication channels to deliver a clear, consistent and compelling message about the organization and its products”. In 2003, he comes back with a new approach to the concept of IMC, arguing that an organization’s entire marketing approach should be regarded as “a way of looking at the whole marketing process from the point of view of the customer” (Percy, 2008).

As seen from the above-mentioned definitions, it can be concluded that the main purpose of IMC is always to find original channels of communication with both

actual and potential consumers so that all contact with the organization, product and brand be transformed into a future communication opportunity with long-term positive effects for all parties involved.

In order to make a meaningful analysis of the marketing communication process and the effects it generates, it is essential to understand what this process is based on and what the essential components are.

In sum, starting from the approaches of Schramm & Roberts (1971), Dominick (1990), and Kotler (1993), it can be argued that a complex model of the marketing communication process includes only a few of nine components (Figure 2).

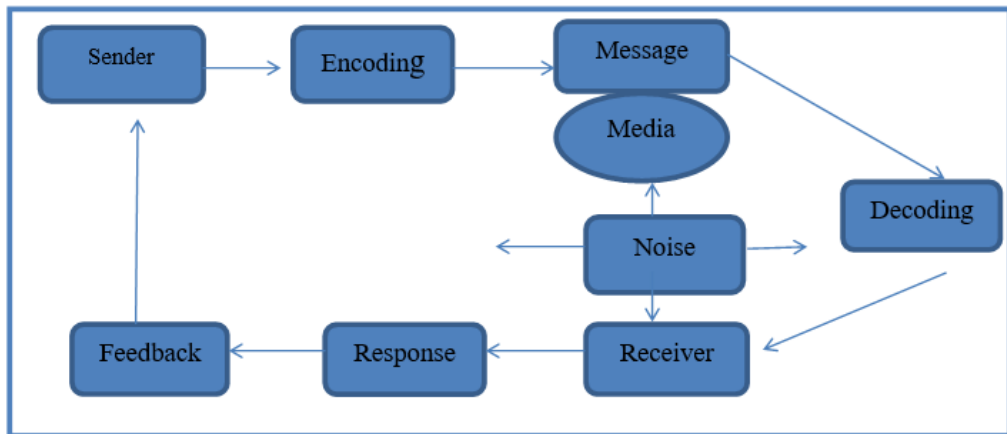


Figure 2. Components of the marketing communication process

Source: Tony Yeshin, *Integrated Marketing Communications*, 1998, p.13.

Each component of the marketing communication process is characterized by certain principles that need to be observed in order to optimize communication and the effects generated on the target audience. These can be outlined as follows (Popescu, 2002):

- the message sender should be perceived as a “strong, attractive, and credible” source of information so that the receiver identifies it and imitates its purchasing behavior for the products / services that are the subject of the campaign;
- communication is efficient if the broadcaster knows very well who the receivers are and what their needs and expectations are;
- the sender should find the best ways to express the idea to be transmitted through the message so that the receiver can correctly decode and understand the message that has been sent to him. Regarding the message to be transmitted to the receivers, the most important decisions for the success of the campaign relate to the content, structure and form of the message;
- the message reaches its target and produces effects on the receiver only if it is transmitted through a suitable communication channel, the options

being oriented towards personal and non-personal communication channels;

- the response is the receiver's reaction to the message; the relationship between feedback and response is part of the whole; feedback is considered that part of the response that returns to the source of communication.

As indicated above, the messages can be conveyed to the target audience by means of communication media (channels), each of which has advantages and disadvantages (Table 2)

Table 2: Main advantages / disadvantages of media channels

Communication medium	Main advantages	Main disadvantages
Newspapers	Flexibility; timeliness; good local market coverage; broad acceptance; high believability	Short life; poor reproduction quality; small "pass-along" audience
Magazines	High geographic and demographic selectivity; credibility and prestige; high-quality reproduction; long life; good pass-along readership	Long ad purchase lead time; some waste in circulation
Television	Combines sight, sound, and motion; appealing to the senses; high attention; high reach	High absolute cost; high clutter; fleeting exposure; less audience selectivity
Radio	Mass use; high geographic and demographic selectivity; low cost	Audio presentation only; lower attention than television; non-standardized rate structures; fleeting exposure
Outdoor	Flexibility; high repeat exposure; low cost; low competition	Limited audience selectivity; creative limitations
Brochures	Flexibility; full control; can dramatize messages	Overproduction could lead to runaway costs
Direct mail	Audience selectivity; flexibility; no ad competition within the same medium; personalization	Relatively high cost; "junk mail" image
Newsletters	Very high selectivity; full control; interactive opportunities; relative low costs	Costs could run away
Telephone	Many users; opportunity to give a personal touch	Relative high cost; increasing consumer resistance
Internet	High selectivity; interactive possibilities; relatively low cost	Increasing clutter

Source: Kotler&Keller, Marketing Management, 14th Ed, Prentice Hall, 2012, p.513.

The decision regarding the choice of media channels should take into account the following factors (Ace, 2001):

- target audience;
- budget;
- timing;
- nature of product / service;
- nature of task (e.g. launch, build loyalty);
- historical activity;
- competitor activity.

In what regards the typology of communication techniques, there are two categories of techniques delineated by the nature of the methods used (Popescu, 2002):

- promotional communication techniques (temporary, spread over well-defined time periods in the form of campaigns): advertising, sales promotion, public relations, event communication, sales force, direct marketing;
- continuous communication techniques (permanent character): brand, product design and packaging, architectural design and interior design.

Regardless of the tools used in the communication sub-mix, the ultimate goal is to maximize the impact on consumers, aiming at creating a long-term profitable relationship for all parties involved.

3. The influence of integrated marketing communication on consumer behavior

In the current economic context, characterized by fierce competition among the providers who struggle to gain the attention of consumers with continuously diverse heterogeneous needs, integrated marketing communication becomes one of the main means by which sellers, and not only, attempt to induce a favorable attitude on the part of the consumers in what regards the company and its offer.

It is well known that during the purchasing decision process, consumers are looking for information from various sources in an attempt to identify the alternatives existing on the market and to make up the so-called “set of evoked alternatives” from which they will ultimately choose the optimal option. Whether it is an external search for information, from sources such as: personal information sources (relatives, friends, neighbors etc.), marketing sources (advertising, sales promotion etc.), public or experimental sources, or an internal search of information, marketing communication plays a fundamental role in guiding the consumer’s decision (Cătoi & Teodorescu, 2004).

A very relevant research regarding the consumer confidence in the information disseminated through traditional sources (TV, radio, written media) as well as specific (generally online sources), was published by the European Commission in the Flasheurobarometer study no.464 from February 2018. The survey was conducted in

the 28 EU Member States on a sample of 26,576 respondents. From the analysis of the data mentioned above, it can be noticed that the traditional communication media enjoys increased public trust (radio-70%, TV-66%, Written media-63%), compared to online communication media which recorded the highest confidence for the age group 15-24 years (Figure 3).

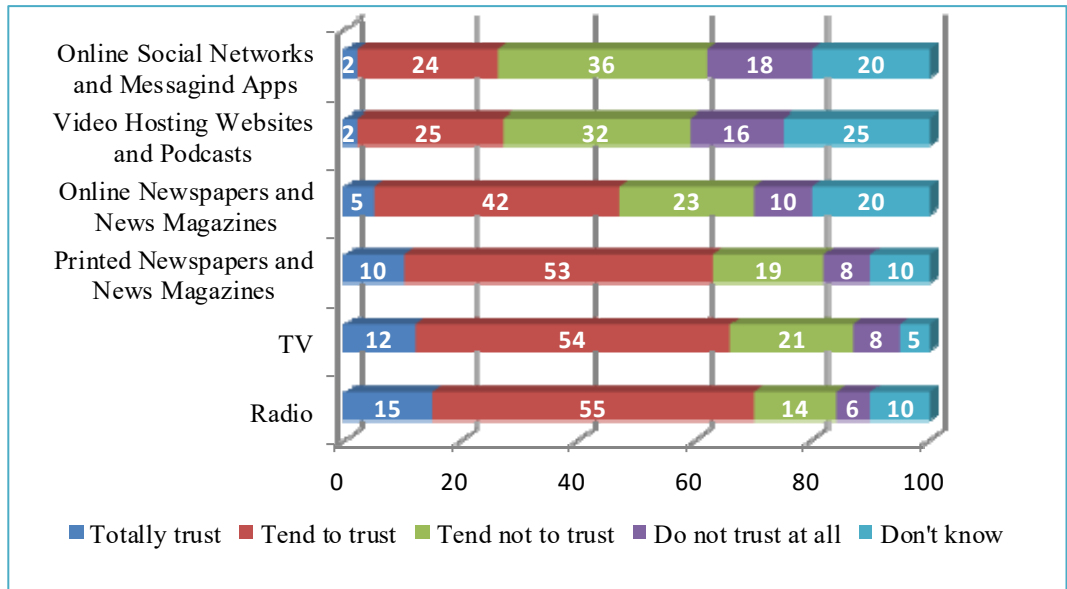


Figure 3. European citizens' trust in communication channels (%)

Source: European Commission, Flasheurobarometer no.464/February 2018, p.5 (www.ec.europa.eu)

Another very interesting aspect that constituted an additional objective of this study was the investigation of the ability of European citizens to identify false news and misinformation, two very important elements in shaping the public perception of the credibility of the source of commerce. Thus, at EU level 28, it can be noticed that 37% of the respondents said they are confronted daily with fake news broadcasts through various media channels, 71% of Europeans being convinced that they can identify them as well. Moreover, from the specific analysis of consumer segments, it can be noticed that citizens with a higher education level have declared to a much greater extent that they are confronted with false news daily, being the most confident segment in what concerns their capacity to identify misinformation in communication through various media channels (www.ec.europa.eu).

At the level of Romania, 41% of the respondents stated that they are confronted with misinformation and false news daily, 27% said that this happens at least once a week, and only 16% of the citizens claimed they had rarely or never encountered these issues (Figure 4).

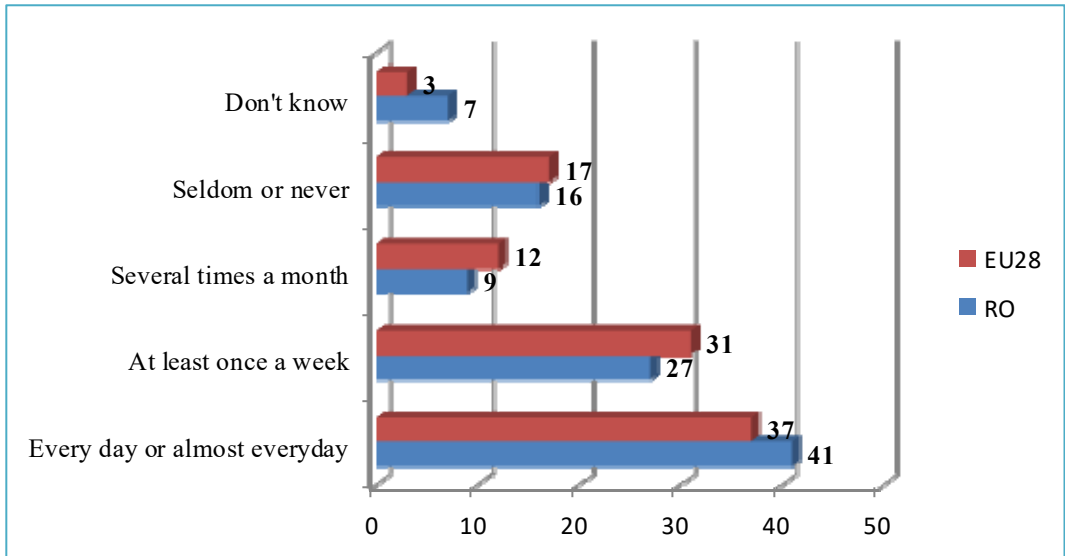


Figure 4. The rate at which European citizens encounter fake news and misinformation through various media channels

Source: European Commission, Flasheurobarometer no.464/February 2018, p.5 (www.ec.europa.eu)

If, traditionally, the first step in the purchasing decision process is to identify the need, followed by the information search and the identification of the alternatives, in the current economic environment characterized by an unprecedented technological revolution, consumers find out about the emergence of new products and services on the market precisely because of marketing communication, which, using various tools in the communication process, succeeds in determining a shift in the succession of the decision-making stages, the consumer being informed about the existence of the product on the market and its performance, a stage that is followed by the awareness of the need for the new product.

The more important the product to the consumer, the broader and deeper the process of searching for information, which implies an appropriate combination of the communication marketing tools which generate the desire to test and finally purchase the product.

In fact, integrated marketing communication must be seen as a systemic process, which involves the consumer's going through a sequence of stages which ends with the desire to make the purchase (Figure 5).

Moreover, as the market offers more and more alternatives, leading to the emergence of substitute products, the need of the big brands to differentiate increases, and integrated marketing communication becomes one of the most widely used public awareness instrument informing the consumers about the special performances and the originality of the products. The role of marketers in this approach is to create

messages that will succeed in reaching the consumers' emotional or rational attitudes, triggering the purchase decision.

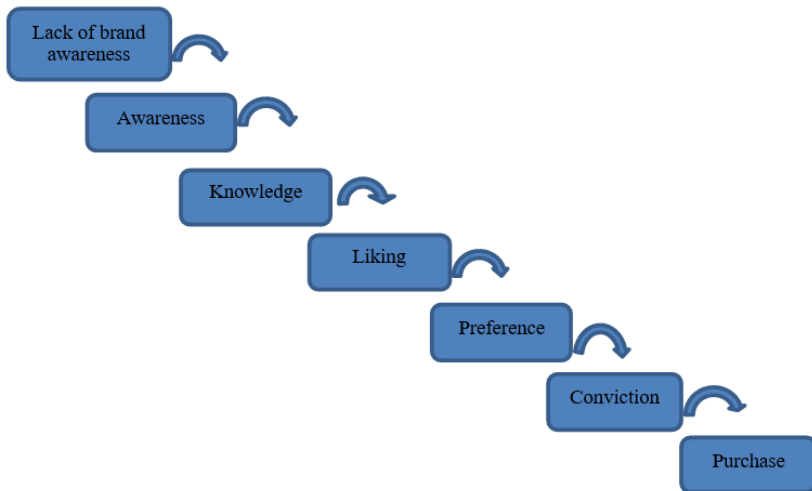


Figure 5. The hierarchy of the stages the consumer goes through during the marketing communication process

Source: Tony Yeshin, *Integrated Marketing Communications*, 1998, p.14.

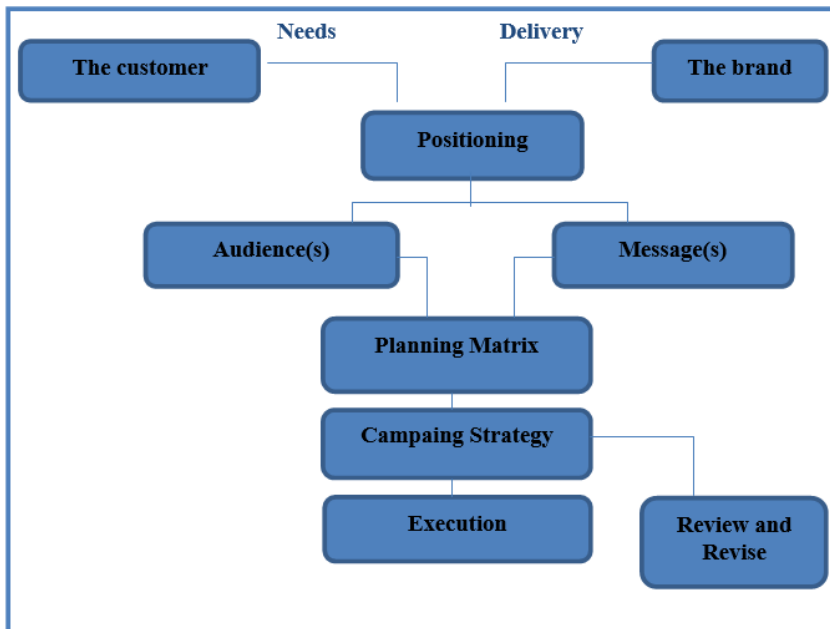


Figure 6. Fundamenting the communication strategy on the positioning of the brand in the consumer's knowledge

Source: Tom Brannan, *A Practical Guide to Integrated Marketing Communications*, 1998, p.10.

In order to run a successful campaign, the organization must clearly know what the perceived image and the desired image among consumers is, which enables the foundation of a communication strategy that takes into account the resources of the organization and its long-term goals (Figure 6).

Furthermore, the marketing communication experts' awareness of the manner in which external stimuli are perceived by consumers, more specifically of the influencing factors that determine the appearance of overt behavior, are of utmost importance in choosing the appropriate communication techniques and transmission channels of the message according to the characteristics of the target audience.

4. Conclusions

The specialists' preoccupations to integrate the marketing communication process into the strategic approach of the organization have been and will remain topical. Competitive pressure, changes in the manifestations of the consumers' behavior, and the continuous diversification of their needs and expectations orient the effort of the marketers towards the identification of new channels for more effective communication with the target audience, by combining and utilizing integrated instruments of marketing communication. The goal is a proper positioning in the minds of the consumers and the application of a strategy different from that of the competitors.

Seen as a process that can add value to the image of the organization, products or brand, integrated marketing communication remains one of the most visible and easily perceptible tools of marketing activity, aiming to determine favorable changes in consumer behavior with beneficial effects on short, medium and long term for all involved parties.

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