“IMC is dead. Long live IMC” Academic vs Practitioners’ views

The purpose of the research is to establish whether academics and practitioners are similar in their perceptions of what Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) is and what role it has to play in today’s dynamic landscape. This objective is achieved by analysing ten essays that were published by Campaign magazine in December 2010 under the heading of “What’s Next in Integration”. The essays were written by a selection of successful and high profile practitioners and it was therefore felt to be an accurate description of views of the industry on the subject. The essays are analysed utilising a framework provided by Kliatchko (2008) with reference to other key writers in the field. The implications of the findings are then discussed.

Integrated Marketing Communications

The exploration of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) as an area of academic interest has been taking place since the early 1990s. Kliatchko (2008) has examined the development of our understanding from 1990 to 2006 and identified that topics have evolved from general definitions, IMC practice, relationship with PR, international IMC, branding issues and, most recently, internal marketing. Despite this there is still debate, within both academics and practitioners, as to its definition and usefulness and it is still referred to as an “emerging discipline” (Kitchen et al 2008).

One of the most recent attempts at defining IMC is provided by Kliatchko (2008) as

“an audience-driven business process of strategically managing stakeholders, content, channels, and results of brand communication programs”

His main theme is that the process must be customer centric or audience driven, which acknowledges the shift of power that has taken place over recent years due, to some extent, to changes in technology. This is achieved through the use of extensive databases that provide information on customer purchase behaviour and consumer insight. This outside in orientation flows through the IMC literature as a common theme. For example Kitchen et al (2008) talk about “planning that starts with receivers, not senders”.

The other thread that needs to be explored here is that of strategy. IMC is perceived as having an impact at a number of different levels of an organisation but its ultimate stage is proposed to be at a corporate or strategy level where its impact is felt right across the organisation (Holm, 2006). The stages that lead up to this point are described in various forms but they generally start at the tactical level involving the co-ordination of promotional elements e.g. activities of a Promotions or Marketing Communications department. The influence of IMC can grow to encompass other elements of the marketing mix leading to clear and consistent brand values. This is where brand touch points are considered and the use of databases. And lastly IMC is considered at a corporate level where not only marketing but business objectives are considered. Building relationships with stakeholders at this stage includes not only customers but also employees, suppliers and
other key influencers (Kitchen and Schultz, 2000, Kliatchko, 2008). This stage is referred to by some as Integrated Marketing (Kitchen, 2004). Fill (2009) identifies similar levels as listed below:

1. **Promotional tools** - of all elements of the promotional mix
2. **Creative Integration** - Unifying creative themes and messages across communications
3. **Marketing Mix** - are the marketing mix elements consistent with the comms message?
4. **Brand** – is there a consistent set of brand values and core proposition?
5. **Strategy** - do the comms objectives fit with the business and marketing strategy?
6. **External/Internal staff** - do agencies and customer-facing employees ‘live’ the brand?
7. **Relationships** – do comms activities develop relationships with key stakeholders?

Duncan and Moriarity (1998) identify three main levels, communications mix, marketing mix and corporate level and propose how different stakeholders may be involved at each.

Figure 1: Communication Based Model from Duncan and Moriarity (1998)

Communications agencies obviously have an important part to play in the implementation of IMC campaigns in their clients’ organisations and their views and perceptions of IMC are therefore crucial in its on-going development. Schultz and Kitchen undertook one of the first examinations of US Agency executives’ views in 1997 and found that half of them were spending more that 50% of their time working on IMC campaigns but the emphasis was on communications consistency and impact. Kitchen et al (2004) examined the views of UK Advertising and PR consultants and found that 80% of their sample had worked on IMC campaigns for their clients. When the executives were asked about their views on what IMC was the statement “Coordination of communications disciplines” received the highest score while “A way to organise the business or firm” received the lowest. Kitchen et al (2004) concluded that IMC was generally perceived by advertising practitioners as being a more tactical than strategic
tool and therefore it was necessary for marketing organisations to integrate themselves first and then give specific tasks to the agencies.

This study picks up from these findings to explore whether these views have changed since 2004. More specifically it is important to establish whether communications agencies still perceive IMC to be a tactical tool or whether their understanding and perception has changed to acknowledge higher levels of the process during the last six years. Academic understanding during that time has continued to develop, with particular emphasis on interactive media, branding issues and internal marketing. (Kliatchko, 2008). It is therefore also of interest to establish whether these themes are evident in the views of practitioners today.

**Methodology**

This research was undertaken by performing a content analysis of essays provided by industry “thinkers”. These essays were published in Campaign magazine on 3rd December 2010 under the heading “What’s next in Integration?”. Campaign is the main weekly trade magazine for the communications industry in the UK. The paper published ten essays, with accompanying podcasts, from senior communications executives representing ten large agencies based in London.

The transcripts were examined by using the following checklist.

Check list

1. Identification of level of integration 1, 2 or 3
2. Evidence of branding issues
3. Evidence of being customer centric
4. Evidence of involvement of internal staff
5. Evidence of media synergy

The first two topics were chosen as they are the two main themes emerging from the definition provided by Kliatchko (2008) and they also assist in identifying whether practitioners’ views of IMC have changed in terms of tactics vs strategy. The last three topics were chosen as they represent the developments in the academic literature on IMC over the same period of time. It may therefore be possible to explore whether practitioners are ahead of the academics in the exploration of the topic or if academics seem to be more advanced in their understanding.

The coding was undertaken on all ten essays by two researchers with any area of discrepancy discussed and resolved, although there was very little area for dispute.

**Results and Discussion**

Although this analysis is on a small sample of agencies it is interesting to observe the differences between them. The agencies are obviously attempting to differentiate themselves from each other
which explains some of the new terminology but behind that there still seems to be some confusion as to what IMC is.

There is evidence to suggest that understanding has developed since the study of Kitchen et al (2004) in terms of levels of IMC. Three of the ten agencies talk about corporate goals as summarised by Agency 2 “Integration works best when there is a unifying thought driving the whole business, not just the marketing”. Unfortunately this agency refers to these views as “post-integration”, suggesting that integration only refers to “joined up conversation”. The academic literature clearly identifies true IMC as reaching these corporate levels without any need to change its name. Agency 6 describes IMC as “about moving marketing out of a department and into the fabric of an organisation”.

Five of the agencies seem to consider IMC still at the Marketing level or at the Communications level with discussion on integrative brand platforms and different groups of people working together on a campaign but not progressing up to higher levels. For example Agency 8 argues that integration has previously meant the use of all media channels available, which they suggest was relevant in the past but not possible now due to the huge increase in media options.

The acceptance of the important role of IMC with reference to branding is strong throughout the essays and again shows some development from the placing of emphasis on communications found in the previous study. Agency 1 talks about “A diverse network of creative and strategic minds and craft skills, dedicated to producing the most powerful brand ideas” and this theme of bringing together the right and diverse group of people is evident in many of the essays.

The main theme in Kliatchko (2008)’s work is this idea of being customer centric and working from outside in. Six of the agencies provide evidence of that type of thinking. The other four discuss interactivity and participation and engagement but the ideas and the motivation still seem to come from the agencies. This is perhaps understandable because that is their job but the academic literature stresses that it is the customer who is now in control and that must be the starting point. Agency 4 puts it well by suggesting that “integration is something best left to the customer, not the marketer. That’s why the integrating framework needs to be customer-based, not brand-based.”

Kliatchko (2008) also recognised the importance of the internal stakeholders in successfully implementing a true IMC programme. Only three of the agencies talk about the role of internal staff within IMC. Agency 2 talks about company culture and getting people to live and breathe the brand. They sum it up by saying “Integration ...needs to drive the whole shebang: the product, identity, NPD, attitude to customer service, way to treat shareholders, PR, CSR, HR and so on”.
Table 1: Analysis of IMC essays

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Check list</th>
<th>Levels</th>
<th>Branding</th>
<th>Customer</th>
<th>Internal</th>
<th>Media</th>
<th>Take-outs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agency 1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Integration involves people and talent not media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency 2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Unifying idea that works across the entirety of a client’s business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency 3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Brand choreography – audience interactivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency 4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Integrate brand and commerce – customer based , not brand based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency 5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Integration is critical to creating innovative platforms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency 6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Integration of creative thinking across all parts of a business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency 7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>What the brand does must be something staff can get behind.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency 8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Integration is an excuse for not making choices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency 9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Core engagement platforms that are orchestrated by data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency 10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Focus on the identity of the individuals we want to talk to</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lastly, both the academic writings and the practitioners seem to agree on the importance of media synergy and interactivity, made all the more important by the ever changing media landscape. The essays imply that the practitioners feel media synergy is the original home of IMC and that they recognise that it has moved on from there.

**Conclusion**

This research reveals that practitioners’ views of IMC have changed since 2004. There has been a general shift from the perception that integration just refers to messages and media to considering it as an essential tool in building a strong brand image. However, only half of the agencies acknowledge the role of IMC at the strategic level. This is supported by a general lack of recognition of the role of internal staff. These views are very different from the academic literature which place increasing emphasis on IMC being a strategic tool influencing all business processes. Evidence of the outside-in, customer centric approach highlighted by Kliatchlo (2008) is also lacking. This discrepancy between academics and practitioners is not helpful in the development of IMC. Indeed evidence suggests that confusion and misunderstandings are still a barrier to its implementation at the higher levels of an organisation (Holm, 2006). So it is important to encourage more dialogue between the two groups so that they can create some of their own integration to the benefit of the industry as a whole.
References

Campaign (2011) What’s Next in Integration, www.campaignlive.co.uk


