Although Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) is now generally accepted as the most effective way to create brand communications programmes, there is evidence to indicate that many companies are not implementing it fully. Reasons put forward for this are a lack of understanding and/or influence at the strategic levels of an organisation. The purpose of this study is to establish whether agencies can assist clients in meeting these challenges. The research examines clients’ and practitioners’ views on whose responsibility it is to implement IMC. The results of an on-line survey are presented and interpreted by an advertising “expert” with extensive experience in the industry, in order to provide a relevant practitioner viewpoint on the issues. The results reveal that the majority of clients feel that it is their responsibility to implement IMC because it requires internal adjustments and is therefore outside the remit of the agency. The views of advertising agencies are more divided on the issue. There is a viewpoint that the initiative can come from agencies because they are better structured to work flexibly. The main challenge is the need to build trust between the client and between their agencies to create a flexible integrated team.
IMPLEMENTATION OF INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS: WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY IS IT?

Despite continuing discussion on its purpose and contribution, (Gould, 2004, Luck and Moffatt, 2009) there is a general acceptance across the industry that Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) is here to stay. In the context of this paper IMC is defined as “an audience-driven business process of strategically managing stakeholders, content, channels and results of brand communication programs” (Kliatchko, 2008). This definition has been chosen because it identifies the importance of implementing IMC at the strategic level of an organisation. A number of different levels of IMC have been identified by researchers in this area. For example Duncan and Moriarity (1998) talk about the Marketing Communication level, the Marketing level and the Corporate level. Kitchen and Schultz (2001) identify four levels ranging from the “tactical coordination of marketing communications” to the highest being “financial and strategic integration”. Despite slightly different terminology it is generally agreed that it is only at this highest corporate level that the benefits of IMC can be enjoyed fully (Holm 2006). Unfortunately there is evidence to suggest that few companies are implementing IMC at this highest level (Kitchen and Burgman, 2010). Two main barriers have been identified which may be contributing to this lack of implementation; lack of staff knowledge and understanding and organisational structures (Eagle and Kitchen, 2000; Luck and Moffatt, 2009). Clients have been found to be reluctant to change working habits and responsibilities when faced with the perceived complexity of planning and coordination that IMC requires (Fill, 2009). A more recent study into the barriers to implementation by Mortimer and Laurie (2012) found that clients did understand IMC but found it difficult to get their voice heard across departments other than Marketing, particularly when they did not have the support of the CEO or another prominent Board member.

It is obviously imperative to understand the challenges that clients face and try to reduce them so that more organisations can benefit from IMC, otherwise the relevance of research in this area can be justifiably questioned. But whose responsibility is it to move this forward, clients or agencies or both? This question seems to have been puzzling the industry for some time. When Duncan and Everett (1993) asked clients who should take the initiative to make IMC successful, 56% said client and agency (or agencies) together and 42% said the client alone. A similar question was asked by Swain (2004) to clients, agencies and academics and the overall results indicated that 31% felt the lead needed to be taken by top management, 36% by Marketing Management and 21% by a committee of agency and client staff. These figures would suggest that there has been a growing recognition of the responsibility of the client in IMC implementation. More recent discussions on the subject would support this. Kitchen et al (2008) found that agency executives were able to put together strategic campaigns but needed to be given that responsibility by their clients. Kitchen and Schultz (2009) also suggest that the client businesses are the prime movers in development of integrated programmes and if they are not implementing at the higher levels then agencies are prevented for developing IMC campaigns. An industry report by the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA) and other industry bodies entitled “Magic and Logic” (2006) suggests that, although both clients and agencies have joint responsibility to adapt to the changing environment, agencies are limited in their advancement if clients are not adopting best practice.

The characteristics of IMC are challenging the relationship between a client and its agency or agencies. For IMC to be fully implemented all brand touch points need to be managed. This involves not only encouraging a range of agencies representing different marketing
communications tools such as advertising and direct marketing to work together, but also managing those touch points more commonly controlled by the client e.g. customer service. Laurie and Mortimer (2011) suggest that it is necessary for clients to open their doors more widely and work closely with agencies on internal and external communication challenges if full integration is to be achieved. This is supported by The Forrester Report (2010) which suggests that as the environment becomes more complex clients will depend on their agencies more for “ideas, interaction and intelligence” which will provide creative platforms to run across all touch points rather than one-off campaigns.

The purpose of this study is to explore the views of both UK clients and agencies on whose responsibility it is to implement IMC so that a better understanding of how to address this issue can be reached.

**METHODOLOGY**

This paper describes the first stage of a larger study into IMC and the client/practitioner interface where in depth interviews with interested parties of both sides are planned. The exploratory data presented here was obtained from an on-line questionnaire which was distributed using a snowballing sampling approach to reach interested parties, as well as publishing the link in Campaign magazine. Eighty eight people responded to the questionnaire with 37 people from the agency side of the business and 23 from the client side (the rest were academics). Out of this total, only 9% identified themselves as at “entry level” of the organisation. The rest of the participants classified themselves in the categories of middle or senior management, board level or owner. It was therefore felt that the respondents not only had an informed opinion on IMC but also some influence.

The questionnaire consisted of a number of statements covering many topics on IMC taken from the literature and the participants were asked to agree or disagree with the statements and then explain their response. This provided the study with both an overview of opinions in terms of statistics, although obviously the numbers are small, but, more importantly, some rich qualitative data. The pilot study revealed that some participants found the statements to be rather controversial, which was our intention in order to get people to respond and join into the debate.

One statement examined the responsibility of implementing IMC and therefore, for the purpose of this paper, the results from this statement are presented along with comments. The statement is as follows:

**Q1 Agencies are keen to implement an IMC approach but the initiative has to come from the client. If the client is integrated then the agency is in a position to be allocated tasks to reach IMC objectives.**

To enrich our data further and strengthen its relevance to the communications industry the quantitative and qualitative results were given to an industry “expert” who was asked to comment on the findings and thereby provide a more insightful interpretation of the data. This person is the Global Planning Director of a multinational communications agency and has worked in the advertising industry for over thirty years on both the client and agency side. He was asked to utilize his extensive knowledge and experience of the industry to express his views on the findings. He chose to examine comments from clients that agree with the statement and comments from advertising agencies that disagree with the statement in order to identify the main areas of disagreement. His commentary has been presented in its
unedited form in order to maintain its richness, adapted only in order to fit within the page restriction of the paper. It is therefore presented as primary data, which is examined in the Discussion and Conclusion section.

RESULTS

Table 1: Quantitative Results from Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agencies are keen to implement an IMC approach but the initiative has to come from the client. If the client is integrated then the agency is in a position to be allocated tasks to reach IMC objectives.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, I agree with the above statement</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Client</th>
<th>79.9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advertising Agency</td>
<td>30.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Advertising Agency | 45 |

Advertising “Expert” commentary on quantitative and qualitative results

“On the surface, the results suggest that there is a significant difference between the response of the clients and agencies, with clients indicating that the initiative to implement a fully integrated marketing communications (IMC) approach must come from within their business, (74% agreeing with the statement), whilst advertising agencies are much more divided on the issue (only 45% in agreement).

So firstly, let’s assess the response of clients who feel that it’s their responsibility to drive the agenda of change, one that I might add has been hanging over their heads for the last decade and still not delivered within most client organisations, who are still fairly siloed in their approach to channel management. In fact many clients still separate both on and off line activities, with media buying often being run by a separate team completely. We shall look at some of the clients’ responses as to why they should be driving the agenda, accompanied by my comments. They say:

*Agree - Agencies are not empowered to change client organisations so it has to come from the client*

No, agencies are not, but they can advise the client on change and/or insist that they only work with the client if they take on an integrated approach to their marketing and communications activities. Mind you, this does not mean that one agency will do everything, but that a group of agencies will work together and be led and guided by the lead strategic agency.

*Agree - It is not only about agency issues. The integrated approach has to be implemented all through the clients organisation, working with the internal culture, brands, R&D, products and channels etc.*

If the culture is not all about IMC, then whose responsibility is it to change it? Wouldn’t it be the clients and in particular the marketing and communications teams? It is no use saying that
it is not in the culture, as the respondents themselves should be responsible for driving the change within the organization.

*Agree - Yes this is a possibility....IMC cannot just be 'inflicted'...the client company needs to believe in the benefits and ROI of IMC*

No, we all agree that IMC cannot be inflicted, but how can clients ignore the success demonstrated by implementing fully integrated marketing communications. Dare I mention Unilever, Coca-Cola, Apple, Microsoft, IBM, GE and Intel, all of which I have firsthand experience of working with in a fully integrated environment.

*Agree - but I would also challenge agencies to become more integrated themselves. A lot of agencies come from one discipline, and find it difficult to work with an IMC approach.*

However, whilst clients are still demanding specialist agencies to align with their own channel specialists, then agencies end up in a hard place. Although Advertising Agencies are often asked to demonstrate how a “big idea” or the creative platform can be executed across all channels, they are often not asked to execute all the final assets, with the clients dividing the work between specialist agencies, leaving the Advertising Agencies in a difficult position. How can they fully integrate if the clients don’t trust them in executing across all channels?

There seems to be a number of reasons as to why clients are not integrating their communications activities, with no single driver. My suggestion would be to move past the excuses and start changing today, as it has been clearly proven that IMC drives a more synergistic approach to the communication planning and execution, which in my experience is always more successful than a series of disparate communications being pushed into market.

So what do the Advertising Agencies have to say? Even though the agencies had a low 45% positive response to the question, it was not that they don’t believe in IMC or that the change should occur, rather that the client shouldn’t be the only driver of the change and in fact in some cases it may prove easier and more beneficial for it to start with the agency.

*Disagree - Agencies and clients should develop an IMC approach together*

Yes, but shouldn’t the agency drive the agenda even if the client is not quite ready? Agencies are the more flexible and usually have the right resources and skill sets to drive change without significant upheaval within their own organisation.

*Disagree - Agencies can lead the process no matter what the client structure.*

Agencies are not as set in their structures as clients, as they themselves have a varying range of organisational structures they need to service across their clients. If they start the change process then eventually they will drive a structural change in the clients business.

*Disagree - For Agencies IMC is a way to sell in more work to the Client.*

Ahhhh finally a truthful answer, yes naturally the more integrated a client becomes, the more they will look for a single strategic and creative lead agency, giving that agency a bigger slice of the pie and a lead position over the "specialist" agencies.
**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this study is to examine clients’ and practitioners’ views on whose responsibility it is to implement IMC. The quantitative results indicate that 74% of clients think it is their responsibility while only 45% of agencies agree. There is evidence to suggest that clients understand IMC as having both internal as well as external implications and it is therefore something that has to be initiated from within. However some agencies feel that they can assist in that process, due to their more flexible approach to working which is less cumbersome than some client structures. Our industry “expert” brings a realistic and practical interpretation of these findings. He agrees that it is up to the client to change the internal culture of an organisation. However it is possible for agencies can help. He seems frustrated that, despite clear evidence that IMC is of great benefit, there is a reluctance to change and he proposes that one reason for that is an unwillingness to pass more control over to their agencies. He also acknowledges that agencies are employed to provide a service to their client and do not want to jeopardize that.

To complicate matters further, it cannot be assumed that all agencies are happy to work together. As the results indicate, lead agencies may not necessarily wish to work collectively with the various specialised agencies. Ewing et al (2000) found that strong conflicts of interests existed between agencies. The challenges for clients working with a number of agencies have been identified by the IPA report “Agencies working better together”. Their results showed that two models were the most common. The “all agency model” is where all agencies work together as equals, popular with larger organisations where the client had the time and resources to over-see the work. Alternatively there is the “lead agency model” where one agency over-sees the others, and that agency is normally the advertising agency.

The relationship between the client and their agency and the level of trust and team-working that exists between them is obviously crucial. Agencies need to be stronger in encouraging their clients to move forward and show them the long-term benefits of IMC. At the same time they need to learn to co-operate with other specialist agencies and present a united front to the client, particularly smaller clients who do not have the resources to oversee turf wars. Lastly agencies must offer to assist the client in internal communication challenges. Only then may it be possible to encourage these larger ‘vessels’ to change direction.
REFERENCES


Mortimer, K. and Laurie, S. (2012), Barriers to the implementation of Integrated Marketing communications: The client perspective, Academy of Marketing Conference, University of Southampton.