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## **INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATION – TOWARDS A HOLISTIC CONCEPT**

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## **ZINTEGROWANA KOMUNIKACJA MARKETINGOWA – W STRONĘ HOLISTYCZNEJ KONCEPCJI**

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**Summary:** This paper explores the concept of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) and presents changes resulting from its evolution. The purpose of this paper is to determine directions of development of the IMC concept and facilitate future research and empirical implementation of integrated marketing communication. Based on a descriptive review of the scientific literature, relevant and significant to the marketing communication knowledge, the authors established the state of development of the IMC concept. The overview of prevailing theories enabled the comparison of the existing definitions and main features of the concept. The paper presents changes and key drivers for the evolution of IMC. The analysis allowed the authors to identify new approaches to the concept of IMC in the world science and determine that the modern IMC concept is moving toward holistic solutions, which include strategic planning in the organisation and modern marketing knowledge. Nowadays, the integration of marketing communications means the need to seek solutions at a strategic level and value creation based on long-term relationships with customers. The future of the IMC concept also means the need to conduct studies that will determine the possibility of its use in relation to different types of organisations (non-profit organisations or administrative units etc.), as well as various industries or business sectors.

**Keywords:** marketing communication, integrated marketing communication.

**Streszczenie:** Artykuł prezentuje koncepcję zintegrowanej komunikacji marketingowej (IMC) i analizuje zmiany wynikające z jej ewolucji. Celem tekstu jest określenie kierunków rozwoju koncepcji IMC oraz dalszych badań i praktycznych zastosowań zintegrowanej komunikacji marketingowej. Na podstawie opisowego przeglądu literatury naukowej, istotnej dla rozwoju wiedzy o komunikacji marketingowej, autorki ustaliły stan rozwoju koncepcji IMC. Prowadzone rozważania teoretyczne pozwoliły na porównanie definicji i kluczowych cech koncepcji. Artykuł prezentuje zmiany i czynniki kluczowe dla ewolucji IMC. Na podstawie analizy światowego dorobku naukowego zidentyfikowano nowe podejścia do koncepcji IMC i ustalono, że nowoczesna koncepcja IMC zmierza w kierunku rozwiązań o charakterze holistycznym, które uwzględniają planowanie strategiczne organizacji oraz nowoczesną wiedzę marketingową. Aktualnie integracja komunikacji marketingowej oznacza potrzebę

szukania rozwiązań na poziomie strategicznym, a także kreowanie wartości bazujące na długookresowych relacjach z klientami. Przyszły rozwój koncepcji IMC oznacza również konieczność przeprowadzenia badań, dotyczących możliwości jej zastosowania w odniesieniu zarówno do różnych rodzajów organizacji (organizacje *non profit* lub jednostek administracyjnych), jak również różnych branż i sektorów gospodarki.

**Słowa kluczowe:** komunikacja marketingowa, zintegrowana komunikacja marketingowa.

## 1. Introduction

Global competition, social and technological changes, and media development have changed the image of the market, and the principles and objectives of modern marketing communication. However, this did not mean the rejection of the IMC concept, but rather required a new approach to the integration of marketing communication. The increasing market requirements and the emergence of new possibilities for marketing communications give rise to the need to examine the directions of development of the IMC concept. The purpose of this paper is to determine directions of development of the IMC concept and facilitate future research and empirical implementation of integrated marketing communication.

The problem of development of the IMC concept seems to be very important for scientific and practical reasons. Modern organisations are facing today the challenge of achieving high efficiency of their decisions concerning the use of marketing communication. Due to the rapidly changing technological capabilities, as well as the growing importance of customer participation in the marketing decisions, the use of the IMC concept may be a recipe for better performance and improving the results by companies operating on the international market.

In order to reach the stated purpose, we did the descriptive review of the scientific literature, relevant and significant to the development of integrated marketing communication knowledge. We used the content analysis method that gave us the picture of prevailing theories and a variety of perspectives, and allowed us to perform a comparative analysis of the chronological development of the IMC concept. The analysis based on the collected theoretical materials led us to the conclusion that justifies the thesis that IMC is moving toward a holistic concept and that scientific research on the IMC concept should follow this direction.

## 2. Integrated Marketing Communication – the idea and key features

The IMC concept was created in response to the need of coordinating promotional actions taken with the use of various promotional instruments. The beginnings of the IMC concept were based on coordinating actions as a part of various promotional instruments used virtually independently of each other in the 1980s. Planning and implementation of communication activities seemed relatively easy at that time,

**Table 1.** IMC definitions and main features by different authors

Author(s)	Definition	Main features
Association of Advertising Agencies [FitzGerald, Arnott 2000]	“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 – general advertising, direct response, sales promotion, and public relations – and combines these disciplines to provide clarity, consistency, and maximum communication impact”.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marketing communications planning.</li> <li>• Coordination and consistency of messages and communication channels (“one sight, one sound”).</li> <li>• Use of a variety of communication disciplines to work in synergy based on a comprehensive plan.</li> </ul>
Schultz [1991]	“IMC is the process of managing all sources of information about a product/service to which a customer or prospect is exposed which behaviourally moves the consumer toward a sale and maintains customer loyalty”.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Process of managing all sources of information.</li> <li>• Inclusion of consumers, prospects.</li> <li>• Behavioural responses.</li> <li>• Nurture relationship and customer loyalty.</li> </ul>
Duncan, Moriarty [1997]	“IMC is the process of strategically controlling or influencing all messages and encouraging purposeful dialogue to create and nourish profitable relationships with customers and other stakeholders”.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Process of strategically controlling or influencing all messages.</li> <li>• Profitable relationships.</li> <li>• Expanded audience scope from customers to other stakeholders.</li> </ul>
Schultz, Schultz [1998]	“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”.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic business process.</li> <li>• Expanded notion of brand communication.</li> <li>• Measurability.</li> <li>• Specified more explicitly the multiple markets – inclusive of external and internal audiences.</li> </ul>
Kliatchko [2008]	“IMC is an audience-driven business process of strategically managing stakeholders, content, channels, and results of brand communication programs”.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audience-driven business process.</li> <li>• Strategic management.</li> <li>• Four pillars of IMC: stakeholders, content, channels, results.</li> </ul>
Porcu et al. [2012]	“The interactive and systemic process of cross-functional planning and optimization of messages to stakeholders with the aim of communicating with coherence and transparency to achieve synergies and encourage profitable relationships in the short, medium and long-term”.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interactive and systematic process.</li> <li>• Four dimensions: “one voice”, interactivity, cross-functional planning, profitable long-term relationships.</li> </ul>

Source: adapted from [Schultz 1991; Schultz, Schultz 1998; Duncan, Moriarty 1997; FitzGerald, Arnott 2000; Kliatchko 2005; Kliatchko 2008; Porcu et al. 2012].

because “marketing communication was essentially an outbound system, developed and controlled by marketing organisation” [Kitchen, Schultz 2009].

In the early stage of development of the concept clarifying the idea of IMC seemed fairly simple. In 1889 the Association of Advertising Agencies proposed the following definition: “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 – general advertising, direct response, sales promotion, and public relations – and combines these disciplines to provide clarity, consistency, and maximum communication impact” [Duncan, Everett 1993, p. 31]. Numerous IMC definitions have been proposed since that time (their examples are presented in Table 1). The comparison of the definitions indicates the changes that have occurred with the chronological development of IMC. Over the years, even the same authors recognized the need to revise their definitions, by entering the elements resulting from the evolution of marketing communication and changing market demands.

Initially, the definition of the IMC was not complicated, but with the development of the concept difficulties in formulating an agreed and universal definition have been increasingly voiced by the researchers concerned with IMC [Kliatchko 2005; Kitchen, Schultz 2009; Kitchen, Burgmann 2015]. Also the manners of identifying the features of the concept evolved over time and varied depending on authors’ interpretations. In recent approaches we can also notice the use of new marketing concepts (e.g. Relationship Marketing). Differences in the approach to the definition and explanation of the idea of IMC often cause confusion and misunderstandings, which is a barrier to its understanding and implementation at higher organisational levels [Holm 2006; Laurie, Mortimer 2011].

Summing up the previous discussion, we can say that an agreement on a definition which would satisfy the requirements of our times and be commonly accepted poses a challenge to the scholars dealing with the IMC concept development.

### **3. IMC concept development – changes and challenges**

In the early development of the IMC concept, integration consisted in simplified management of the communication system and harmonizing messages and incentives supplied in functional promotion areas. The coordination regarded mainly the used media, communication content and timing. It can be said that integration consisted in tactical coordination of individual components for the purpose of obtaining the “one sight, one sound” effect. The point was to gain certainty that “the same corporate colours were used in all communication” [Schultz, Patti 2009].

Global competition, social and technological changes, and media development changed the image of the market. However, this did not mean the rejection of the IMC concept, but rather required its development and change of approach to integration. The challenges and key drivers for the evolution of the concept were

technology development, increase in branding significance, and globalization processes [Schultz, Schultz 2003].

An important element of the concept is the place and role of the consumer in marketing communication of organisations. In the first IMC development phase, consumers were message recipients who were offered a specific set of benefits/values by the organisation. After some time, they began to be perceived as both content receivers and creators [Kliatchko 2008]. As the IMC concept evolves, a customer focus is playing an increasingly important role. It means that it is a consumer that has to be at the centre of any type of integration. This enforces striving for action as a customer-focused (or customer-centric) organisation, whose members cooperate to provide the best customer products, services, and solutions [Schultz, Schultz, 2003].

Nowadays the role of consumers is even more significant. They have increasingly greater capabilities of selecting the media and accepting or rejecting messages. Naturally, the organisation can “push” messages using different media channels, and consumers can reject or “pull” them by means of the Internet and social media, with the use of various electronic facilities, in different time and places, on single or multiple occasions. They can also transfer messages to other consumers (reinforcing, assigning and changing the meaning). Hence, when thinking of IMC development, the phenomenon of the rise of push-pull communication and consumer-to-consumer marketing communication [Schultz, Patti 2009], and in particular consumer-to-consumer interactions in virtual communities [Chan, Lee 2010], cannot be ignored. Therefore, network effects that represent interactions among consumers and between consumers and organisations [Mulhern 2009] should be taken into consideration.

Presentation of the changes resulting from IMC development permits movement to the next point in the discussion – levels of integration. Their identification might help organisations understand the “place” where they presently are on their way to fully integrated communication and point to developmental opportunities.

As the IMC concept developed, researchers made attempts at specifying levels of integration in subsequent years. For instance, Schultz and Schultz [1998] determined four stages of development, specifying levels of IMC: tactical coordination, redefining the scope of marketing communication, application of information technology, financial and strategic integration. Kliatchko [2008] proposed four pillars of IMC (stakeholders, content, channels, results), stating that “all the four pillars may be said to be present in each of the four levels of IMC to a lesser or greater extent, but with one pillar being given prominence at each level”. He thus proposed a manner of interpreting the levels of IMC, which indicated the key pillar at each stage of implementation:

- Level 1: tactical coordination – content.
- Level 2: redefining the scope of marketing communications – channels.
- Level 3: application of information technology – stakeholders.
- Level 4: strategic and financial integration – results.

Lee and Park [2007] introduced a multidimensional model of IMC, based on four key dimensions: unified communications for consistent message and image, differentiated communications to multiple customer groups, database-centered communications for tangible results, and relationship fostering communications with existing customers. Naturally, identifying the level of integration requires the specification of the execution conditions and the determination of reliable measurement methods.

Due to its significance, the issue of IMC measurement has been often touched upon by scholars and practitioners. It was handled in the research carried out by, among others, Duncan and Moriarty [1997], Swain [2004], Schultz [2011], Vantamay [2011], Reinold and Tropp [2012]. Evaluation was often indicated as the basic weakness of IMC [Kitchen et al. 2008], and even a missing link in the IMC knowledge [Kitchen, De Pelsmacker 2004]. In spite of the increasing complexity of integration processes, reliable evaluation methods should be sought to enable measurement of effects, demonstration of the IMC implementation value, and determination of the level of integration.

In 2009 Finne and Grönroos proposed the outside-in consumer-centric perspective and emphasized the role of the consumer in message integration. According to them “a focus on outgoing integrated messages alone is not sufficient”, therefore marketing communication should focus more on meaning [Finne, Grönroos 2009]. This means the development of the concept also at the communication content level, as well as strong connection between message and meaning creation.

The development of the IMC concept also required to determine the possibilities of its application in practice. Schultz and Schultz [2003] enumerated four mandatory factors enabling practical implementation of integrated communication:

1. Starting at the top (senior management support).
2. Customer-orientation and customer-focus.
3. Communication becoming a sustainable competitive advantage.
4. Centralised communication.

The list could be extended by brand as a major integrating factor around which all marketing communication should be built [Schultz, Schultz 1998]. The significance of branding for IMC was emphasized by many authors [Schultz, Schultz 1998; Duncan 2002; Schultz, Schultz 2003; Duncan, Moriarty 1997; Kitchen, Schultz 2009; Luck, Moffatt 2009; Kitchen 2010].

Researchers have frequently indicated that effective IMC implementation requires the placement of responsibility at an appropriately high organisational level and clear leadership [McArthur, Griffin 1997; Low 2000; Pettegrew 2000-2001]. Pettegrew [2000-2001] saw a barrier to full and effective IMC adoption in the lack of CEO support and leadership. Such a top-down support is important because IMC requires cross-functional planning, and involvement of multiple departments and functions which will lead to cross-selling opportunities [Luck, Moffatt 2009]. It is the result of the necessity of strategic integration, which has to take place in different organisations [Porcu et al. 2012].

#### 4. The new approach to the IMC for modern organisations

IMC in the tactical dimension does not establish high organisational requirements and does not involve much effort on the part of the organisation with respect to identifying consumer insight, market analysis and database building [Kitchen, Schultz 2009]. Obviously, such an approach and understanding of integration designates only a very basic IMC level.

The development of the media contributed to a considerable expansion of the set of communication instruments and components. We entered the multi-media, multi-level information technologies and multi-promotional options era [Kitchen, Schultz 2009]. The digital revolution influenced not only the development of the media and communication devices but also contributed to increasing the capability of obtaining consumer data, monitoring consumer insight [Mulhern 2009] and building customer relationships. Thus, marketers began to use digital technology to improve consumer understanding and influence consumers. However, consumers began to use technology and related media to influence marketers [Schultz, Patti 2009].

According to Kitchen [2010], a modern approach to integrated communication requires interactivity, process approach, global thinking, allowing for the significance of intangible assets, customer value, alliances and affiliations, leading with (integrated) communications and treating branding as an absolutely core.

At present, the role of consumers has increased considerably and they are driving the marketplace. This requires entering the relationship level from marketing communication [Finne, Grönroos 2009] and associating it with CRM (Customer Relationship Management).

A proposition for specifying levels of integration was put forward also by Porcu, del Barrio-García and Kitchen [2012], who determined four principal dimensions of IMC:

1. “One voice” (clear delivery of coherent messages through different marketing communication tools).
2. Interactivity (constant dialogue with stakeholders).
3. Cross-functional planning (the point of reference is organisation as a whole).
4. Profitable long-term relationships (the higher strategic dimension and the main purpose of IMC).

These dimensions indicate that the concept of IMC noted not only strategic issues, but also adapted a new marketing knowledge in the field of relationship marketing. Quite clearly, the concept is changing toward holistic solutions, as indicated by cross-functional planning, long-term relationships aspect and long-term value creation.

In Poland, the theoretical approach to integrated marketing communication is represented, among others, by Hajduk [2010]. In his view, the process of integrated marketing communication takes place on three levels:

1. Internal level – the selection of appropriate actions and communication tools and their coordination in time and space (i.e. communication mix).

2. External level – integrating communication activities with other marketing activities and elements of marketing-mix.

3. Corporate level – binding marketing communications with vision, mission and strategy of the organisation.

It can be said that this is a modern approach to the concept of IMC, because according to Hajduk fully integrated marketing communication requires integration and coordination in time, spatial integration and coordination, integration and coordination of internal and external communication activities, adapting to the current environmental conditions and taking into account research results.

The IMC concept becomes with time a holistic approach to marketing communication activities of organisations. Scientists, dealing with the issue of integrated marketing communication, agree with the need to identify new features of the concept, as well as the extension of its applications. Based on the achievements to date, IMC researchers specified the key features that are significant for modern IMC [Kitchen 2005; Kitchen, Burgmann 2015]:

1. Affecting behaviours as the primary goal of IMC.
2. An outside-in perspective (starting with customers when developing and implementing communications).
3. Building sustainable relationships (organisation-stakeholders).
4. Including all communication activities with consumer contact points.
5. Coordination between all communication disciplines that gives the effect of synergy.

To summarize, it needs to be said that the complexity of communication processes requires a holistic approach to the IMC concept. Nowadays, the integration of marketing communications means the need to seek solutions at a strategic level and value creation based on long-term relationships with customers. The development of the IMC concept also means that need to conduct studies that will determine the possibility of its use in relation to different types of organisations (non-profit organisations, administrative units etc.), as well as industries or business sectors.

## 5. Conclusions

Contemporarily, organisations still have the opportunity to influence the communication processes. Despite weaker control, they have communication monitoring and stimulating tools at their disposal, and – owing to the development of technology – they have greater capabilities of obtaining data. A lot depends on the competences concerned with processing, interpreting and using knowledge. Organisations can also develop their own communication platforms and media, encourage consumers to use them and participate in creating new solutions.

Obviously, integration of marketing communication was easier when a marketer was the main source of information and, as a sender, controlled messaging and communication channels. Currently, the level and capabilities of such control has

significantly decreased and a consumer is gaining more and more influence on communication processes. However, market changes and increasingly greater challenges do not mean resignation from integration processes aimed at gaining and maintaining real impact on consumer relationships and provoking the desired behaviours. There is a need to find ways of maintaining the consistency of marketing communication in new conditions, being aware of new challenges and taking into account the growing consumer impact. This requires setting directions and assuming a strategic approach to the integration of marketing communication.

The analysis based on the collected theoretical materials led us to the conclusion that the modern IMC concept is moving toward holistic solutions, which consider strategic planning and modern marketing knowledge. Nowadays, the integration of marketing communication means the need to seek solutions at a strategic level and value creation based on long-term relationships with customers. IMC scholars and practitioners face also new challenges today. In the text "IMC: new horizon or false dawn for a marketplace in turmoil", among other challenges involved in the development of the IMC concept, Kitchen and Schultz [2009] pointed to the need for evidence of wholesale or partial adoption by different sectors.

The future of the IMC concept also means the need to conduct studies that determine the possibility of its use in relation to different types of organisations (non-profit organisations or administrative units etc.), as well as various industries or business sectors. The adaptation of the IMC concept in non-profit organisations can be considered another important stage in its development.

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