Strategically oriented integrated brand communications marketing essay

Kitchen et al. emphasize that “ strategically oriented integrated brand communications can help businesses move forward in the highly competitive world of the 21st century” (2004, p. 28, italics added). For Schultz (1998), brands are central to this integrated marketing communication. Keller (1993) points out that customer-based brand equity emanates from the consumer’s familiarity and strong, favourable associations with the brand. For Keller, “ marketing communications represent the voice of a brand and the means by which companies can establish a dialogue with consumers concerning their product offerings” (2001, p. 823). That is, marketing communication may provide the means for developing strong, customer-based brand equity (Keller 2003). Furthermore, marketing communications help the firm in eliciting favorable responses from customers (Duncan and Moriarty 1998). Although a number of factors influence customer-based brand equity, including product, price, and distribution, in this paper, we focus on the influence of IMC on brand equity.

Recently, Kitchen et al. (2004) observed that IMC has evolved from being a mere “ inside-out” device that brings promotional tools together to being a strategic process associated with brand management. Further, Naik and Raman note that IMC emphasizes “ the benefits of harnessing synergy across multiple media to build brand equity of products and services” (2003, p. 375). In this paper, however, by taking the works of several researchers (e. g., Duncan and Moriarty 1998; Jap 1999; Reid 2003), we conceptualize interactivity, strategic consistency, and complementarily as synergy constructs. Therefore, noting the intricate relationship between IMC and brand management, this paper aims to explore IMC as an integral part of a firm's overall brand equity strategy.

CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

IMC has a come a long way from being conceptualized as the coordination of communication tools for a brand (Krugman et al. 1994) to a more strategic conceptualization (Duncan 2002; Percy, Rossiter, and Elliott 2001; Schultz 2004a). As Carlson, Grove, and Dorsch (2003) note, the initial conceptualizations

of IMC were somewhat blurred and led to the adoption of different approaches to creating messages. Even after a decade of research in the IMC area, differences still exist among researchers as to the conceptualization of IMC. For example,

Cornelissen and Lock (2000) claimed IMC to be a " management fashion" rather than a theoretical concept. In reply, Schultz and Kitchen (2000) argued that IMC is an emerging paradigm whose progression as a concept and discipline is entirely appropriate and in accordance with scientific theory. Recently, Gould (2004) noted that though IMC remains a controversial theoretical concept, it could be a powerful theoretical tool when viewed from a post-structural paradigmatic perspective on theory. Therefore, it can be inferred from the preceding discussion that IMC as a theoretical concept is on the right path in terms of attracting and generating an informed, intellectual discourse from various concerned researchers.

Strategic Role of IMC in Branding

Kitchen et al. (2004) point out that IMC is no longer just a communication process, but a process associated with management and brands. Furthermore, for Kitchen et al. (2004), IMC involves managing marketing communications in a holistic manner to achieve strategic objectives. The findings of McArthur and Griffin (1997) that the responsibility for marketing communications is clearly becoming an internal, upper management affair suggests that IMC is evolving to be strategically oriented rather than tactically oriented.

Importance of IMC

Does integrating all marketing communications actually matter? Why is IMC being hailed as a major communications development of the 21st century? A few recent studies (e. g. Carlson, Grove, and Dorsch 2003; Naik and Raman 2003; Reid 2003) suggest and provide support for the idea that IMC provides various benefits for firms. Naik and Raman (2003) indicate that IMC helps firms in building the brand equity of their products and services through synergy. Similarly, Reid (2003) provides support for his contention that integration of marketing communications is related positively to a firm’s brand-related performance. In the services context, Carlson, Gove, and Dorsch (2003) indicate that successful IMC can generate desirable customer responses. Therefore, we contend that IMC potentially can make firms more efficient and/or effective in communicating with their intended target markets, and in turn, can help firms in achieving superior financial performance through higher brand equity. In the next section, we present and discuss IMC strategy and brand identity strategy as critical components of the firm's overall brand equity strategy.

Different tools of IMC

As Mancini and Hallin explained in their mass communication models, there are several variables to consider when approaching an international market. Some of these variables are: literacy level, economic level, political situation of the country and the technological development of that nation. These variables will directly influence the traditional promotional tools known as direct marketing, sales promotions, advertising and public relations.

Direct Marketing

Direct marketing is a form of personal communication between marketer and individual customer. Personal communication is considered as more efficient because it gives immediate feedback telling the communicator whether he/she has been successful in conveying the intended message (Webster, 1971).

The objective of direct marketing is to generate an immediate response from customers. Essentially, each direct marketing piece contains the information needed for the customer to respond immediately and can provide a personal touch by addressing customers by first names (Burnett & Moriarty, 1997; Curtis, 1999).

Sales Promotion

Companies use many different ways to achieve their objective of sales and purchase. Consumer promotions such as price reduction, coupons, premiums, contests, etc. and trade promotions such as point of purchase displays, packaging etc. are all different sales promotion techniques and oriented to trigger buying action (Webster, 1971; Rossiter & Percy 1997). Sales promotion is driven by the specific objective to encourage customers to purchase. Therefore, sales promotion is more action oriented and can be termed as " short-term inducements to customer buying action" (Rossiter & Percy 1997. p. 556).

Advertising

Advertising is essentially an activity that promotes the sales of a product and helps build the company and brand reputation. It provides information about the company, product, and brand and helps identify the role of products for each consumer (Burnett & Moriarty, 1997; Berkman & Gilson, 1980). According to Frank Jefkins (1982), " Advertising aims to persuade people to buy." According to Burnett and Moriarty (1997), though advertising is directly related to sales, not all advertising results in instantaneous response. Most advertising is indirect and creates demand for a product in the long run. Advertisements generally aim at stimulating the consumer interest and awareness. The functions of advertising can thus be categorized into: attention, memorability, persuasion, and action.

Memorability of a product is classified as either recognition or recall. While recognition means remembering the image, recall means remembering the advertising message. However, the goal of the marketer is to match the products and services to customer needs. Therefore, by customer driven marketing, marketers learn what customers want, " to maximize the profits and build brand loyalty, a marketer needs to customize the product and all the marketing communication efforts to achieve the same objective" (Rossman, 1994; Rossiter & Percy, 1997). Consequently, companies have to go further than advertising in order to achieve a continuous impact on their target audiences. Organizations have to stress ongoing relationships with their customers and achieve this through relationship building. Relationship building is a key area of public relations, and a key tool to achieve this relationship is public relations.

There are a number of strategies in the communication force of an organization. One of these is advertising, although it is typically seen as " a cost which reduces current profits rather than as an investment in future profits" (Farr, 1996).

Public Relations

" Public relation is a major force in the organizational communication in the United States and other Western countries" (Grunig, J. E., Grunig, L. A., Sriramesh, Huang, & Lyra, 1995). It is a key tool for the public image of an organization, a way to transmit perceptions, interactions, and the culture of the company to its stakeholders as well as to the general audience, a combination of communication tactics and strategies that helps to understand an organization and ultimately, it helps to encourage audiences to move in their purchasing process. Among the many tools used by public relations mostly: corporate advertising, publicity, videos and films, special events and sponsorships, lobbying, fundraising, meeting and social activities, publicity is most easily recognized and identified by the key publics (Burnett & Moriarty, 1997; Norman & Allen, 1984). However, the public relations practitioners have to choose effective communication models in line with the demands of the situation. Further research is needed on the universal applicability of these models, and identified cultural factors that influence the practice of these models in their pure form. Based on an organization's cultural interactions to its immediate environment, practitioners in different countries practice public relations according to completely different models (Grunig, et al, 1995). The indigenous cultures of the underdeveloped countries have to be a major consideration for universal application of public relations models and ethics practiced in the developed world (Kruckeberg, 1996).

The significant socio-economical and technological differences between nations, makes it difficult for communicators to send global and coherent messages. This

Perspective sounds a lot like the Magic Bullet theory of communications where the media is viewed as a powerful weapon capable to produce changes in the thoughts and behaviors of the audiences that receive those messages. Furthermore, scholars believe that media will be transmitted to every single eye and ear in the same way because of an understood uniformity of human behaviors in society. Individuals attend to events in similar ways and therefore cause uniformity when interpreting messages. This realization derived into the accommodation of messages for specific target audiences, making it more difficult to target audiences with the traditional promotional tools of communication. In addition, there has been a major increase in competition.

Day after day it can be observed the constant creation, unification and growth of

new corporations throughout the globe. This stressing situation force those individuals involved in the progress of the organization to be constantly developing new communication techniques that will more effectively reach the target audiences. In addition, studies have shown the importance of loyal customers and keeping them happy is the main reason for the number of car commercials on TV. Car commercials on TV are not designed with the objective to increase sales, but to confirm and reinforce the sale already made by a customer. This feeling of satisfaction will evolve into the word of mouth communication, or how it was explained by scholars, the ‘ two step flow’ which is

one of the most effective ways of communication. After the World War II there was an intense period of research in the field of communications. Furthermore, there was a realization that the process of communication was far more complex than anyone had previously thought.

Two-Step Flow

Two-step flow of communication consisted on the realization of the existence of two main groups of influence, a first group formed by close social ties, such as coworkers, and so on. And a second group, formed by family members and peers. The finding showed that the primary social relationship was a significant factor in the way people behaved. Leadership can happen in many forms, some more visible than others, such as managers, politicians, parents and so on, but another kind of leadership is far less visible.

It takes place when people turn to others at their same social level whom they know and trust. They do this because they need advice or interpretations to try to make sense of a specific situation, like the purchase of a car or a house.

There are a number of studies on opinion leaders that tried to determine who influenced who in different areas like marketing, advertising and on. Some of the results found were that opinion leaders are far more influential than a commercial. However, it seems obvious that people will refer to those they trust, thinking they will have more knowledge of opinion. Associates are trusted more than public sources that are not directly aimed to us, because of the ambiguity of responses that public sources can derive.

Social Comparison

Furthermore, there is another variable that needs to be considered here in addition to the opinion leaders' theory. Festinger (1954) developed a theory called Social Comparisons, this theory states that the cognitive information includes an assessment of how our ideas, opinions, characteristics and attitudes match up against the desired ideas of important referent groups. This idea implies several corollary statements:

a) We are members of many reference groups.

b) The value of reference groups may vary individually.

c) The comparisons we make can be conscious or unconscious.

These concepts add several assumptions regarding the receiver, to our discussion, and in addition, there are four independent variables that we need to consider; the ideal me versus the real me, self concept, feedback and comparisons (upward vs. downward).

· The ideal me versus the real me; most people have an idealized perception of themselves that allows them to maintain their self-esteem.

· Self Concept; this concept means how we perceive ourselves physically, socially, our knowledge level and so on.

· Feedback; this concept refers to the social comparisons, a measuring mechanism of ourselves.

· Comparisons; social comparisons happened so the individual can evaluate himself and improve. These comparisons can be upward or downward. Upward comparisons are those that inspire us to improve, to become better, and downward comparisons are those that bias comparisons that help us to maintain our self-esteem and feel better with ourselves.

This concept of social comparison will influence our purchases, uses of media and behavior towards different brands depends on who we see using them in the media. If the individuals using certain brands belong to our reference group or the reference group we aspire to be part of, those brands will have a more positive message on us than those used by individuals that we try to imitate, emulate or aspire to be like. If our friends (as a reference group) are conservative people, and to reinforce their beliefs, they use the Fox channel as a source of information, those individuals that look up to them and try to become more like them or part of their social group, click, they will be more inclined to use the Fox channel as a source of information, than those individuals with strong liberal beliefs that may use a different TV channel for their acquiring of information.

In addition, the structure and content of the message will affect the retention and effects of these messages. But to achieve this level we need to convince opinion leaders.

They need to have a building and connecting experience with the specific brand, organization, etc that will make them have positive thinking towards that organization and its products. This goal is only achieved through the communication tools and techniques in connection with a good quality product.

Schema Theory This concept is connected with Schema theory, Piaget (1920’s), Anderson (1977) and more recently by Doris Graber (1983). Schema theory states that individuals acquire and store hierarchized information from prior experiences, and that this information is used and put together depending on the situation.

There are three main ways of acquiring information;

a) Assimilation; new information is easily stored

b) Tuning; new information is combine with previous information

c) Restructuring; new information that is totally incoherent with our previous experience is assimilated and consequently, a new category needs to be created.

This theory also points out the concept of resonance, when an idea watched on

TV or any other source is connected with the previous experience of an individual, and therefore it has a bigger effect. In addition, this schema can also be used not only to interpret but also to predict situation occurring in our environment, and consequently the development of multiple schemas, can guide our behavior, furthermore, in order for the receiver to effectively process the information received, the existing schemas related to the new content need to be activated. Although, we need to consider that not all files retrieved, because they are not necessary, and we can only retrieved those that our memory allow us.

BRANDING STRATEGY

Building and properly managing braning is a priority for many firms (Keller 2003). Keller (1993) points out that building branding requires

(1) internal brand identity efforts, and then,

(2) integration of brand identities into the firm's overall marketing programs, such as product, price, advertising, promotion, and distribution decisions.

Furthermore, Keller (1993) suggests that the strength of the firm's brand equity from communications depends on how well the brand identities are integrated into the supporting marketing programs. In addition, Keller (2003) calls for effective strategies for integrating marketing communications in building and maintaining brand equity. Although all marketing programs, such as product, price, advertising, promotion, and distribution, can potentially create and maintain brand equity, in this paper, we focus on the role of the firm's marketing communication efforts in a branding strategy. How does IMC contribute to a firm's branding? Schultz, Tannenbaum, and Lauterborn (1993) conceptualize the effects of integrated marketing communication in terms of " contacts."

According to Schultz, Tannenbaum, and Lauterborn (1993), a contact is any information-bearing experience that a customer or prospect has with the brand, including word of mouth and the experience of using the product. All of these contacts with customers can potentially influence the firm's branding. As Keller (2001) notes, customers or prospects can also have contact with the brand through marketer-controlled communication, including (1) media advertising, (2) direct response and interactive advertising, (3) place advertising, (4) point-of-purchase advertising, (5) trade promotions, (6) consumer promotions, (7) event marketing and sponsorship, (8) publicity and public relations, and (9) personal selling. There is ample evidence in the literature that suggests that various marketing communications influence brand equity, including advertising (Aaker and Biel 1993; Cobb-Walgren, Ruble, and Donthu 1995), sponsorship (Cornwell, Roy, and Steinard 2001), and various alternative communication options (Joachimsthaler and Aaker 1997). Hence, in this research, following (1) Keller, who notes that one important purpose of all marketing communications is to contribute to brand equity, and (2) Schultz, Tannenbaum, and Lauterborn's (1993) notion of marketing communications through " contacts," it is argued that firms can use IMC to achieve high brand equity through marketer-controlled brand contacts.

If in broader way the concepts of brand identity contacts and brand equity contacts are observe then brand identity contacts are all message- carrying interactions concerning the brand between the brand strategists and the brand stewards. Brand stewards are all internal and external entities (individuals and groups) that have responsibility for communicating the brand to customers, prospects, and publics (de Chernatony 1999). Brand stewards can include advertising and public relations agencies, direct marketers, and salespeople. Brand equity contacts are all marketer-sponsored interactions concerning the brand between brand stewards and customers, prospects, and publics that are intended to create or maintain strong and highly favorable associations.

Firms that are better able to influence their IMC through their brand identity contacts will be better able to influence their branding through their brand equity contacts. Internal brand identity efforts are the first step toward firms building their brand equity (Keller 2003). We argue that there are two interfaces that fall within the purview of the firm's overall brand equity strategy: (1) the interface between the firm's IMC strategy and brand equity, and

(2) The interface between the firm's brand identity strategy and IMC strategy.

Furthermore, it is proposed that while the former interface can be influenced through brand equity contacts, the latter interface can be influenced through brand identity contacts. Also, the firm's overall branding strategy is influenced by the feedback loop from the firm's customer-based brand equity to the firm's brand identity strategy, external environment, competitors' brands, and changing customer needs and preferences.

IMC AND BRANDING

The traditional communication process (Lasswell 1948), which depicts the flow of messages from senders to receivers via elements such as encoding, media, and decoding, has undergone noticeable changes and has evolved into a more interactive and dynamic process (Kotler 2003). However, the traditional framework is still followed as a guideline for understanding and describing the brand communication process. Under the emerging interaction-focused view of brand communications, there is an extensive focus on brand contacts. It is now widely accepted that (1) although communication is but one of the drivers of brand equity, it is nonetheless a crucial one, (2) brand communication is transmitted through a combination of vehicles rather than broadcast advertising alone, (3) brand communication can be meticulously planned or unplanned, and (4) some important brand (equity and/or identity) contacts are not controllable by the brand strategist (Duncan and Moriarty 1998; Schultz 2003). Integrated marketing communication has been advanced as a strategic business process that could contribute to building brand value (Schultz 2004a). Although systematic research on several strategic and tactical aspects of IMC is gaining momentum, it is widely accepted that effective communication is critical in enabling the formation of brand awareness and brand image, that is, brand equity. Branding has been identified as a valuable source of competitive advantage for many organizations (Aaker 1991; Bharadwaj, Varadarajan, and Fahy 1993; Keller 1998). Given the importance of brand equity, it is not surprising that many organizations devote considerable amounts of resources to developing strategies that will allow them to build and/or maintain strong brands (Schultz and Barnes 1999). For Duncan and Moriarty (1998) and Duncan (2002), marketing communications is the glue that enables the connection between the firm's efforts and customers' favorable responses. As Schultz (2004b) notes, branding is not merely built through independent forms of communication (such as advertising or public relations), but is generated by managing brand equity contacts via IMC. IMC, with synergy among the various communications vehicles as its fundamental concept, could potentially create the greatest persuasion effect in consumers' encounters with brand contacts (Chang and Thorson 2004). Indeed, based on their empirical study, Naik and Raman (2003) conclude that by adopting an IMC perspective, marketers harness synergy across multiple communication vehicles to build brand equity across products and services.

Brand Identity Strategy and IMC

Creating and maintaining a brand identity is regarded as the first step toward building strong brands (Aaker 1996; Keller 2003). Almost a decade ago, Shocker, Srivastava, and Ruekert (1994) claimed that research on the development and importance of brand identity is required to retain the significance of scholarly brand management research to the practice of marketing. Although brand identity helps in establishing a relationship between the brand and the customer by generating a value proposition involving functional, emotional, or self expressive benefits (Aaker 1996), it is extremely difficult for brand image to match perfectly with brand identity due to the complex nature of the communications system. According to Aaker's (1996) conceptualization, brand image is one of the inputs and should be an integral part of strategic brand analysis wherein the brand strategists carefully analyze their own existing brand image and competitors' brand images to help them determine their own brand identity. This is represented by the feedback loop from brand equity to brand identity strategy. The feedback loop refers to the influence of the firm's own brand equity and the environment in terms of competitors' brand equity and changing consumer preferences and needs. De Chernatony (1999) discusses the next stage after the organization creates a brand identity. He contends that the organization should consider the suitability of the intended positioning against the brand's identity. That is, after the organization develops a unified brand, it should consider the ways in which the identity is to be communicated to all brand stewards (employees and agents) responsible for marketing communication with customers, prospects, and publics. As per de Chernatony (1999), there is a potential for conflicting messages as different communication options have different points of contact with different message receivers. We prescribe that brand identity should influence IMC in creating and maintaining synergistic and effective messages. We define an effective brand identity strategy as one that informs, guides, and helps develop, nurture, and implement the firm's overall IMC strategy through various brand identity contacts.

Brand Equity

Keller conceptualizes brand equity as “ the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand” (1993, p. 2). Furthermore, Keller (1) proposes brand knowledge as central to the definition of brand equity

and contends that high levels of brand knowledge increase the probability of brand choice, and (2) defines brand knowledge in terms of brand awareness and image. Following Rossiter and Percy (1987), Keller conceptualizes brand awareness as the strength of the brand trace in memory that is reflected by the consumer’s ability to identify the brand under different conditions. Next, Keller defines brand image as “ perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory” (1993, p. 3). There are ways of measuring brand equity besides customer-based brand equity, however. For example, there are (1) financial measures of brand equity based on stock prices (Simon and Sullivan 1993) and potential value (Mahajan, Rao, and Srivastava 1994), and (2) measures involving consumer behavior, such as purchase (Kamakura and Russell 1993). For the purposes of this paper, however, we propose measuring brand equity in terms of brand knowledge perceptions, for

two reasons: (1) If the firm has a portfolio of brands, measuring brand equity based on stock prices becomes problematic, and (2) consumer perceptions are precursors to behavioral manifestations of brand equity (Cobb-Walgren, Ruble, and Donthu 1995).

Brand Equity Contact Factors

We propose that the brand equity contacts can be effectively managed through integration of marketing communications. Therefore, factors associated with the successful integration of marketing communications such as IMC synergy and IMC effectiveness will be valuable in managing the brand equity contacts and, hence, are related positively to brand equity. IMC Synergy Synergy is a phenomenon whereby the combined effect of multiple activities exceeds the sum of their individual effects (Belch and Belch 1998). Naik and Raman (2003) note

that the combined impact of multiple communication activities can be much greater than the sum total of their individual effects, and use modeling to furnish empirical evidence of synergy between television and print advertising. Reid (2003) makes a similar claim, arguing that through IMC, firms can attain synergy among all of their marketing communications, which, in turn, leads to enhanced performance. Following the works of Duncan and Moriarty (1998), Eagle and Kitchen (2000), and Hines (1999), Reid notes that synergy ensures that the use of multiple communication tools is mutually reinforcing. Therefore, following Belch and Belch (1998), Duncan and Moriarty (1998), Eagle and Kitchen (2000), Hines (1999), Jap (1999), Naik and Raman (2003), and Reid (2003), we conceptualize interactivity, strategic consistency, and complementarity as synergy constructs. For Duncan and Moriarty (1998), interactivity refers to the processes that link customers to the company and its brands, and strategic consistency refers to the coordination of all messages in the promotion of brands. In addition, we contend that complementarity of marketing communications, which refers to the reinforcing effects of individual communication efforts, helps in achieving communication goals.

Brand Identity Factors

The identity of the brand-the brand concept from the brand strategist's perspective-is the foundation of a good brand building program (Joachimsthaler and Aaker 1997). Furthermore, the brand identity helps the brand achieve high equity. Therefore, this paper proposes that a well-conceived and well communicated brand identity contributes to building branding by positively influencing the IMC processes. That is, it proposes that by effectively managing brand identity contacts (those between the brand strategist and the brand stewards) through (1) a brand identity-oriented culture, (2) top management support, and (3) an internal market orientation, firms can effectively inform and integrate their marketing communications.

Brand Identity-Oriented Culture

Reid (2003) suggests that IMC synergy and IMC effectiveness are based on cultural and managerial factors. Recently, Urde (1999) introduced the concept of brand orientation that is centered on brand identity. For Urde, " brand orientation

is an approach in which the processes of the organization revolve around the creation, development, and protection of brand identity in an ongoing interaction with target customers with the aim of achieving lasting competitive advantages in the form of brands" (1999, pp. 117-118; emphasis added). Throughout his paper, Urde draws parallels between his concepts of brand orientation and market orientation. Therefore, drawing on similarities between Urde's notion of brand orientation and Slater and Narver's (1995) conceptualization of market orientation as a culture, we conceptualize brand identity orientation as a culture that

(1) places high priorit