

G&S Insight

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Teamwork Means Synergy, Maybe Survival

“We must all hang together, or we most surely will all hang separately.”

Benjamin Franklin

“Teamwork” has been a critical element of success to us since early Homo sapiens banded together to hunt large game, such as the woolly mammoth. No teamwork, no dinner.

Corporations hunting even bigger game in the global economy face the same challenge. No teamwork, no success or survival.

But even on the best of teams, egos and individual agendas can sometimes get in the way of progress and success. Nowhere is this more evident today than in business communications. All marketing professionals understand the importance of teamwork, and “integrated marketing communications” (IMC) is a concept all of us are familiar with by now. It is the rather simple, but surprisingly elusive, concept that organizations should plan all of their communications efforts in tandem so that they not only contribute to the same overall business objectives, but actually reinforce each other. Synergy should make $1+1+1 = 5$. Or 10. IMC should give you more impact with fewer resources. Heady stuff in cost-conscious times! Does it work? Skeptics point out that most of the integrated ‘mega-agencies’ of the 1980s quietly disappeared. Their one-stop-shopping theories looked great on paper, but never seemed to work well in the real world.

A closer look at why they failed reveals that most of these “whole-egg” experiments were advertising agencies seeking new sources of revenue. To achieve functional expertise, each discipline was usually organized as an independent department. Many witnesses can attest that the “new” departments were often treated as less than equal.

But IMC does not rely on “one roof” to work, and many companies are trying hard to find that elusive synergy. In fact, outside agencies and consultants increasingly find themselves in the same room with marcomm cousins at

planning time. This is especially true with the growing emphasis of relatively new disciplines such as telemarketing, “cybercomm” (web sites, virtual newsletters, etc.), and sophisticated customer response centers.

Can professional rivals who believe they are competing for the same budget dollars work together as a team? Yes, but it usually requires a good corporate leader (*a referee!*) who understands the value of each team member and each marcomm discipline. It also requires objective planning, teamwork, and continual coordination. IMC at its best not only pulls together the very best of advertising, PR, direct communications, telemarketing, cybercomm, literature, and sales promotion, but also cuts or at least prunes marginal tactics to achieve both higher impact and reduced costs.

Over the years, G&S has worked with many clients and their specialized agencies in planning and executing IMC programs. Sometimes these programs have worked brilliantly, sometimes not. The best ones were successful because they followed a few basic guidelines. Some of them may seem overly simple, but they can be very difficult to put into practice. Stick to them, and your goal of reducing costs and improving results is only a matter of time.

- 1. Identify the objectives first.** Nothing seems more obvious, but many attempts at IMC are doomed from the start because different specialists have different interpretations of the ultimate objectives. Synergy occurs only when all parties are working toward the same, clearly articulated marketing objectives.
- 2. Measure results according to outcome, not output or glitz.** Most of us, especially agency folks, are accustomed to being judged to some extent by the volume or sex appeal of our output. Make it clear that at the end of the day, results are all that count.
- 3. Assemble your IMC team before setting strategy.** Involve your team during the early stages of strategic planning. Let them help determine strategy, not tactics. Get your moneys’ worth!

4. Manage competition between partners. Specialists tend to accentuate the advantages of their particular discipline. Nothing wrong with that, but some agencies also treat IMC planning as a contest for budget dollars. Human nature. Be on the lookout for self-serving advice, and don't be afraid to demand objectivity. Your real partners won't mind.

5. Beware of sacred cows. We've all got them. "It's the way we've always done it!" Some of them may be truly valuable. Others probably deserve new, distant pastures. But none of them should be 'sacred.'

6. Evaluate tactics according to their relative advantages in achieving your objectives. Now comes the hard part. Your objectives are clear, the strategy is set, and your IMC team is ready for objective tactical planning. This is the stage where you are likely to hear conflicting advice on getting from A to B.

Unfortunately, business communications is not a perfect science. Fortunately, it has been practiced long enough for a clear understanding of relative advantages among the various disciplines to emerge. Most of us agree that each of the disciplines offers valuable contributions, but how do you find the best mix?

The accompanying chart, developed some time ago by Gibbs & Soell in

	PR	Ads	Direct	Collateral
Credibility	+	-	-	-
Cost	+	-	-	-
Message Control	-	+	+	+
Repetition	+	+	+	-
Guaranteed Placement	-	+	+	-
Brand/Image Impact	+	+	+	+
Awareness Builder	+	+	+	+
Comprehension Builder	+	-	+	+
Audience Targeting	-	-	+	+

association with a client and their IMC partners, has proven to be a useful working guide. The plus and minus signs indicate strengths and weaknesses of the listed techniques *relative to each other*. While there is no room here to discuss every factor in detail, some examples should be helpful.

Credibility: As an independent PR firm, we like to list this one first! PR messages are the most credible because they have received third-party endorsement. In other words, an independent editor or program manager has reviewed the message and judged it newsworthy. This is one reason PR is considered a valuable component of most communications programs.

Message Control: However, editors edit. Reporters get things wrong. The best way to send precisely worded messages to your audiences is through controlled communications: advertising, Web sites, direct mail, and literature. Here, you can be more subjective, brag a little more, and say what you want, within reason.

Brand/Image Impact: All of the disciplines can contribute strongly here. You can use advertising and/or direct mail to spell out your precise positioning message, PR to subtly

reinforce it, and collateral as your reinforcing response mechanism.

Every situation is different, but the objective of improving results through IMC is always worthwhile. The best way to get the synergy you want is to measure your results and make intelligent changes along the way. Be patient, because it can take a year or two for real synergy to kick in, and if you keep making improvements, you can only continue to reduce costs and improve the impact of all aspects of your integrated marketing communications program.

New York - Cos Mallozzi
212.697.2600
cmallozzi@gibbs-soell.com

San Francisco - Roger Ryerson
925.866.8201
rryerson@gibbs-soell.com

Chicago - Jeff Altheide
847.519.9150
jaltheide@gibbs-soell.com

Raleigh - Bob Bowman
919.870.5718
bbowman@gibbs-soell.com

Houston - John Dewberry
281.358.2804
jdewberry@gibbs-soell.com

White Plains - Mark Monroe
914.946.1440
mmonroe@gibbs-soell.com

London - Brian Hind
011.44.171.736.0780
bhind@gibbs-soell.com

Tokyo - Lynn Manning
011.813.3449.5626
rmanning@gol.com