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TOWARDS A NEW PARADIGM OF INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATION?

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Abstract

Marketing communication has been undergoing dynamic transformations in recent years. The main factors influencing those changes are: globalization, technological progress and the digitisation of life. Moreover, customers' needs and expectations related to the communication are evolving as well. Because of those changes, there is a need to adjust the concept of integrated marketing communication to the new reality. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is twofold. First, to analyse the consequences of above-mentioned transformations for the concept of integrated marketing communication. Second, to discuss the need of elaborating a new marketing communication paradigm and to indicate the directions and areas that ought to be adjusted. These deliberations will be based both on critical literature analysis and results of research carried out by the author.

Key words: integrated marketing communication, transformations, image

1. INTRODUCTION

An organization cannot properly function without the communication with the environment. It should be noted that the environment is understood as various groups of stakeholders (as it is normally assumed in the light of the public relations approach) and it should not be limited to merely customers. In the recent years corporate communication has been dynamically changing. The main reasons of this fact are: the intensive development of technology, the progressing globalization, as well as social transformations, leading to the changes in people's attitudes and behaviour, in relation to both consumption and communication. As a

result, techniques, strategies and principles of communicating with the environment need to be adapted to the present reality. The undertaken actions should not have an immediate character, but rather be long-term and strategic. That is why, it has become necessary to revise the assumptions of the integrated marketing communication.

The objective of the present study is the analysis of the technological, economic, and social effects of the integrated marketing communication concept. Moreover, the study will indicate the areas of the communicative activities which need to be adapted to the present conditions. These considerations will be based on the critical analysis of literature, as well as on the author's own research results.

2. THE CONCEPT OF THE INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATION

An undoubted benefit of the information era is the easy and fast access to data, but on the other hand, it is also associated with the communication chaos and the overload of information. The modern societies are bombarded with messages, many of which they regard as annoying, distracting, or unnecessary. As a result, companies are facing a huge challenge in relation to their communication activities.

The subject literature admitted the necessity of reaching consumers by various channels and tools a long time ago. The need for their integration was first pointed out in the 1980s, when it was stated that marketing and public relations are not separate functions with different target groups, but they complement each other. Because of the change in the approach to both these areas, the model which grew in significance was the one whereby these functions should be integrated, coordinated, aligned and in some cases completely fused [Torp 2009, s. 192]. This was the beginning of the Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) concept. However, even though so much time has elapsed since then, this concept is still far from unambiguous and different authors emphasize different aspects of IMC in their definitions, often in opposition to earlier approaches.

According to Duncan, 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”* [Duncan and Caywood, 1996, p. 18]. A few years later this definition was expanded by Duncan and Mulhern, who described IMC as: *“an on-going, interactive, cross-functional process of brand communication planning, execution, and evaluation that integrates all parties in the exchange process in order to maximize mutual satisfaction of each other's wants and needs”* [2004, p. 9]. It should be noted that the marketing communication as a process crosses the traditional departmental boundaries. This point of view is shared by Christensen,

Firat and Torp, who claim that IMC evolved from the rather bounded and specialized activity to an organization-wide issue and concern [2008, p. 425].

Shultz defines IMC as “(...) *strategic business process used to plan, develop, execute and evaluate coordinated, measurable, persuasive brand communications programs over time with consumers, customers, prospects, employees, associates and other targeted, relevant external and internal audiences*” [2004, p. 9]. It should be stressed that the author points to the employees as one of the important groups of the targets of the activities undertaken within the marketing communication.

The need for looking at a company's communication activities as a whole, undivided into separate areas, such as: marketing communication, corporate communication, or internal communication, has been more and more frequently pointed out in the recent years. As a result, there is a growing number of supporters of the Integrated Communication (IC) concept, defined as “*the notion and the practice of aligning symbols, messages, procedures and behaviors in order for an organization to communicate with clarity, consistency and continuity within and across formal organizational boundaries*” [Christensen *et al.* 2008, p. 424]. The authors argue that if those in charge of the communication management in organizations do not understand that all acts of communication must be cohesive, their influence will be much smaller. In consequence, the organization's image and the perception of its brands will suffer.

3. THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS FOR TODAY'S MARKETING COMMUNICATION

3.1. The social transformations

Over the last decades the social sphere has been undergoing intensive transformations, which to various degrees have affected the present shape of the society. The main phenomena included here are, among others: the globalization with the resulting migration, the growing (on the global scale) population, the ageing societies (especially in Europe), the developing urbanization, the growing wealth of the rich, as well as the emancipation of women. From the perspective of the marketing activity, the most significant social-cultural trends are growing consumptionism versus the ecologization of consumption, virtualization of life and home-centrism and a shift from individualism to tribalism defined in a new way [Kacprzak-Choińska 2007, p. 15]. Thanks to the access to the developed communication and information processing media, in the present societies the national revenue is based on the information processing, which is a source of income for the majority of citizens [Goban-Klas and Sienkiewicz 1999, p. 53]. Such a society is called an information society. However, in spite of its numerous positive aspects, it is also exposed to certain threats. Some people think that its functioning may lead to a new division of the world, as well as deepen the social,

civilizational and economic differences. This can be explained by the various degrees of development of technologies indispensable for processing and managing information in different countries [Portal Wiedzy Onet 2014]. Another important issue are the citizens' digital competences, which are often insufficient to face the modern challenges. The digital competences are defined as: “*a group of information competences, which include the ability to seek information, understand it and assess its credibility and relevance, as well as the IT competences, i.e. the skill of using a computer and other electronic devices, using the Internet and various types of applications and software and also creating digital content*” [Szymanek 2013, p. 14]. With the growth of the above mentioned competences, the chances for the satisfactory functioning in the information society are also growing. What is more, such competences make it possible to obtain and use reliable information concerning products and services, which facilitates making purchase decisions. Many studies emphasize the relationship between the extent of using the computer and the Internet and the life situation of the users, both in the professional and in personal sense [Batorski *et al.* 2012].

The progressing virtualization of life, the development of information technologies and the media allowing for forming virtual communities may create an impression that the information era is nearing its end. According to Fidelman, in 2010 the social media era started, as a response to the excess of information, which had an overwhelming effect on people [2014, p. 28]. Seeking the possibility of prioritizing and finding the sense in the available messages, people turned to social networks, such as: Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, or YouTube. Fidelman argues that maintaining the competitiveness and effective communication in today's world is possible only under the condition of integration and acting within the above mentioned social media. An important fact is that it refers to the communication with both internal and external customers. It should be remembered that the social entrepreneurship requires the introduction of business culture based on a target, a mission, common values, but also the economic and social business environment [*ibidem*, p. 67].

The transformations described above are by no means the only phenomena shaping the modern society, but they are crucial from the point of view of the companies which seek the ways of reaching the society members with the message about their offer. The presented trends, especially the social media trend, influence the attitudes and behavior of people as participants of the market, therefore they also affect their approach to and expectations of the marketing communication messages.

3.2. The network paradigm vs. marketing communication

The development of technology has undoubtedly brought about significant changes in the life style and ways of communicating – especially in

relation to the globalization and the computerization of the modern world. It has also contributed to the emergence of a new concept of a society – the network society. It is based on the network of social relations, but also the free access of an individual to social groups, organizations, or interest groups. The individual is a tie which, by entering interactions with other individuals, forms a network of relationships. Thanks to the new technologies the number of such relationships is unlimited. According to M. Castells, networks are „*a new social morphology of communities*” [Castells 2008, p. 467].

From the point of view of the marketing communication management, the essential aspect of the network society is its ability to organize new and complex information relationships (e.g. by means of digital communication) [Stachowicz 2011, p. 202]. In this way, messages sent by individuals extremely quickly spread within the network and a single opinion may influence many other people’s opinions. Therefore, customers have a huge power in creating brand images, both in the positive and negative sense. For this reason, it is essential to identify the major actors of the network, those with the strongest social influence, in order to win their favorable, or at least neutral opinions about a company’s products or services. The *Social Network Analysis* (SNA) is a useful tool for this purpose [Waserman and Faust 1994]. The above mentioned actors often become opinion leaders, playing the role of interpreters, who first receive and interpret a message, and then convey their interpretation to other participants of the network [Kaczor 2014, p. 97]. As a result, they are the senders of the content modified in a way that reflects their own outlook. The marketing messages undergo the same process.

3.3. The modern “recipient” of marketing messages

Persuading potential buyers to accept a company’s market offer is to a lower and lower degree based on the marketing activities, including the traditionally understood marketing communication. Today it mainly relies on forming ties with customers (e.g. by sharing their values and beliefs), as well as on maintaining the relationship, especially in the virtual sphere. Due to the progress of technology and the broad access to information, customers constantly demand a response to their communication needs related to the market offer, and they expect companies to be transparent in all areas of their activity. At present, companies are supposed to be where their customers are and every contact with the organization should provide consumers with a positive experience. Because of the growing popularity of all types of mobile devices used by consumers for making their buying decisions, the presence in the Internet and the social media has become an absolute necessity for companies. What is more, nowadays consumers trust their acquaintances and friends – both real and virtual – more than companies. Therefore, the traditional promotion is losing its appeal, as the most important talks take place between consumers, not between a company and a consumer [Consumer 2020..., p. 17-21]. It should also be stressed that at present consumers are no longer passive recipients of information, as many of

them not only actively create various types of content, but also build communities around ideas, beliefs, or even specific products or services. That is why, customers are not only the supporters or the critics of brands, but they are also to have their part in the development of the market offer, especially in relation to the companies they feel related to. All the above mentioned phenomena have specific implications for the communication activities of companies.

3.4. Integration in marketing communication

In the traditional approach, marketing communication is initiated and managed by the organization, which controls its own interactions with consumers. However, in 2006 it became clear that there is a need to adopt a new approach, whereby the customer is the active part of the process. It stems from the fact that the integration of various types of messages takes place on the recipient's side [Schultz 2006, p. 7]. It should be emphasized that this is true of both the messages which are planned and initiated by a company and the so-called invisible communication. It occurs when from the point of view of a company no information about the organization or its offer is given, but from the point of view of a customer such information is revealed. The invisible communication has a growing influence on the recipients' behavior and therefore its identification and understanding is a real challenge to those involved in the corporate communication management. It is a very important fact that customers integrate messages regardless of their source, prioritizing them as they wish, trusting some sources and rejecting others [Finne and Strandvik 2012, p. 121]. Thus they play an active role in the integration of messages, also those of the marketing character.

From the point of view of an organization, the integration of the marketing communication should occur on several surfaces: [Stoica and Cretoiu 2009, p. 1063]:

- horizontal – based on the integration of marketing instruments and business functions;
- vertical – based on the assumption that marketing and communication objectives contribute to the implementation of an organization's major purposes;
- internal – including the preparation and the motivation of the staff in the area of the functioning of the organization, as well as the customer service, with a view to obtaining the coherence of actions;
- external – related to the cooperation between the advertising and public relations agencies, in order to convey a clear message to the environment;
- data – based on creating a marketing communication system in a company, which allows for effective collection of data about customers.

According to the assumptions, the integration is a multi-level process of a strategic significance. It includes the coordination and the management of stakeholders (internal and external), messages (controlled and uncontrolled), channels and results [Johansen and Andersen 2012, p. 275].

The integration of corporate communication from the point of view of a company differs from the integration of messages conducted by recipients. First of all, companies focus on the integration of channels and the integration of messages is limited to those of the marketing character. Thus, the unconscious invisible communication and the messages whose recipient – in companies' opinion – is not the customer are disregarded. However, at the stage of absorbing messages, the recipients focus on the integration of their content and the selection of the integrated content does not depend on who is the addressee of the message. The source of the information plays a much more important role and the non-corporate sources are more valued [Rogala and Wielicka 2015].

Moreover, from the perspective of a company, the integration of communication takes place in a specific order and according certain rules. Among others, it is assumed that particular channels, tools and targets of the communication activities are compatible. Nevertheless, it is the recipient who selects and absorbs messages, on the basis of their own expectations and preferences. It is the recipient who decides about what, when and how they will obtain information and also which sources they will trust. In the era of the network society, various types of communities are the opinion leaders. As a result, the integration of information often takes place not at the level of an individual, but a community, usually a virtual one.

Organizations aim at making their marketing messages compatible and not mutually exclusive. However, today's recipients expect more. The cohesion of the marketing communication at the declarative level is insufficient. They want each message sent by an organization – regardless of its character and its recipient – as well as each aspects of the company's activity to be consistent with the declared values [Yeboah 2013, p. 86]. What is more, consumers expect a company and its staff not only to practice the declared values, but also truly believe in them.

4. THE CHALLENGES OF TODAY'S INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATION – TOWARDS THE MODIFICATION OF THE CONCEPT

The transformations taking place in the social, technological and information sphere lead us to a conclusion that it is justified to treat the corporate communication as a whole, i.e. all the communication activities undertaken by a company should be integrated into one coherent message. It is particularly significant in view of, on the one hand, the common access to information, the speed of information flow, the democratization of the media and the growing

popularity the social media and, on the other hand, the falling interest in and trust to the traditionally understood promotion. Therefore, from the perspective of companies, integration is nowadays an extremely difficult to manage process, mainly due to the increasing role of the invisible communication in shaping the response to messages and also because of impact of the online social communities on the way the target audience select and receive messages.

The changes in today's consumers' behavior imply the necessity of modifying the integrated marketing communication concept in such a way that it will be capable of meeting the challenges it faces. The majority of them are related to the earlier mentioned information and media revolution. One of the challenges is the need to adapt the employed communication tools to those preferred by the recipients. It stems from the fact that the traditional forms of communication are losing their attractiveness and, consequently, their effectiveness, whereas the number of online messages recipients – users of smartphones, tablets and mobile applications is growing [Kotler *et al.* 2010, p. 20]. As a result, communication is becoming an increasingly interactive process and takes place on a “one-to-many”, “one-to-several”, “one-to-one” and many-to-many” basis [Danciu 2013, p. 42]. Moreover, the consumers' position as participants of the marketing communication process has also strengthened. They are no longer mere recipients, but also co-creators of the content, due to their activity in the virtual sphere – in the social networks, forums, blogs, or videoblogs [Rogala 2014b]. The important fact is that the content placed by other consumers is considered more reliable than the marketing messages issued and managed by the organization. Therefore, it is necessary to constantly monitor the messages published in the virtual sphere. At the same time, however, it has to be remembered that a company has a very limited chance of controlling them.

Another difficulty is related to the earlier mentioned integration of messages. Unlike a dozen years ago, at present this process is controlled by stakeholders rather than companies. The former group is the proactive part of the process, as they decide about what, when and where they want to see and hear, whereas combining messages from different sources does not always meet deliberate and rational criteria. For this reason the coherence of all the elements of the communication system is so crucial, in order to achieve the maximum of convergence of individual stakeholders' experiences [Wiktor 2013, p. 77]. It is related to another challenge, i.e. the necessity to ensure that the values declared by the organization are reflected in all the manifestations of its activity, which means that they need to be practiced. As Hajduk argues, the effectiveness of the multidimensional communication depends on its coherence, which, in turn, relies on the marketing communication integration on three levels: internal, external and corporate external [Hajduk 2010, p. 28]. Therefore, the messages communicated by a company must converge with its vision, mission and strategic assumptions.

Regardless of whether the recipient deals with communication planned and controlled by a company, or random and informal, the message should be

coherent and unambiguous. It is also true of the communication with employees, whose attitudes and opinions play a significant role in the marketing communication process. It can be explained by the fact that a company's internal communication shapes the internal image of the organization, the employees' knowledge about their company's offer and their willingness to recommend it, as well as their readiness to recommend the company as an employer. Moreover, on the basis of the research¹ conducted by the author of the article it was established that there are statistically significant positive relations between the achievement of internal communication objectives and the assessment of the consistency of internal and external communication in particular aspects, as well as between the overall evaluation of internal communication effectiveness and the evaluation of consistency of comprehensive communication activities [Rogala 2014a]. Consequently, internal communication takes part in shaping employees' attitudes in relation to both the organization and to the world outside it. Therefore, from the point of view of the organization's communication integration, it is essential to ensure the coherence of these attitudes.

In its present understanding, the marketing communication needs to be coherent. This coherence is seen by Cornelissen and Lock as the promise of "*order, stability and predictability in an otherwise fragmented and confusing world*" [2000]. Lost in the information jungle and confused by often mutually exclusive messages, a consumer will appreciate the communication strategy which is homogeneous and consistent with the organization's values. This view is shared by Porcu *et al.*, who claim that the main objective of IMC is the consistent, transparent and using the synergy effect communication to various groups of stakeholders. The authors point to the four basic dimensions of IMC [Porcu *et al.* 2012, p. 326-329]:

- one voice communication – the achievement and maintenance of a unique image and positioning and clear delivery of coherent messages through online and offline marketing communication tools;
- interactivity – the element that allows the paradigm shift: to set a constant dialogue with stakeholders through a two-way communication;
- cross-functional planning – strategic integration has to take place in the organization as a whole, since messages may come from all departments and not only from the marketing department;
- profitable, long-term relationships – the highest strategic dimension, representing the main purpose of IMC.

¹ The quantitative research in the form of direct and online surveys, conducted in 2013 in: production, service, trade-production and trade-service types of companies in Wielkopolskie voivodeship (Poland). The research comprised employees, representing all levels of management. Throughout the survey 787 direct and 611 online questionnaires were collected, 1,354 of which were qualified for the further study. The project was financed with the National Science Center resources, granted on the basis of the decision number DEC-2011/03/N/HS4/00701.

The implementation of this concept of communication activities enables the organization to build profitable relations with the outside community. In this multifunctional and interdisciplinary approach, taking the organization as a whole as the point of reference, the integration conditions the competitive advantage. It is achieved due to the interactivity and optimization of relationships between messages, channels and recipients, not just the coordination of particular elements of the marketing mix.

Over the years the IMC concept evolved from the approach assuming the integration of activities related to: advertising, sales promotion and public relations, towards the treatment of an organization's communication as a whole. However, it seems necessary to include in these considerations also the shift in the roles played in the processes of communication and integration by both the organization and its various stakeholders.

5. CONCLUSIONS

As Christensen, Firat and Cornelissen rightly point out, the integrated communications present a paradox to contemporary communication management [2009, pp. 207-208]. In the times of the developing informatization, globalization and virtualization, integration seems to be the most sensible method of the corporate communication management. For the time being, however, it is an ideal, a target a company should aim at, but at the moment unachievable. It would be difficult to assume that an organization manages to integrate all the communication acts it participates in (including those within the invisible communication), as well as the messages created by the former recipients of the marketing communication.

Nevertheless, in spite of these difficulties, companies should not feel free from the efforts aimed at ensuring the coherence of all the communication activities, with the particular emphasis on those related to a company's image. Regardless of the target recipients of their activities, it is essential to make every effort to ensure the consistency of the conveyed messages, as well as the comprehensive and integrated approach to the communication policy of a company.

Taking into consideration the more and more important role of traditionally defined receivers in the marketing communication's messages creation, as well as the impact of invisible communication on the corporate image, it is necessary to search for new promotional mix. Nowadays, one can observe increasing confidence in the independent communication channels and tools, as well as in unintended messages that are sent to the environment. Therefore, it seems justified to treat consumers not only as targets, but also co-creators of marketing communications. Never before, in such a high extent they had the opportunity to express their independent opinions about the company and its products and to influence other consumers' opinions. That is why

organizations should focus on initiating communication and creating a community around brands, primarily by providing the appropriate platform for ideas and opinions exchange and by shaping atmosphere encouraging to discussions.

In the light of deliberations made in this paper, the concept of integrated marketing communication needs to be adapted to contemporary realities. As part of the research, the author intends to develop the current model of marketing communication, including all the described changes. However, before the publication, it needs empirical verification.

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