

USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO ADDRESS CURRICULUM OBJECTIVES IN INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS COURSE

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a report on incorporating social media into both the teaching and learning processes in an MBA-level Integrated Marketing Communications course. The course is among the first to use social media simultaneously and systematically as instructional tools, information sources, and marketing communications media for student projects. By outlining specific curricular objectives addressed by using each social media site, this report presents a solid planning instrument that can be used in many business classes.

INTRODUCTION

Recent developments in Web 2.0 and 3G technologies have created a major paradigm shift in business-to-customer relationships: a shift in information control. Customers are no longer passive “receivers” of company and brand-related marketing messages. Instead, they are engaged in initiating conversations with and providing feedback to businesses, as well as in creating and sharing content among themselves. Social media sites allow users to create and share personal profiles, establish and develop new connections, and provide and acquire information in an interactive manner (Boyd and Ellison 2008). Open access to other members’ contacts provides consumers unprecedented opportunities to control the process of marketing communications by exponentially spreading viral messages about products, brands, and/or customer service that can be either detrimental or beneficial to any business. Given the remarkable growth rate (e.g., from January 2009 to January 2010 Facebook gained over 100 million users), social media are acquiring strategic significance for companies that appreciate their potential for targeting, promotion, public relations, and market research. According to eMarketer (2010), U.S. online social network and word-of-mouth marketing spending will grow 35 percent in 2010 to over \$1 billion, and will exceed \$3 billion in 2012.

With business colleges and schools facing increasing demands from both employers and students for adequate and cutting-edge workplace preparation, bringing real-world relevance into the classroom becomes an imperative. For example, a leading Internet-based employment agency Elance lists competencies in social media and social media marketing among the top 100 skills in highest demand. To illustrate, proficiency in using Wordpress

(a popular blogging and web content management system) is number 15 on the list, followed by blogging skills (#19) and competencies in social networking (#38), Facebook (#61), and Twitter (#93) (Elance.com 2009). In addressing these challenges, marketing professors are increasingly utilizing innovative teaching approaches that, among others, include uses of social networking either as instructional tools (e.g., blogs and discussion boards) or objects for case study analysis (e.g., “Molson Canada: Social Media Marketing” HBR case and Ford Digital and Multimedia Communications case (Fox and Monty 2009)). However, only a few universities offer separate classes or degrees in SNM (e.g., Rutgers University and Birmingham City University (UK)), or systematically incorporate them into marketing courses. It appears that designing a course that would utilize specific social media in accordance with the curriculum objectives each can help achieve best may provide a more meaningful and enriching learning experience, as well as illustrate advantages and challenges of social media for marketing practice.

This paper presents a report on a newly developed MBA-Level Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) course that incorporated social media into both the teaching and learning processes in a way that students not only experienced the role of customers of interactive educational experiences, but also played the role of interactive marketers with their target audiences. The remainder of the paper provides a rationale for the new course development, describes the course objectives and its outline, and illustrates how using various social media in the class helped accomplish its tasks, as well as the assessment of the innovation by the students. It also provides some recommendations for marketing professors interested in integrating social media in their classes.

CURRICULUM OBJECTIVES ADDRESSED BY THE NEW COURSE

The existing catalog description of the MBA-Level IMC course emphasized acquisition of knowledge and skills necessary for “synergistically integrating advertising, sales promotion, direct marketing, event sponsorship, personal selling and public relations for superior marketing communications programs.” Internet and other new developments in communications technology were given only a marginal focus. The final deliverable expected from students was a written marketing communications plan reflecting the acquired knowledge and skills. Taking into account the dynamic developments in the marketing communications field, it was deemed necessary to redevelop the existing course, primarily emphasizing Internet marketing and Social Media Marketing (SMM) to reflect their increased prominence in marketing practice. SMM involves initiating viral consumer-to-consumer communications by creating company/brand fan pages and managing promotions and public relations within most popular social media, such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. Such social media applications as product sharing and voting, collaborative design, and product launch announcements have the potential to provide relevance, immediacy, and convenience to customers, as well as publicity and brand name recognition to the company (Evans 2009). In addition to the widely accepted potential advantages, SMM may present a number of difficulties. According to the Internet Advertising Bureau (2010), major challenges of SMM include lack of demonstrable return on investment and absence of reliable reporting metrics for this emerging marketing tool. It is true that given their viral characteristics, SMM may be more effective in building brand awareness and enhancing brand reputation than generating leads and increasing sales. But even in this function, SMM is only one part of integrated marketing communications, and it is difficult to ascertain its contribution compared to paid advertising and other types of promotion.

The goal of incorporating SMM as a substantial part of the course was to make students aware of its opportunities and challenges, and to come up with creative uses of various SMM vehicles for better marketing communications results. The new course incorporated social media both as an instructional tool and as part of an integrated marketing communications team project deliverable. The curriculum objectives addressed by this innovation include:

- ◆ Developing skills in media analysis and comparison.
- ◆ Practicing methods to evaluate and select media vehicles.
- ◆ Developing a capability to devise and implement IMC measurement procedures.

- ◆ Understanding purpose, strengths and weaknesses of interactive and word-of-mouth marketing.
- ◆ Practicing creative strategies and developing a creative copy in interactive media.
- ◆ Fostering skills in technology-mediated professional communications and collaborative learning.
- ◆ Developing competencies in media strategy planning, budgeting, and scheduling.
- ◆ Implementing and analyzing the results of interactive marketing communications.

COURSE OUTLINE

The goal of the instructional innovation was to redevelop the existing MBA-level IMC course to integrate the interactive nature of modern marketing communications (MarCom) into the teaching and learning processes, so that students not only experience the role of a customer of interactive educational experiences, but also play the role of interactive marketer with their target audiences. To achieve this objective, the class consisted of two modules: informational and practical.

Informational module focused on acquiring and sharing information and knowledge about the IMC phenomena through methods of *active* investigation, interacting with professionals and customers, analyzing and synthesizing theoretical knowledge and practical examples, and presenting this knowledge and its practical implications to peers. The foundational theoretical content was offered to all students in the form of reading modules dedicated to the following topics: the role of IMC in the marketing process, the role of ad agencies, the communication process, source, message and channel factors, creative strategies, media planning, evaluation of broadcast, print and support media, sales promotion and public relations, as well as objectives and budgeting for marketing communications. As part of this module students were required to join IMC-related LinkedIn professional networks and explore relevant professional groups and organizations, become members of those organizations and communicate with other professionals in order to supplement the more general foundational content with the relevant and current knowledge in the IMC area of their choice. The LinkedIn platform was also used by the instructor to initiate weekly class-wide discussions dedicated to current and challenging developments in IMC (e.g., the use of “freemiums” by content providers). Additionally, students were required to develop their individual content blogs (using the Wordpress platform) dedicated to a marketing communications issue of interest (student instructions are provided in Figure 1). These content blogs were offered to other students in the class, as well as to the respective LinkedIn communities for

comments and suggestions. For example, the student blog dedicated to mobile marketing communications, included entries on:

- ◆ Mobile Web: definition of mobile web; buying advertising on mobile web; advertising guidelines relevant to mobile marketing; mobile advertising results metrics.
- ◆ Mobile Messaging: mobile messaging as an advertising medium; mobile messaging response capabilities; mobile messaging success drivers.
- ◆ Mobile Applications: games; travel; banking; social networking, etc.
- ◆ Mobile Video and TV: broadcast, streaming; downloads; interactive ads, etc.

Practical module consisted of implementing the acquired knowledge through planning and creation of an integrated marketing communications campaign and implementing at least one interactive media tool (Figure 2).

The deliverable for this part was a written communications plan document, and a multiple-media campaign for the team-selected product or service, that contained at least one social media vehicle (Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube). Although the instructions did not limit the students in selecting the type or size of a business for MarCom campaign development, all groups opted to work with small local businesses and organizations. Among the chosen partners were: a university cafeteria, an organic deli, a Super Suppers franchise, a local Susan G. Comen for the Cure chapter, a shopping mall, a city hockey team, and the university athletic department. Students were also required to obtain feedback from target audiences and/or professional colleagues, as well as some performance metrics (e.g., number of visitors, number of fans, qualitative feedback, etc.) from the implemented social media marketing. Table 1 provides the list of course objectives, class activities designed to address these objectives,

FIGURE 1 INDIVIDUAL PROJECT DESCRIPTION

During the semester each student will create his/her own social network accounts on Wordpress. The individual Wordpress account will serve to develop content dedicated to one of the class reading modules of your choice. This site should contain information, images, links, and interactive elements that would help present your content to those interested in marketing communications. It can contain descriptions and illustrations of IMC theories and new developments, and/or suggestions and advice to practitioners. You should provide the link to this account to your classmates so they can post their comments and suggestions. You should also promote your blog within the LinkedIn social network in order to obtain comments and feedback about your blog postings from experts and colleagues in the area of marketing communications. The module for your individual project should be selected during Week 2 of the course.

FIGURE 2 TEAM PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This project provides you an opportunity to apply the marketing communications concepts you will learn throughout the course. Students will be assigned to teams of 5-7 members. Each team will identify a product/service for which it will develop a **marketing communications campaign** embracing multiple venues (with at least one interactive medium) that would synergistically impact targeted consumers' behavior. Using knowledge gained from the class, students will research the target audience and propose recommendations in the form of a marketing communications plan. Students will then implement and test the interactive component of their plan with their target market online. The interactive component can be created using various social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, YouTube), or as part of a community on your product's website. Marcom Plan Guide (attached) should be used as the assignment outline. The project should be submitted in five steps, with the dates for each part indicated in the syllabus. The grade for the final project consists of four 15-point grades for submitting and revising the first four parts, and one 100-point grade for submitting the final project with corrections. A proposal with your group's preliminary thoughts (no more than 1 page) is due in Week 3 of the course. In the proposal you should: describe the selected product (or service), describe the potential customers and competitors, and provide justification of your choice (e.g. changing consumption trends or technological breakthroughs).

Grades for the project will be based on the following criteria:

1. Depth of industry, product and market research and analysis.
2. Compelling arguments for the proposed selection of media and vehicles.
3. Creativity in the choice of communications strategy and tactics.
4. Implementation of the interactive element of the campaign.
5. Thorough assessment of feedback from the target audience.

TABLE 1
DIFFERENTIAL USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN ACHIEVING INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS COURSE OBJECTIVES

| Curriculum Objectives | Activities | Use of Social Networks | Assessment Methods |
|---|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Developing skills in media analysis and comparison - Fostering skills in technology-mediated professional communications - Understanding purpose, strengths and weaknesses of interactive and word-of-mouth marketing | <p>Analyzing and synthesizing information: interactive research for new knowledge and information in different areas of marketing communications</p> <p>Establishing professional communications</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Online LinkedIn and in-class discussions and recommendations; - Wordpress blog weekly entries (individual project) | <p>Instructor-developed criteria for blog content requirements (e.g., number and importance of issues discussed; creativity of execution; possibility for interactivity)</p> <p>Online and class discussions</p> <p>Blog author-developed test questions</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fostering skills in technology-mediated professional communications - Understanding purpose, strengths and weaknesses of interactive and word-of-mouth marketing | <p>Establishing professional communications</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Active membership in LinkedIn and professional virtual communities | <p>Amount of online traffic to each student's blog generated by professional networking</p> <p>Number of connections made</p> <p>Number of comments left</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fostering skills in technology-mediated collaborative learning - Practicing methods to evaluate and select media vehicles - Developing a capability to devise and implement IMC measurement procedures - Developing competencies in media strategy planning, budgeting, and scheduling | <p>Developing integrated marketing communications campaign</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Collaborative work using LinkedIn: written plan describing target market, competitors, creative messages, selected media and their combinations, budget and timeline for implementation (team project) | <p>Instructor-developed criteria for the written plan (e.g., logically developed arguments, synergistic integration of media; message appeals pertinent to target market)</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Practicing creative strategies and developing a creative copy in interactive media - Implementing and analyzing the results of interactive marketing communications | <p>Implementing integrated marketing communications campaign</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creating campaign and messages following the plan; - Posting at least one campaign element in interactive media: Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube | <p>Number of comments by representative of target market and professional marketers</p> <p>Expression of willingness to buy or recommend to others the advertised product</p> <p>Social media-based analytics</p> |

differential uses of social media to help achieve these objectives, as well as the assessments of the levels of those skills.

Each social media site used in the course served its particular goal and helped promote distinct class activities.

Blogs: As part of the individual assignment for the course, students were required to develop a blog in order to present to the class their research, analysis, and interpretation of one selected content issue. The blog themes selected by the students included: communications process theories, creative strategies, marketing communications media and their characteristics, setting MarCom objectives and measuring the results, comparing interactive media, employing social media marketing, search engine marketing, and mobile marketing. The goals of utilizing this medium for the course were to help familiarize students with blogging and content creation and encourage them to initiate discussions, foster and participate in conversations using this format, and to promote their original content via social media. This assignment also contributed to facilitating two of the main course activities: actively investigating the concepts and notions of integrated marketing communications and soliciting and obtaining feedback and evaluations of one's work from target audiences. The unplanned positive outcomes of this exercise were practicing cross-platform communications (e.g., when the discussions started in blogs were continued in class), networking with other professionals in the area via the LinkedIn network, obtaining a permanent platform for discussions even after the course was over, and for some students even obtaining sales leads. As a follow-up by the instructor showed, at least five students continued writing for their blogs after the end of the semester, and stayed focused on the chosen topic, attracting more readers and expanding the content. This illustrates the usefulness of this tool for continued learning, networking with relevant professionals, and obtaining a platform for self-marketing.

LinkedIn: All students were required to register and participate in the LinkedIn professional networking site, and to interact with virtual communities of marketing communications professionals. In particular, they joined such communities as Marketing Communications, eMarketing Association, Analytics Happenings, etc. They identified themselves by their professional affiliations and also as students in the MBA program. As such, they shared their views, posted comments and questions, as well as made connections with other professionals in these networks. The LinkedIn involvement was assessed by the number of new connections made, the number of posts made by the students on the respective LinkedIn forums, as well as by the number of posts made on the students' blogs by their LinkedIn connections. A separate LinkedIn discussion group was established by the instructor to post and share current articles, web site links, or videos that were pertinent to the course discussions and to

foster additional discussion outside of the classroom. The LinkedIn participation facilitated the class goals of developing professional communications skills via interactive media, and actively acquiring pertinent, relevant, and timely information. The discussions helped collaboratively analyze and critique this information, as well as arrive at potential real-world applications. As with the individual blogs, cross-platform integration occurred when students were able to establish traffic to their Wordpress blogs by signing their LinkedIn comments with their blogs' URLs. The unplanned outcome of this class activity was improved employment as well as lead generation opportunities.

YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter: Students were required to develop at least one interactive media account as part of their team project dedicated to creating an integrated marketing communications campaign for the selected product or service. Several teams developed a Facebook fan page for their chosen company of study because of its ease of set-up and ability to become a highly targeted integrated marketing communications point. Other groups selected the popular micro-blogging platform Twitter to experiment with its marketing capabilities. Some groups utilized both platforms when it was justified by their marketing communications objectives. A few groups added YouTube video sharing social media pages that provided advantages of product/service demonstrability and a less structured environment allowing for more creative solutions. These activities facilitated the achievement of major class goals of conducting marketing communications planning and implementation, soliciting and obtaining evaluations of one's work from target audiences, and analyzing the results of the implemented campaign. A major advantage for using these media was the opportunity to obtain tangible results in terms of the numbers of visits, "fans," and followers. They were further used to analyze advantages of SNM real-world metrics, as well as their challenges. This really illustrated to students the concept of "permission marketing," when customers are in a constant search for additional information from a company, and are open to receiving messages from retailers and service providers through this medium. An unplanned positive outcome was the synergistic marketing effect from linking these sites and redirecting visitors, multiplying brand exposure for the target market.

ASSESSING THE INNOVATION EFFECTIVENESS

Upon the completion of the course, 31 students provided their assessments of the class in terms of how well the course objectives were achieved, as well as how well their personal goals for the course were accomplished (Table 2). The responses showed a sufficient correspondence between student goals and content-related course objectives. Interestingly, student goals corresponding to skill-development course objectives were

mainly expressed in information and knowledge acquisition terms as opposed to more practical expected outcomes. This can be explained by the perception of a university-based education as more of a theoretical professional preparation, even within the MBA program.

It appears that even hands-on individual and team projects involving local businesses are not sufficient to change these stereotypical student expectations. The achievement of the course objectives received very high evaluations and positive comments.

TABLE 2
ASSESSING THE INNOVATION EFFECTIVENESS FROM THE
STUDENT PERSPECTIVE (N = 31)

| Curriculum Objectives | Average Assessments (out of 5) | Individual Student Goals for the Class | Average Assessments (out of 5) |
|---|--------------------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| Developing skills in media analysis and comparison | 5 | Understand how different types of marketing communications work | 5 |
| | | Learn more about up-to-date marketing techniques | 5 |
| | | Leaving the class with more knowledge for my future experience than before | 5 |
| Fostering skills in technology-mediated professional communications | 5 | Learn more about current events in MarCom | 4 |
| | | See what other companies are doing | 4 |
| Understanding purpose, strengths and weaknesses of interactive and word-of-mouth marketing | 4.9 | Learn more about how social media networks are affecting marketing | 5 |
| | | See how pervasively SNs are used in business | 5 |
| Fostering skills in technology-mediated collaborative learning | 4.8 | Become more technologically savvy | 4 |
| Practicing methods to evaluate and select media vehicles | 4.8 | Understand marketing from a new perspective | 5 |
| | | Niche marketing | 5 |
| | | How/when/who to target | 4 |
| Developing a capability to devise and implement IMC measurement procedures | 4.8 | How to communicate effectively in marketing | 4 |
| | | Assess advertising effectiveness | 4 |
| Developing competencies in media strategy planning, budgeting, and scheduling | 4.8 | Increase knowledge of preparing MarCom plan | 5 |
| | | Learn to advertise on campus | 5 |
| Practicing creative strategies and developing a creative copy in interactive media | 5 | Expand knowledge of how to appeal to consumers | 5 |
| Implementing and analyzing the results of interactive marketing communications | 5 | Get a better idea of how to evaluate ad strategy | 5 |
| Note: Achievement of the course objectives and goals was assessed on a scale from 1 (Did not achieve at all) to 5 (Achieved to a full extent). | | | |

Some responses, quoted below, addressed the following learning outcomes:

Acquiring information and increasing knowledge:

“I have learnt key aspects in writing a blog and marketing it.”

“I gained useful key things, and it is how social media can improve your learning experience.”

“I think the individual project familiarized me with different aspect of marketing through companies’ stories and new information.”

“I learned a lot about social media from marketer’s or business owner’s perspective.”

“The class helped to bring me up-to-date on marketing communications today. I received my undergrad degree 10 years ago so I was outdated and this helped fix that.”

Acquiring professional communication and collaboration skills:

“Participating in LinkedIn discussion and networking with peers benefited me to elevate my awareness on LinkedIn and achieving my career goals.”

“It’s a lot more useful to look at what yours peers may think about certain issues.”

“I have benefitted greatly academically and professionally through the social networking from this course because I realize and understand how can I use these sites other than socially and personally as I do now.”

“This course has reinforced my interest in social networking and prompted me to start a blog – something on my to-do list for a long time. It has also promoted my use of LinkedIn – a network I paid little attention to before the class.”

“Creating a LinkedIn account will help me with future professional networking/goals/etc.”

Practicing Creative Marketing Communications Planning and Implementation:

“I was able to get sponsor for my team by marketing and advertising my business.”

“Creating websites enabled me to learn about the techniques of creation which in turn helped me achieve my goal from business and marketing standpoint.”

“Creating interactive marketing communications for group projects contributed most to achieving my goals as it allowed me to think outside the box.”

“Personally – this class prompted my trial of social networking.”

While the class was very successful in achieving the pre-determined educational goals, as well as student personal goals, there were some suggestions and comments provided by the students to improve the course. The following quotes illustrate some areas suggested for improvement:

“Maybe utilize a wiki or ning.com site for students who lack a LinkedIn account.”

“Need to know how viral and buzz marketing can be

incorporated in new product launch.”

“Although two guest speakers provided their insights into traditional and Internet marketing, more real experience from existing companies would be beneficial.”

“Engaging the class online in other ways than discussions.”

“Seeing the exact Marketing Communications plan of an actual company to see how they use social media.”

“Search engine marketing and optimization should be considered in more detail and at more length.”

Generally, the course progressed smoothly, with the students enthusiastically participating in the innovation and proactively expressing their opinions and advice about how to improve their experiences. One student suggested adding Twitter as a teaching tool and using it on a more consistent basis during the course, although he did not provide concrete ways for it to advance learning. Being more mobile and immediate, Twitter can facilitate instant communication with and among students, contributing to the class experiences and providing convenience. However, using micro-blogging for class-related communications may be less comprehensive than social media-based discussions and emails. Therefore, it appears reasonable to utilize Twitter for studying practices of established companies and to continue experimenting with it as part of team marketing communications campaigns. Others commented that the course was instrumental in better understanding advantages and disadvantages of each social network when making a choice for marketing communications mixes. The average teaching evaluation for this class was 5 out of 5, significantly higher than the teaching evaluation from the previous version of this class (4 out of 5). Based on the evaluation results and student comments, systematically incorporating social media into integrated marketing communications courses may be an important and necessary innovation. Additionally, other aspects of current Internet marketing practices may be included to increase the relevancy of marketing communications education.

ADAPTABILITY AND CONCLUSION

The goal of the new Integrated Marketing Communications course was to address current demand for interactive media marketing skills and increase the real-world relevance of MBA-level marketing classes through the use of social media in the teaching and learning processes. In line with the AACSB Assurance of Learning standards for MBA programs, enhancing marketing curriculum by introducing knowledge and skills of social media marketing clearly contributes to developing student capacities of “applying knowledge in new and unfamiliar circumstances” and “adapting and innovating to solve problems and to manage in

unpredictable environments.” The positive student outcomes of the restructured course testify to the need to continually enhance the marketing curriculum with new offerings that allow students to experiment and explore new and innovative marketing techniques and tools and to increase the relevance of marketing education.

Based on student assessments and comments, the class succeeded in developing knowledge and competencies in the areas of interactive teaching and learning, mediated professional collaborations, developing creative solutions for new media marketing communications, and assessing the need for and results of interactive media in integrated campaigns. The course is among the first using social networking simultaneously and systematically as the instructional tools, information sources, and as marketing communications media for student projects. By outlining specific curricular objectives addressed by using each social networking and blogging site, this report presents a solid planning instrument that

can be used in many marketing classes. For example, any marketing class can incorporate social media as individual instructional tools (e.g., blogs for developing and reporting content and LinkedIn for professional networking). Existing social media accounts created by companies may be used as case studies in brand management, retailing and distribution, or marketing strategy classes. Marketing research classes can collect publicly available demographic and traffic-related information in social media. Finally, creative use of social networking for MarCom campaigns can be utilized in marketing communications and advertising classes. Such internet marketing techniques as wikis, search engine marketing and optimization, or apps can be also incorporated as practical tools for student learning. It should be noted that ongoing developments in social media warrant continuous adjustments to the scope of their coverage in class, as well as to their instructional use in marketing education.

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