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## **Conditions must be right for integrated marketing to work**

by Pam Lagano

Businesses operating in today's marketplace must feel like they are walking through a minefield. Markets are splintering into niches, customers are forsaking their brand loyalties, competitors are proliferating, and communication and information channels are exploding. Very few companies feel that they face a secure future.

In the midst of these upheavals, companies are desperately searching for new answers to age-old questions. The questions haven't changed: How do we win new customers? How do we keep our current customers? How do we develop a sustainable competitive advantage that differentiates us from our competitors and wins the continuing loyalty of our customers?

In the marketplace of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the driving force is not companies with products to sell but customers controlling what, where, and how they want to buy. Thanks to the Internet, 24-hour toll-free phone numbers, credit cards, and express delivery services, consumers are accessing information on demand and seeking out the products and services that interest them.

The old answers – to spend megabucks on mass advertising, roll out endless promotions, dispatch a battle-weary sales force – no longer work. Gone are the days when a company determined where, when, and how it sells its product. A new approach not only changes the way we make our purchasing decisions, it also revolutionizes how companies market to their customers. For most companies to win, they must replace outdated mass-marketing tactics with a targeted, customer-focused approach.

A growing number of companies are turning to this promising new approach called integrated marketing communications. This is not simply a call for integrating the various and proliferating means of communications so that they work together and deliver one message. The focus is to build positive relationships with customers and other stakeholders – by understanding needs, motivations, attitudes and behaviors. Integrated marketing communications is rooted in the notion that consumers do the integration. Consumers put together all their information and experiences and come out with favorable or unfavorable perceptions of companies, products and brands.

Consumers base their decisions on their perceptions of reality, rather than on reality itself. Consumers buy a Sony if they think it is better than a Panasonic. They don't really know. They don't take apart the TV sets and examine them from an engineering

point of view. They choose the Sony because of a multitude of favorable impressions, experience and conversations that they have had about different brands.

All planned communication must start with a rich understanding of all the ways that consumers receive and process information. Marketers must strive to deliver a consistent picture of their brand positions and company position through all the channels that reach consumers. For example, it doesn't help to advertise that Progresso soup has superior quality if the soup cans occupy only a few facings on the lowest supermarket shelves and the cans look dusty and undistinguished. It doesn't help to promote the image that a hotel is friendly if guests experience grumpy hotel clerks.

There are a series of necessary conditions that must be present for integrated marketing communications to be adopted effectively by a company. Five recommendations are:

- It is a concept that must be implemented systematically and simultaneously at all levels and functions of a company. One program in which the PR and marketing functions are integrated does not qualify the company as an exemplar example.
- The CEO must voice direct support - otherwise efforts are doomed.
- Someone within the company needs to become an evangelist and conscience of the implementation effort.
- Any integrated marketing communication program must be adapted to the unique character of a particular organizational culture. A "one-size-fits-all" program does not exist.
- We must look beyond narrow integrated marketing communication successes in traditional businesses for exemplars. Many of America's most venerable companies do a few aspects of it well, but fail to exemplify company-wide integration. High tech companies appear to be doing a better job at the process.

Of the five major communication tools – advertising, personal selling, sales promotion, direct marketing, and marketing public relations – it is the last two that are receiving the most attention and recording the most growth. Direct marketing can account for its growth in being able to customize its messages to segments of one, carry on dialogue and not just monologue, and obtain a pretty good measure of response and, therefore, communication effectiveness. Public relations can account for its growth by its great versatility, its aptitude for drama, and its capacity to break through the information clutter and capture attention and interest.

Its time to embed public relations in the larger marketing paradigm of integrated marketing communications. Creatively used, it has the power to develop and nourish companies, products and brands.

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