

# Has anyone seen the business plan?

*Heather Maitland* discusses the thinking behind integrated marketing communications

**W**hy do we need an issue of *JAM* devoted to communication strategy? Different communication channels coordinated to achieve strategic goals – we do that really well, don't we?

The aim of integrated marketing communications (IMC) is to create a 'synergy of persuasive voices' where the message is consistent and each persuasive tool is used to best effect.<sup>1</sup> In the arts, we're good at getting people to attend, visit and participate in our organisations' activities. That's important, of course, but do our communications coordinate to achieve our organisations' wider goals or are we just delivering a series of separate campaigns?

Thorson and Moore say a campaign is aimed at a narrowly defined set of audiences. In the cultural sector that's mainly the people we think are most likely to attend, visit or participate. IMC is aimed at the widest possible range of audiences carefully segmented according to the way they decide to get involved with our organisation. This includes people who won't themselves attend, visit or participate but who play a role in the decisions of others.

A campaign focuses on one clear message about the most appropriate benefit (a benefit is a reason to get involved rather than a fact about the activity). I can think of lots of arts organisations that still find it difficult to talk about benefits at all. IMC, however, coordinates lots of different messages, each chosen as the most appropriate benefit for one of the many target audiences.

A campaign focuses on a narrow

range of communication channels chosen because they are familiar and readily available. In our sector that means the season brochure, show or exhibition leaflet, direct mail letter and press release. In contrast, IMC chooses channels solely because they are the most effective way of persuading a particular target audience.

A campaign focuses on one point in the decision-making process. In the arts we tend to assume that everyone is a latent attender, visitor or participant so our communications simply seek to persuade someone to choose this cultural activity rather than that one. Instead, IMC sets out to influence every stage of the decision.

So, not very many marks out of ten for the arts sector, then. Why do many of us find strategic communications so hard to achieve?

The most important factor in IMC is that communication objectives fit with marketing objectives and that they in turn fit with our organisation-wide objectives.<sup>2</sup> And this is where Olaf Holm believes the problems lie. His research across a number of sectors shows that sometimes goals conflict. In the arts, for example, the communications objective of maximising attendance at minimum cost can be at odds with the strategic marketing objective of broadening audiences. Often, the people implementing campaigns do not understand or are not even aware of marketing and organisational objectives.<sup>3</sup> In larger arts organisations it's often the most junior staff putting leaflets together, writing press releases or sending e-mailings, and they lack the necessary strategic marketing

knowledge. I often meet marketing assistants who don't know that their organisation has a business plan. But, conversely, their strategic managers don't pay enough attention to tactical communications either. It's as though tactics and strategy are on different planets.

One of the main strategic goals of marketing communications is to ensure our existing and potential audiences recognise our organisation's brand when they see it, recall it unprompted in the right circumstances (brand awareness) and associate that brand with a set of values (brand associations). But how often do we audit our campaigns to check that they are compatible with our overall brand position?<sup>4</sup>

Instead, we focus on the superficial aspects of integration. Thorson and Moore describe these scenarios from other sectors, but they sound familiar:

- we simply make everything look the same by applying a rigid visual identity
- we make everything sound the same by using identical copy in the season brochure, on the show or exhibition leaflet, in the press release
- we develop packages of communications based on industry standards rather than on what our existing and potential audiences actually do
- we have marketing meetings in which we bring together the people responsible for various communication methods, but focus on our tactical capabilities rather than on getting a better understanding of how our audiences actually perceive us.

1. **Esther Thorson and Jeri Moore**, *Integrated Communications: Synergy of Persuasive Voices*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996, pp. 136 et seq.
2. **Paul Smith, Chris Berry and Alan Pulford**, *Strategic Marketing Communications: New Ways to Build and Integrate Communications*. Kogan Page, 1999, p. ix
3. **Olaf Holm**, 'Integrated Marketing Communication: From Tactics to Strategy', *Corporate Communications*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2006, pp. 23–33

4. **Shiva Nandan**, 'An Exploration of the Brand-Identity – Brand-Image Linkage: A Communications Perspective', *Journal of Brand Management*, no. 12, 2005, pp. 264–278
5. **Leslie de Chernatony and Susan Segal-Horn**, 'The Criteria for Successful Service Brands', *European Journal of Marketing*, vol. 37, no. 7/8, 2003, pp. 1095–1118
6. **Lynne Eagle, Philip J. Kitchen and Sandy Bulmer**, 'Insights into Interpreting Integrated Marketing Communications: A Two-Nation Qualitative Comparison',

*European Journal of Marketing*, vol. 41, no. 7/8, 2007, pp. 956–970

7. **Lars Thøger Christensen and Simon Torp**, 'Integrated Marketing Communication and Postmodernity: An Odd Couple?', *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2005, pp. 156–167

Leslie de Chernatony and Susan Segal-Horn have reviewed the research and interviewed branding consultants to come up with the solution.<sup>5</sup> It's about leadership.

First, the organisation needs 'a ruthless clarity' about its values. If management genuinely believes in those values, then it will behave accordingly and they will be more likely to be shared by the staff, especially if systematic recruitment, induction and training are in place.

Second, multi-functional staff teams need to work from strategy to tactics to implementation so that everyone understands the marketing and organisational objectives and how they can be delivered consistently. The process seems straightforward enough:

- define your brand
- define your organisational and marketing objectives
- define your target audiences
- understand how each target audience makes the decision to get involved and who influences that decision
- decide which messages will be most persuasive and which communication method(s) will be most effective at each stage of each target audience's decision-making process
- work out how individual campaigns will contribute to delivering the strategy.

Perhaps it's too straightforward. Lynne Eagle and her colleagues' research showed that marketers resist the development of 'rigid rules' and instead develop processes that best fit their own situations.<sup>6</sup> IMC is an approach that defines communication as one-way, argue Lars Christensen and Simon Torp. They agree with fans of IMC that it's important for organisations to

develop a coherent narrative that makes sense of fragmented markets and ever-diversifying communication channels. But they believe we can no longer control the values audiences associate with an organisation. They want a more flexible approach to strategic marketing communications that allows audience involvement in creating shared, not imposed, meanings.<sup>7</sup> That said, even

Christensen and Torp are arguing for a strategic approach to communication that goes beyond the campaign; so, I suspect they wouldn't give most arts organisations many marks out of ten either.

So let's involve our colleagues in a serious discussion about what our organisations really stand for. Let's empower everyone involved in implementing tactical communications so they understand why they do what they do. And let's make an honest assessment of what our communications, taken as a whole, really say about us. That's what this issue of *JAM* is all about. ●



**Heather Maitland**  
Consultant and author  
e hmaidland1@aol.com