

Marketing communication practices that foster integration in football clubs

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Introduction

Integrated Marketing Communications, or IMC, has been a platform for research for almost three decades, attracting the interest of both academics and practitioners (Kliatchko & Schultz, 2014). The scholars' appreciation has been often expressed, mainly due to the close relationship between IMC and brand performance (Kitchen & Schultz, 1999), with recent studies suggesting that implementing integration can have a direct impact upon an organisation's communications campaign effectiveness and the brand's market-based and financial performance (Luxton, Reid & Mavondo, 2015). However, IMC's implementation in practice still remains a rather uncharted territory, especially in regards to integration in sports in general and football in particular. In reality it could be argued that the only study that has focused purely and more holistically on IMC in sport is the one conducted by Hopwood (in Beech & Chadwick, 2007), who presented the sport integrated marketing communications mix (SIMCM), its characteristics and the advantages and disadvantages of each element. Its practical application is, nevertheless, not examined, suggesting that a substantial under-researched territory exists in integrated marketing communications practices in sports.

This study aims at addressing this gap by investigating IMC in practice and examining the marketing communications practices that foster integration in football clubs. Based on the close link between integration and marcom practices, it can be argued that this study examines the current practice in an effort to access the strategic focus of the marketing communications practices encountered. In other words, the aim of this study is not only to create an account of the marketing communications practices in football, but also to identify and access whether the current practices implemented foster strategic integration, which is a key aspect of strategic brand management.

In order for this to be achieved, a systematic review of the IMC literature is conducted, which forms the basis for the development of the second part of the study. Following this step, empirical research was conducted, which involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the individuals in charge of marketing or marketing and communications in all clubs that participated in the Premier League in any of five consecutive seasons - 2010/11, 2011/12, 2012/13, 2013/14 and 2014/15), 30 in total. Using the findings of the research, IMC is examined through the analysis of the clubs' marketing communications practices and the football practitioners' views, which provide the author with a holistic view of the current landscape of marketing communications practices in football clubs and the extent to which they foster integration.

Literature review

From as early as 1989 IMC has been described as a concept that can be applied in order to deliver clarity, consistency and maximum communication impact (American Association of Advertising Agencies in Schultz, 1993a) utilising marketing tools, such as advertising, sales promotion and public relations, coherently. Keegan et al. (1992) and Kotler (2000) presented IMC as a strategic process of coordination and integration of all messages and communication channels in order for a clear, consistent, coherent and persuasive message or a collective influence to be achieved. Both scholars underlined the strategic importance of the concept that should be leading to a more strategic and long-term process, rather than a quick procedure of mainly operational value, as it had been previously presented, with Keegan et al. linking IMC with brand value as well. In 2008 Kliatchko (p.140) summarised IMC as 'an audience-driven business process of strategically managing stakeholders, content, channels, and results of brand communication programs'. This last definition appears to capture the key aspect that underlines IMC's importance, its direct link with strategic brand management.

Through the analysis of the literature available, it can be identified that a number of marketing communications practices have been associated with IMC. These practices represent the way in which marketing communications are or should be managed in order for IMC to be

implemented. In other words, these practices represent an 'enhanced' version of common marketing communications practices, which can facilitate and support, and in reality represent integration. It is worth mentioning that little literature exists on these marketing communications practices, even though it can be argued that pinpointing and underlying them could assist in both future research on the topic and IMC's actual implementation by practitioners. These practices include the existence of an appropriate, clear and concise brand strategy, linked with relevant and measurable brand objectives, which are carefully created and in turn communicated to the individuals within the organisation (Christensen et al., 2008). The establishment of collaborative communication throughout an organisation, in order to ensure that the functions and individuals within it communicate openly and are able and willing to co-operate (Reid, 2003). Moreover, the practice of 'orchestrating' all promotional tools and activities at different brand levels was emphasised, since it can ensure that brand consistency exists within all marketing communications efforts and activities, as strategic integration suggests (Reid, 2002).

Even though increasing scholarly interest has been attracted to football, and especially areas such as sports brands and the way they have been managed in both the sports industry in general and the football industry in particular (Bridgewater, 2010; Beech & Chadwick, 2007), a number of topics, such as marketing and communications practices, could be still considered a rather under-researched territory (Hamil & Chadwick, 2010). Taking this into consideration, it could be suggested that any research conducted on the topic could have a contribution to the future of the industry, regarding both the potential scholarly interest on the area and the managerial practices employed. Especially when bearing in mind that the football industry in particular is a rapidly developing industry that has been experiencing significant growth even through troubling financial times (Szymanski & Smith, 2010), while investing extra effort and placing further emphasis on the marketing and communications functions (Brown, 2003), whose strategic importance and potential has been underlined by the academics, while suggesting that this could only be achieved if additional research is conducted on the topic and informed the current practices. This study aims at addressing this key issue by investigating the marketing communication practices in football clubs in an attempt to understand the extent to which integration is implemented in them.

Methodology

This study investigates IMC's implementation through a qualitative research design which allows for rich information to be collected, enabling the author to gain deep insight to both the practices encountered and their underlying structures. As a result, this study aims not only at creating an account of the marketing communications practices in football, but also at identifying and accessing whether the current practices implemented foster strategic integration.

Based on the complexity of the industry and on the disparities that exist both globally and within each country on various aspects, such as structure, finance, and customer base and reach (Noll, 2002), the focus of the research was limited to the clubs in the top level of English professional football, the English Premier League. Critical case purposive sampling was employed in order to select the sample which consists of cases that share an important characteristic or set of characteristics (participated in the Premier League). In order for the potentially sizable sample to be limited to a manageable number, the shared characteristic was further limited to clubs that participated in the Premier League in any of five consecutive seasons - 2010/11, 2011/12, 2012/13, 2013/14 and 2014/15), 30 in total. In more detail, these clubs are: Arsenal, Aston Villa, Birmingham City, Blackburn Rovers, Blackpool, Bolton Wanderers, Burnley, Cardiff City, Chelsea, Crystal Palace, Everton, Fulham, Hull City, Leicester City, Liverpool, Manchester City, Manchester United, Newcastle United, Norwich, Queens Park Rangers, Reading, Southampton, Stoke City, Sunderland, Swansea, Tottenham Hotspur, West Bromwich Albion, West Ham United, Wigan Athletic and Wolverhampton Wanderers.

Acquiring census allowed the author to examine the population selected, by studying all the above mentioned case studies / football clubs. In more detail, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the key individuals responsible for marketing and marketing communications activities in the 30 football clubs comprising the census of this study. The interviews took place between August 2014 and March 2015 and were conducted in-person in either the office or the training ground of each club. The duration of each interview ranged from 25 to 55 minutes, while following a coherent interview protocol. A thematic template approach was followed for the analysis of the data collected, which enabled the author to identify the underlining

structures leading to the various marketing communications practices that can be encountered in the industry.

Findings and discussion

Through the analysis of the findings a number of patterns were identified in the existence and nature of an overall marketing strategy and relevant marketing goals of each organisation, in the cross-functional communication within each club and in the ways in which outward communications are aligned. At the same time, the discrepancies noted on each of the above mentioned topics, allowed for a detailed mapping of the practices encountered to take place, which could potentially assist in marketing communications current appreciation and future progress. Taking the IMC

In more detail, inquiries on the existence and content of marketing strategies in the industry presented the author with a number of differing answers that point towards the opposite directions; From multiple function-specific marketing strategies focusing on areas such as fan engagement and brand's international recognition (suggested by five clubs), to a marketing strategy deriving from the overall commercial strategy of the club and thus including numerous sales elements (presented by eight clubs), to a rather lax and mainly commercially focused strategy (existing in eleven clubs), and finally to the lack of marketing strategy altogether (found in six clubs). Following the above-mentioned pattern, four significantly different patterns were identified in the existence and nature of marketing goals. In more detail, it was suggested that five clubs set well-defined and measurable goals, eight clubs present the marketing employees with a mixture of marketing and sales goals, eleven clubs tend to focus mainly on the sales goals and overlook any marketing targets, while six clubs argue that no marketing goals are set in the club.

In terms of cross-functional communication within the organisation, five different patterns were identified among the clubs, ranging from seamless to problematic communication. Firstly, collaborative seamless communication was identified in one club, while another four argued that open and frequent informal and formal communication exists among employees. Another eight clubs suggested that unstructured, informal communication is fostered within the organisation, while sometimes substituting the formal more structured approach. Eleven clubs presented the author with a different practice characterised mainly by infrequent communication cross-functionally, while the remaining six clubs admitted that a number of interdepartmental silos exist within the organisations, that hinder most forms of collaborative cross-departmental communication.

Finally, outward communications alignment, one of the key aspects of protecting and safeguarding a club's brand by ensuring that all marketing communications messages are coherent and consistent, while sharing the same 'look and feel', was discussed providing the author with fewer differing answers. The two main patterns identified suggest that the majority of the clubs (24 out of 30) place a person or a team in charge of controlling, checking and approving all messages that are communicated from the club, which resembles the idea of an Integration Czar, as suggested by Schultz (1992). The remaining six clubs, however, argued that such a practice is not followed, since non-aligned communications are preferred.

As the above mentioned analysis shows, the various differing patterns identified allowed the author not only to create an account of them, but also to group the clubs studied accordingly in relation to the extent to which they foster integration. In other words, the marketing communications practices investigated allowed for an assessment to be made regarding the level of IMC's implementation in each of the clubs, which in turn enabled the author to group the clubs in the five IMC levels (adapted from Kitchen and Schultz, 1999, p. 34), which can demonstrate the various stages of integration's implementation in the census of the population studied. The level zero was added preceding level 1, in order for the full spectrum of the IMC stages to be captured, since, as this study suggests, integration is not implemented in all clubs examined. These levels capture the full spectrum of integration stages that can be observed in this particular sample, however, it could also be argued that they might possibly capture the potential integration scenarios encountered in other sectors as well.

As a result, it could be argued that identifying the marketing communications practices encountered in all five levels of IMC could not only provide an account of the marcom practices in football clubs. On the contrary, it could also allow for a connection to be made between integration and marketing strategies and goals, cross-functional communication and communications alignment in companies operating in the wider sports industry. In other words, this study allows

for a more thorough and broader view of the marketing communications practices to be presented, by including organisations that belong in lower IMC levels, while continuing on the work conducted by scholars such as Reid (2002, 2003), Tsai (2005) and Christensen et al. (2008) who focused on the practices encountered in organisations that implement IMC strategically. The more thorough and holistic presentation of marketing communication practices presented through this study is therefore expected to not only broaden our knowledge and understanding of integration in football, but also to potentially act as a guide and assist in IMC's implementation and, thus, strategic brand management practices in the future.

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