

## Exploring integrated marketing communication gaps in the not for profit sport system

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**Keywords:** integrated marketing communication, sport marketing, organisations, national governing bodies, community sport organisations

### Aim of the paper

This paper aims to test the variance between organisational approaches and consumer attitudes to investigate integrated marketing communication (IMC) approaches of national governing bodies (NGBs) and community sport organisations (CSOs). Focusing on elements of the IMC suite used by CSOs governing Olympic sports, the content and messages delivered by these organisations are compared with wants and needs of consumers to identify gaps in communication strategies. Discrepancies between these are then viewed through a conceptual framework highlighting the effectiveness and efficiency of IMC within these organisations.

### Theoretical background

In a sport context, IMC use aims to establish, maintain and enhance relationships helping to achieve functional goals, including attracting and retaining members, as well as increasing awareness and public perception of the sport (Iokamidis, 2010). Contemporary marketing literature regarding IMC strategies highlight capabilities gaps where expectations of consumers are in disconnect to products and services offered by organisations. Based on a service dominant logic (SDL) philosophy, consumers demand a shift from traditional one way communication to dialogic information exchange and value co-creation (Kim & Trail, 2011). Social media, advances in content platforms, transition to digital databases and customer relationship marketing (CRM) are suggested as possible solutions to this, improving sport organisation communication, but their strategic use in not for profit sport systems needs further research.

Investigating IMC of NGBs and CSOs, and their role in ensuring the viability of important sport outcomes provided, frame this research. By identifying possible gaps between wants and needs of consumers (from Uses and Gratifications theory (see Clavio & Kian, 2010)), and content provided by sport organisations a greater synergy between the two can be developed maximising benefits provided by IMC.

### Methodology

A conceptual framework was developed, including consumer attitudes towards IMC quality, behavioural intentions and organisational functional outcomes. Using this, a comparison of the wants and needs of CSO members, and IMC services of sport organisations was investigated. Data was collected utilising a mixed-method approach, involving three medium size CSOs. Initially, in-depth interviews with relevant staff were undertaken to ascertain IMC strategies within the organisation. Following interviews, an online survey was distributed to members. The survey included IMC usage, demographic information and 16 existing constructs adapted to a sporting

context including; service quality, consumer loyalty, and organisational awareness. Interview data was analysed to understand communications roles and responsibilities of CSOs, while survey results provided consumer perceptions of the quality of these communication activities, and practical benefits of IMC use and consumption.

### Results, discussion and implications.

Overall, results demonstrated validity of the proposed framework in representing the IMC process in not for profit sport. Also identified were inconsistencies between organisational delivery and consumer demand in the communications delivered by the research subjects. Interviews carried out with suggested IMC strategies and activities were ad hoc and inconsistent, with a case description developed for each CSO. These were compared across the organisations involved, and within the organisations focussing on consumer specifics including internet usage, and level of sport involvement. Organisations were shown to use a limited range of tools with no specific evaluation protocol, and adoption and implementation was based on conveniently chosen actions rather than part of a strategic process.

Interview data and consumer perceptions obtained from the survey were applied to the conceptual framework, with path analysis indicating a satisfactory model fit and significant relationship between consumer attitudes and relationship quality. Overall, participants indicated moderate levels of experiential benefit, service satisfaction and perceived quality, highlighting that IMC did not match the expectations of consumers. Further analysis is underway quantifying links between perceived quality and satisfaction with IMC and functional organisational outcomes.

The research suggests value in a refined and structured process including a dynamic, consumer focussed SDL philosophy to address inconsistencies ensuring better practical outcomes from IMC investment. Theoretically, the conceptual framework presents a tool aiding investigation of IMC processes of the sporting organisations involved. This adds to limited existing knowledge in this area while providing a viable framework for further academic study of these concepts. While this study focussed on Australian NGBs and CSOs, the similarity of these sporting organisations to global counterparts ensure findings from this investigation can make a meaningful contribution to theoretical, methodological and practical bodies of knowledge regarding IMC in sporting organisations and other not for profit industries.

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