

The Marketing Communications Course: A New Interdisciplinary Course with Multiple Dimensions.

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ABSTRACT

Marketing Communications is rapidly becoming a "hot" area for both advertising and marketing departments. This article emphasizes the difference between the marketing and communications perspectives on the course, advocating a crisp delineation between the disciplines even though the lines are often blurred in practice. Five content/course/curriculum decisions must be made before a course can be appropriately designed. The author offers a sample course outline and term project for one model.

THE NEW ADVERTISING—OLD HAT

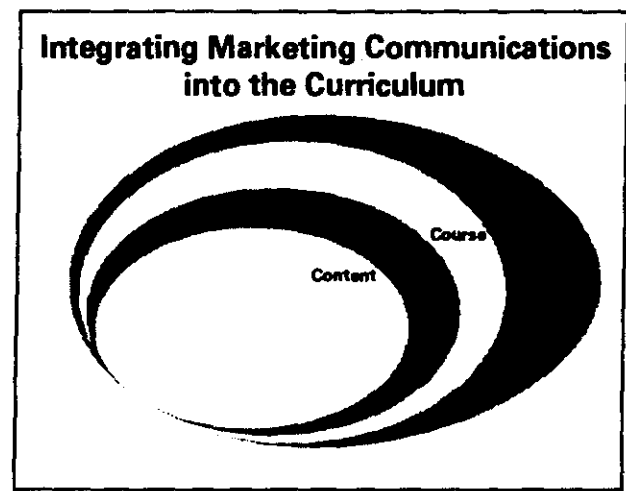
"The New Advertising" isn't. Application of time-tested integration techniques to consumer advertising may be a new concept for many; but the close integration and coordination of all four marketing communications disciplines—advertising, public relations, sales promotion, and personal selling—is old hat in business-to-business marketing communications (Jordan 1982). Nonetheless, advertising and the related marketing communications disciplines are undergoing significant changes (Clancy 1990; Landler, et al 1991, Light 1990). As the appeal of these "new" integration techniques spreads from business-to-business to the consumer marketing, academicians can be expected to introduce courses that cover marketing communications (marcom) comprehensively. In this paper, I will suggest some divisions and definitions based on my personal experience as a practitioner and having taught this course for the last ten years in two different divisions (marketing and journalism) at two universities at both the graduate and undergraduate levels.

Four fundamental issues must be addressed:

- What Content should be included;
- Where the Content fits in the Context of the course;

- Where the Course fits in the Curriculum;
- Where the Curriculum fits in the students' overall education (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1



CONTENT

When I arrived at my current teaching post, the business to business communications course was being taught by practitioners and other "non-traditional" faculty (Plumley, 1990). Each was well qualified in his or her own specialty—trade shows, brochure production, product publicity, advertising, direct mail, etc.—and each did an excellent job explaining the content of the discipline. Yet the course was failing, drawing on the average only 10 to 15 students in a department with 600 advertising majors. (We now draw more than 40 students per semester.) In talking with students and visiting the class, it soon became apparent that the missing ingredient was a roadmap, a context for the material that they were being given. The practitioners were advocates of their particular disciplines, and worthy advocates. But the students were bombarded with content and unable to give it a context.

CONTEXT

The content had to be given a meaningful context—integrated into a course that made sense to the students, a course that related to their other courses and to the curriculum as a whole. I use a marcom plan outline both as a term project and to provide context for the entire course. Based on my experience, this is a good model, though not the only one. The plan outline shows students the similarities and differences among objectives, strategies and tactics for the four disciplines. Indeed, my experience has been that many students understand, for the first time, how these disciplines interact. The course content and outline decisions should be made by the individual instructor, in light of the overall course requirements and the requirements of the curriculum. The context of the course also includes the marketing concept. Since advertising students today should be well grounded in marketing, a large part of the context of my course in relating the marketing communications disciplines to the marketing mix model. (Blotnick 1991).

COURSE

The structure of a course with a beginning, middle, and end, a course with clear objectives and outcomes, is clearly necessary. This would be difficult for any practitioner, no matter how skilled. Even the head of a major advertising agency, familiar with research, planning, and all the strategic as well as tactical elements involved in the complex undertaking of marketing communications, could not be expected to create a course that relates to the student's needs and the curriculum's needs. Indeed, when I first taught this course as an adjunct professor, I was more of a practitioner than a teacher. It has taken me more than 13 years of teaching marketing, advertising, and public relations courses, and working on department and school curriculum committees, to appreciate the discipline of integrating content into the context of a course, and a course into a curriculum.

CURRICULUM

At this level, each marketing communications course must be designed to complement the curriculum in which it is to be offered. The

position of the course in the curriculum, from introduction to capstone, should be made clear to students as well as faculty. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine all the issues for all situations but I suggest that decisions must be made in five dimensions to successfully integrate the marketing communications course in the curriculum: the level at which the course is taught; the core discipline, the desired emphasis, the scope, and the student profile (Fig. 2):

FIGURE 2

Fundamental Course Design Decisions	
Dimension	Decision
1. Level	Graduate/Undergraduate
2. Core Discipline	Marketing/Communications
3. Emphasis	Business-to-Business/Consumer
4. Scope	BTB Advertising/True Marcom
5. Student Profile	Practitioner/Student

Graduate/Undergraduate

This decision is the most clear cut. When I cover media optimization strategies at the undergraduate level I tell my students, "in graduate school, we call this the iterative method; for our purposes, it's just trial and error." Of course the differences are much deeper than terminology, but assumption of knowledge among students is one critical difference. If the course in being taught at the graduate level, the focus will be more strategic than tactical, and will assume greater knowledge and ability from the students. Course work can be more theoretical and advanced.

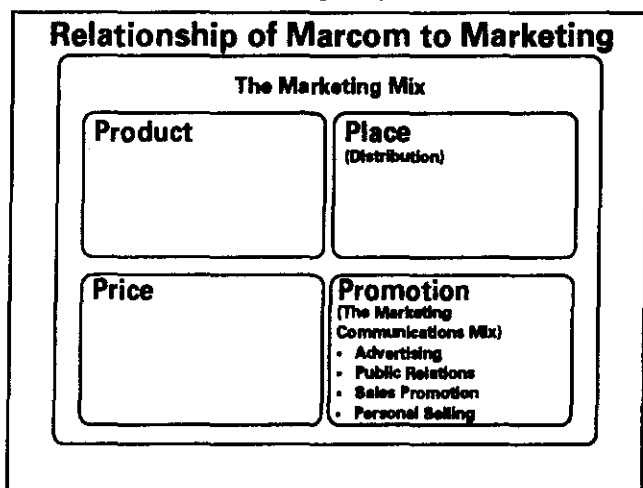
The undergraduate course will cover more basics and, perhaps, less of the strategic viewpoint, though I believe the strategic perspective should always be a key part of the course and, as you'll see, is a foundation for my course. At this level, we should impart some specific "hands on" skills appropriate to those who may soon be implementing sales promotion programs, making sales calls, or writing sales brochures.

Marketing/Communications

This decision would at first seem to be easy, but the lines are blurry. Logically, if the course resides in the marketing department, as my graduate course did, the emphasis should be more on the marketing/management side; if the course resides in the journalism or communications department, as my current course does, the emphasis should be on communications. Students need a crisp definition of the marketing component and the communications component, along with examples of when we are doing each. The reality is that people will be involved in both, and should know when they are crossing lines into areas that, though intimately related, are truly the areas of expertise of others with whom we work.

I believe so strongly in marketing as the basis for marketing communications that I make the marketing introduction course a pre-requisite for my marketing communications course, and I spend the first week or two of the course reviewing marketing fundamentals. (Figure 3.)

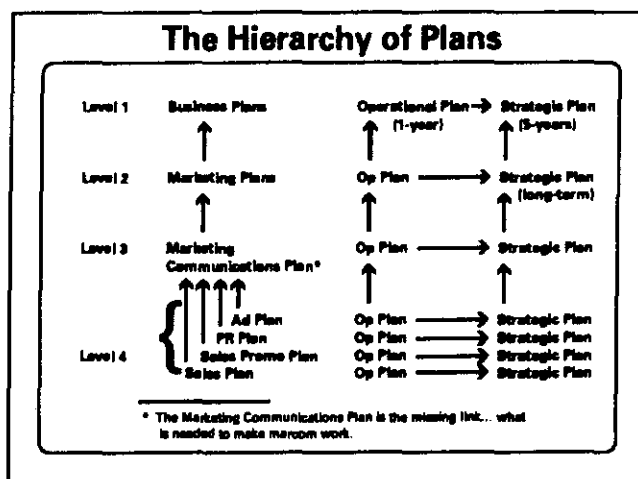
FIGURE 3



Clear delineation among the different marketing communications disciplines as well as between marketing and marketing communications disciplines is imperative. I use the Hierarchy of Plans (Fig 4) to illustrate the relative position of the various plans (and their functions) within the corporation. I point out that each function, by achieving its objectives, allows the higher functions to fulfill their objectives and, eventually, the corporation to achieve its long-term business objectives. People should understand exactly what discipline they're working in, and know

where they are in the hierarchy. In this schema, I point out that the Marketing Communication plan is often the missing ingredient.

FIGURE 4



At a tactical level, some of the worst product publicity I have ever seen was done by very good advertising copywriters who knew nothing of the subtle (or even the obvious) differences between public relations and advertising. Conversely, I have seen truly awful sales brochures and ads written by PR people who are most likely quite good at public relations writing, but not acquainted with the different requirements and dynamics of ad copy and sales promotion copy. For another common example, the term "promotion," is often used imprecisely to describe some public relations functions, such as product publicity. While we understand that it is indeed part of the promotional process—when seen from the broader, marketing perspective—students need lines drawn for them to differentiate between *the process of promotion* that comprises all the marcom disciplines, and *specific sales promotion functions* such as direct mail campaigns or sales seminars.

Similarly, students typically need specific examples to help them differentiate between the out-and-out persuasive style of advertising and the mock-objective but still persuasive style of product publicity. This difference seems apparent to those of us who are in the field but, particularly at the undergraduate level, students benefit enormously from examples. In fact, with my current emphasis on the tactical matters of actually executing marcom, I often have students write both an ad and a press release on a new product.

As I mentioned above, as academics, we may emphasize the strategic or management viewpoint, sometimes to the exclusion of the tactical, assuming, perhaps, that our students will learn the details in the real world. Or maybe we want to avoid the "trade school" stigma and resist the "hands-on" approach to anything at a lower level than the planning of campaigns. Clearly, this is the trend today even though 88% of the courses are taught in journalism rather than marketing divisions (Ross 1991).

My current perspective is different. I teach in the Department of Journalism and Mass Communications within the College of Applied Sciences and Arts, so I feel not only free but compelled to teach—as much as constraints of time will allow—the nitty-gritty nuts and bolts of direct mail, creating a brochure, writing a press release, etc. This is the tactical, bottoms-up approach, but it mirrors logical career growth for most people who enter marketing communications: they must write brochures and press releases and execute the details of trade shows before they are elevated in the organization to a position in which they plan and integrate these functions for others to implement.

Consumer/BTB

When I taught the marcom course at the graduate level my emphasis was on consumer marketing communications. We concentrated on the strategic, management perspective. In consumer advertising, the integrated model is more difficult to implement and not always as clearly beneficial. Nonetheless, this is the primary area of growth. Mainstream advertising agencies are smarting under their loss of revenues as advertisers move out of the traditional media and into the more measurable and currently more profitable direct marketing and sales promotion disciplines (Gosden 1985, O'Neil 1991, Patterson 1991, Wylie 1991). So many have decided to declare themselves experts in these areas as well, to claim the revenues back. The analogy to the typewriter repair shop that hired an electronics technician and changed its name to word processing repair shop is tempting. These will be interesting times.

Today, I teach the marcom course at the undergraduate level. My perspective is more tactical (although the strategic framework is always present), more business-to-business—to

reflect the geographic reality of being in a high tech center. Both courses, as I have done them, have emphasized the inter-related nature of the marcom disciplines and the key role of planning to accomplish this smooth integration. The business-to-business course is nearest to the real world. Business-to-business is where marcom was born and where it thrives. The close integration was not a brilliant strategic move but the result of budgetary realities. Very often a start-up company allocated very little to its marketing communications function, and all skills and budget responsibilities resided with one person. If one person must manage all functions from one budget, they will, by default, be integrated. As the firms grew, the integration remained (if they were smart, lucky, or both), and marcom managers became experts in their field before many people even recognized it as a legitimate field.

Business-to-Business Advertising/Marcom

I have often encountered, among practitioners as well as academics, the fuzzy notion that if one is doing business-to-business advertising, one is doing marcom. We must be absolutely clear with students that advertising, whether business-to-business or consumer, is merely one of the four basic marketing communications disciplines, just as marketing communications is merely one of the four basic components in the marketing mix.

In my opinion, the terms industrial advertising, and business-to-business advertising should be eliminated. Both terms imply that advertising happens independent of the other disciplines. While this may be accurate in some companies—indeed, in many companies—it is not the model or the mindset we should pass along to students. The integrated model of marcom is the one being emulated by consumer advertisers; it is the one which should be taught. In discussions of contemporary advertising, advertising should always be seen as part of an integrated, coordinated marcom program.

Here in the high tech center where I live, work, and teach, very few people work exclusively with BTB advertising. By far the more common model is the marcom manager, running advertising, trade shows, brochures, A/V presentations for sales people, direct mail programs, the public relations functions (at least the product publicity part of pr), and virtually anything having to do with

communications support for the marketing function. And, though people may specialize in one discipline or another as individual contributors before they become managers, cross-over and generalized skills and abilities are the rule rather than the exception in marcom today.

Student/Practitioner

As a final dimension, we should understand that, depending on where and when the course will be held, we will draw a different kind of student. At the graduate level in some institutions, particularly in MBA programs or evening sessions, one may expect more practitioners and fewer pure students. Given the more substantial base of experience that may exist in such a group, one may assume a greater level of knowledge, and raise the standards in the course accordingly. Naturally, one must exercise caution here so as not to leave the less experienced students behind, but generally, the class can operate at a strategic level, often incorporating students' experiences and problems into course material. On the negative side of this, many students with limited experience—having worked in one function in one company, for example, no matter how many years—bring inaccurate or false conceptions of the entire field to the class. Some may, for example be fortunate enough to work with a company marketing a successful product. Often, the people in every function in that company feel they are doing excellent work, and it is difficult to convince them that their particular function could be improved. So, with some practitioners, some corrections or alterations may have to take place.

On the other hand, inexperienced students possess no base of knowledge in the field. This can be both negative and positive. On the down side, fundamental concepts such as push and pull marketing strategies, product life cycles, and writing of effective strategies and tactics must be covered or at least reviewed. On the up side, the student may present the classic *tabula rasa*, and be more accepting of theory since they don't have experiences that seem to prove the exception.

The Strategic Imperative

Finally, having closely considered the content, context, course and curriculum, and decided on at least the five dimensions I've outlined here, it is imperative that we communicate the strategic, or

top-down, view of marketing communications to everyone who takes this course, at any level and from any perspective. That is, we should bring some focus to the marcom disciplines by placing them in their logical position within the marketing mix (Figure 1). I suggest the first few sessions of any course be devoted to setting this roadmap out for students, and that the roadmap be referred to often throughout the course.

FIGURE 5

Marketing Communications Course Outline	
Week 1	Introduction
Week 2	Marketing & Marketing Communications Mixes
Week 3	Communications for Business to Business
Week 4	Hierarchy of Plans/Planning Basics
Week 5	Research for Marcom - Term Project Assigned
Week 6	BTB Creative
Week 7	BTB Media (Trade Magazines)
Week 8	Collateral/Ad Specialties/Premiums
Week 9	Sales Promotion/Direct Mail
Week 10	Public Relations for BTB
Week 11	Personal Selling in BTB
Week 12	Sales Support Material
Week 13	Trade Shows
Week 14	Presentation of Term Projects
Week 15	Integrating Marcom
Week 16	Review

In addition, to establish this strategic view, I emphasize the planning function (Figure 2) as central to the marketing communications process... in fact, I model the entire course to follow the plan, (Fig 5) and have each student write a marcom plan as the course project.

Team Teaching and Interdisciplinary Efforts

In a recent article, Alden, Laxton, Patzer & Howard (1991) advocate fostering connections between marketing and other disciplines. I suggest that marketing communications would be an excellent course to bring together the communications expertise from the journalism division and the marketing expertise from the marketing or business division. The course also lends itself to team teaching within the journalism department between advertising and public relations specialists. And at every level, it makes a great deal of sense to involve members of the local marketing communications community—not only as guest lecturers but in the planning of the course and outcomes assessment. Whether team teaching or simply trading guest lectures, the experience is almost certain to benefit faculty and students.

Marcom is a true interdisciplinary course with many dimensions. I suggest that marketing departments emphasize the MAR part of the course, journalism departments emphasize the COM, and both clearly distinguish among the disciplines and between consumer and BTB MARCOM. This is an engaging course to teach and student feedback tells me they benefit enormously from it, often seeing, for the first time, how all the pieces fit together.

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