

An essay on strategic aspects of firm to market communications

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ABSTRACT

The study focuses on the strategic aspects of marketing communications between the firm and the target market. In addition to the three consumer end perceptual processes of selective attention, selective distortion and selective retention, and the aspect of subliminal perception, the study postulates a fourth firm end process of perceptual acuity, a process of the firm overcoming consumer misperception with an increase in perceptual sharpness and thinking (acuity). The study thus postulates the segregation by the firm of consumer perception into aspects of 'perception is reality' or 'perceived realities', and 'perceptual distortions.' Marketing strategy can be conducted effectively when there is a successful interaction management between the ground realities and perceived realities of the organization with the ground realities and perceived realities of the market. The study also postulates on issues pertaining to involvement, leveraging in communications, use of repetitive communication, attitude to market fit and vice-versa, integration of message strategy and media strategy, quantitative considerations in firm to market communications including the aspect of net valence of messages, as well as the direct effects of advertising represented by objective effects (of inform, persuade, remind and reinforce), importance of both enculturation and acculturation and tying together diverse cultures, and linkages for firm to market communications with other elements of strategic marketing. The study concludes by laying out the implications to marketing strategists.

Keywords: firm to market communications, perceptual acuity, perceived reality, ground reality, objective effects.

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INTRODUCTION

Marketing communications is not only an enabler of marketing strategy but also has a fundamental value add to the value delivery process. Advertising helps build the brand in the market (aggregates of consumers who are business holders), and brand is an important asset to the organization. Social media vehicles enable prompt and useful feedback for the firm to help correct and improve its user design, user interface, and user experience. Promotions act as transaction enablers in highly competitive situations; and personal selling is more than necessary for consummating in the market those products that have a product knowledge component. Direct marketing enables customization, and public relations helps build an image of the brand and the firm with its stakeholders. Events, and experiences help in experiential marketing situations; and mobile marketing spreads the communication message ubiquitously. As of recent times, SMAC (social media, mobile, analytics and cloud computing) help uncover market specific and firm specific relationships between marketing variables.

Marketing communications also gains weight because its content and context helps build meaning in addition to value in the process of exchange between the firm and the consumer. Meaning delivered through marketing communications gets locked in and logged into the brands making them deep and rich and thereby help the firm increase the brand market value.

RESEARCH SCOPE

Marketing communications pertains to the communications (i) between the firm and the target market, such as advertising, consumer promotions, personal selling, direct and database marketing, events and experiences, online marketing, social media marketing, and mobile marketing; (ii) among the members of the target market that includes the management of viral marketing, buzz marketing, social networking using sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn, blogs and micro-blogs such as Twitter and Tumblr, online virtual worlds such as Second Life, and content communities such as YouTube; (iii) between the firm and its stakeholders that includes public relations and publicity; and (iv) internal marketing communications within the organization, that enables smooth conduct of the marketing tasks. Marketing communications is a stimulus of a firm's marketing efforts as well as a communicator of other marketing stimulus that evolves from the decision variables of the firm's marketing mix including those of product, price, service, and distribution. Marketing communications seeks to inform, persuade, remind, and consequently reinforce and / or modify consumer's thinking, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes in an effort to seek consumer response in the direction preferred by the firm.

In this study, we focus on the strategic aspects of marketing communications between the firm and the target market for the purpose of marketing the firm's products and services; these include (i) strategic aspects of communications sensitivity; (ii) strategic aspects of quantitative marketing and research; (iii) marketing strategy issues; and (iv) linkages for firm to market communications with other elements of strategic marketing; these are the linkages between market communications strategy, and business marketing strategy that includes competitive marketing strategy. The study concludes with implications for marketing strategists.

STRATEGIC ASPECTS OF COMMUNICATIONS SENSITIVITY

The first aspect of firm to market communications is the identification of the target audience. The target audience definition is needed, as an important aspect of all marketing communications is awareness building. The target audience can be an individual with a specific profile or a household with a specific consumption characteristic, a socio-economic classification, a niche, a segment or a target market with a demand profile. Further for marketing communications in consumer markets, the buyer, the user, and the influencer need to be considered. As a part of business activity targeted groups or innovatively defined different consumer groups could be as follows: (i) heavy users, medium users, light users; (ii) loyalists, profitable loyalists, split loyalists, shifting loyalists, switchers; (iii) search intensive consumers, experience intensive consumers; (iv) potential users, first time users, regular users, competing product users; (v) complaining consumers who need to be guided by specific service failure recovery mechanisms, satisfied consumers; (vi) innovators, early adopters, mainstream market consumers, late majority, laggards; (vii) value conscious, luxury conscious; (viii) savvy consumers, novice consumers, limited knowledge consumers; (ix) information sensitive consumers, cues processing consumers; (x) cognoscenti, opinion leaders, followers, mass market; (xi) prosumers, value added resellers; (xii) one time consumers, limited time transaction consumers, relationship consumers; (xiii) price sensitive consumers, not so price sensitive consumers; (xiv) quality seekers, brand seekers, rugged product users; (xv) satisfaction and delight seeking consumers, service requirement consumers; (xvi) risk averse consumers, risk prone consumers; (xvii) utility seeking consumers, pleasure and style seeking consumers.

Perception

Perception is an important aspect of consumer buyer behaviour in that it influences the formation of preference in the consumer buy decision process after need / problem recognition, and information search before the evaluation of alternatives. Following evaluation of alternatives, is the purchase decision followed by post purchase feelings. Perception is endogenously determined from firm to market communications and includes selective attention, selective retention, and selective distortion. Selective attention, is the consumers' predisposition to be attentive to certain communications that fits their market context, and marketers have to work hard to get their communications noticed so that it gets into the knowledge of the consumer. For example, a five percent discount on a product may not get noticed, but a buy two take one free, gains a value conscious consumer's attention, and the consumer actively seeks more information of the product. Selective retention refers to the fact that consumers' memory is sticky on points of communications that they like and they forget points of communications they do not like, even though the consumers are made aware through suitable exposure. Selective distortion is the tendency to interpret information in a way that fits the consumer preconceptions, those that also are consistent with prior brand and product beliefs and expectations (Kotler and Keller, 2018).

Firm End Postulate

In addition to the three consumer end perceptual processes of selective attention, selective distortion and selective retention, and the aspect of subliminal perception (product placement in movies and audience response to product placements; as consumers do what they like and recognize), the study postulates a fourth firm end process of perceptual acuity, a process of overcoming consumer misperception with an increase in perceptual sharpness and

thinking (acuity). The study thus postulates the segregation by the firm of consumer perception into aspects of 'perception is reality' or 'perceived realities', and 'perceptual distortions.'

Perceptual distortions are those misperceptions of the consumer that could be derived / understood by the firm and corrected by the firm with the consumer (including correctable aspects of selective distortions), through appropriate communications, based on perceptual acuity derived from sharper and deeper thinking and / or from facts, intelligence and expertise. Identification of perceptual distortions enable the marketing strategist to fix the boundaries of 'perception is reality' or 'perceived realities' with the consumer. The marketer could thus do better by engaging with the consumer on correcting perceptual distortions. The marketer can then engage in confronting and managing the perceptual realities and ground realities of the organization with the perceptual realities and ground realities of the market. In this context it is postulated that effective marketing strategy can be conducted through the management of the interaction of the perceived realities and ground realities; consequently (i) manage the ground realities of the organization with the ground realities of the market, and vice-versa; (ii) manage the perceived realities of the organization with the perceived realities of the market, and vice-versa; (iii) manage the perceived realities (perception is reality) of the market with the ground realities of the organization; and (iv) manage the perceived realities of the organization with the ground realities of the market. Managing the ground realities of the market with the perceived realities of the organization is likely to lead to deep customer dissatisfaction; managing the ground realities of the organization with the perceived realities of the market is likely to lead to deep employee dissatisfaction; thus both needs to be avoided.

Thus the process of perceptual acuity and the concept of perceptual distortions emphasise the importance of the marketer's role in building the right communications with the consumer; the associated obtainment of perceived realities is an important aspect of driving marketing strategy.

An illustration of the use of perceptual acuity to fix the perceptual realities as against the perceptual distortions follows, indicating the importance of building the right perceptions in the minds of the consumers making communications an important tool in marketing strategy.

First assess and understand the ground realities of the market, and the organization – a Ford dealer is losing out to on car sales to competing dealers who have recently entered the same territory. Second assess and understand the perceptions in the market, and the organization – the prices of the Ford dealer are high and the dealer is not good on service response. Third fix the perceived realities of the market, and the organization given an understanding of the ground realities and the perceptions; i.e. assess and understand those realities for which perception is reality – the prices are perceived high by the consumer in the territory as the recently entered competitor has started giving discounts on trade-ins on the same brand thrice a year in January, May, September. Fourth as it is not possible that perception is reality for all realities, assuming which could lead to distortion, keep correcting those perceptions that cause distortion for which perception is not reality; the corrections could be through direct communications and signaling - The dealer's records say that there has been service response upkeep in 99% of all job cards in the past three years; correct the consumer's perception on service response by leveraging on communications through advertising of the service track record. Fifth manage the interaction between the ground realities / perceived realities of the organization and the ground realities / perceived realities of the market - earlier trade-ins on the same brand was offered once during the close of the year; now strategize to offer trade-in across brands to address the perceptual reality of high prices and beat competition.

Involvement

The concept of level of involvement influencing buyer behavior was initially proposed in the context of advertising media (Krugman, 1965, Krugman, 1966-67) and products purchased are either low involvement or high involvement. Buy behavior was later classified into four different types (Assael, 1998) based on level of involvement and differences between brands (habitual / inertia buy behavior when products are low involvement vis-à-vis little or no information used and consideration of only one brand / there are few differences between brands; limited decision making or variety seeking buying behavior when there is low involvement and significant differences between brands; dissonance reducing buyer behavior or brand loyalty behavior when there is high involvement and few differences between brands; and complex buyer behavior when there is high involvement vis-à-vis information search and consideration of brand alternatives due to their significant differences between brands).

Firm End Postulate

This study postulates that change of the level of involvement in consumers from low involvement to high involvement so as to increase purchase likelihood, using communications as a tool or technique, is more a case of moderation. An illustration is the case of AMUL, a leading Indian dairy cooperative based in Gujarat, India. It can be inferred from AMUL's successful marketing efforts in the Ahmedabad, Gujarat area in the late 20th century, that increased consumer education could turn milk from a low involvement product to high involvement product. With decreased availability, consumers would purchase any kind of milk without being conscious of its composition or other characteristics such as freshness – they just wanted milk; with making milk widely available, consumers became more conscious of its SNF (solid not fat) content, shelf life, unadulterated milk requirements, correct quantity of milk being sold (500 ml or 1000 ml as declared on the pack rather than 490 ml or 980 ml actually delivered). Increased availability increased the awareness, and the associated consumer education moderated the awareness to knowledge aspect of the hierarchy of effects model in a positive way so as to increase purchase likelihood.

Persuasion and Learning

Firm End Issues

The elaboration likelihood model (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) outlines the two routes of persuasion – the central route and the peripheral route; it is conceptualized that low involvement products use the peripheral route to persuasion - soaps use celebrity advertisements to get consumer attention; and high involvement products use the central route to persuasion - products such as computers are sold as much on cognitive reasoning. Further emotion is more instantaneous than cognitive thinking and persuasion can be influenced by emotion which may be very different from persuasion outcomes that is influenced by cognitive thinking; this aspect can be used in designing advertising content.

Persuasion of consumers is a necessary outcome of marketing communications, and it is important to be aware that at the level of the individual consumer, the persuasion principles are those of (i) generating liking of the firm's products and services; (ii) engaging in acts of reciprocity with the consumer; (iii) generating social proof of the firm's products and services through opinion leaders and cognoscenti; (iv) demonstrating consistency through honouring

commitments and assurance of marketing action; (v) understanding the importance of authority in generating communications from experts and leaders; and (vi) leveraging product scarcity in communications to achieve results in sales (Cialdini,2013).

The process of persuasion essentially involves four steps (Conger, 2013) (i) establishing credibility in target market as for example with message source credibility by endorsements with professional celebrities in their fields; (ii) framing goals so that there is space for a common ground with the target market, as for example with lifelong warranty for an expensive equipment; (iii) reinforce the position of the firm with respect to its advantages and benefits, in vivid expressions of language or pictures or evidence; (iv) connect emotionally with audience as in the NIKE campaign 'Just do it.'

Learning of the consumer is guided by inner drives, but influenced by cues, stimulus and reinforcement. Communications being a standard stimulus of the marketing process can also be used to address cues, and reinforcement to gain in purchase intentions. Point of purchase displays in brick and mortar retailing, banners and interstitials in web advertising are typical cues used in firm to market communications to gain in purchase intentions. Cutting the post purchase dissonance of consumers as in the case of consumer durables through advertising, aids in reinforcement that could lead to positive buzz of the product and thus gain in purchase intentions; 'have you driven a Ford recently' is an illustration.

Firm End Postulate

First, repetitive communications by the firm can also bring in positive persuasion changes in the consumer; for example the Indian herbal product company Himalaya used repetitive communications to shift some of its herbal products such as Ashwagandha to the prescription category from the OTC (over the counter) category. Second changing the attitude to fit the market offering can persuade the consumer to buy the product; for example in the 1990s an Indian TV Manufacturer AKAI was the first to launch trade-in which consumers could exchange old for new; the traditional Indian attitude in the 20th century was to keep the old and AKAI became a huge success with its efforts to change the attitude of the market from "keep the old philosophy" to "exchange old for new", through extensive and intensive promotion campaigns; the consumer was persuaded to change. Simultaneously fitting the product to the market can also persuade the consumer; for example in recent time there is rising health consciousness in market and consumer goods marketers would be paid well if they brought in a 'diet' variety in their product line. Third, whenever there is a clear gap in the market that can be addressed by the firm then the consumers are immediately persuaded; for example in the 1980s, the leading Indian detergent producer in the economy value category NIRMA succeeded in its launch efforts against another leading multinational detergent producer, Hindustan Unilever's SURF because it launched its product at a huge price advantage in the market mainly targeting the handmade soap manufacturers who did not have a brand reputation; the gap in the market was not addressed by SURF and NIRMA walked away with a huge gain; as of today NIRMA is in a battle with Hindustan Unilever's competing product WHEEL for the top spot in the economy value proposition category.

Integration of Message and Media Strategy

Integration of message strategy (often called the creative), and media planning is necessary for the strategic marketing communications to be effective and efficient. Often firms develop advertisements to be "very creative and memorable", but product does not sell; (i) the target group of the message strategy and media planning may be misaligned (the product is a chocolate drink for nourishing young children, but the media used are TV

Channels of teenagers and young adults); (ii) the target audience may be wrong (the message strategy is for advertising dog food but the media used for advertising are business magazines); (iii) the product needs demonstrations but a major portion of media budgets are spent on print, radio and billboards; it might be better to use television, internet and onsite media with demonstrations; (iv) the product scores highly on awareness but very poorly on knowledge thus precluding preference to develop (celebrity advertising used to advertise the launch of cars but brochures and specification sheets are not available in adequate quantities at the dealers' place); (v) the product advertised does not fit the preconceptions of the target market (Ford Edsel, in the 1960s, was having a front design, that likened it to a child ego while the car is an extension of an adult ego).

In addition, it should be ensured that the message-media combination is a manifestation of the brand identity that the firm has charted out for itself and is aligned to the positioning given by the market. Mostly message strategy should decide how media planning should progress, media planning can lead message strategy, or both be done simultaneously depending on the market context, the communications objective and most importantly what works or is feasible. In situations where coverage is most important as for new product launches, media planning has to go hand in hand with creative; however for advertising campaigns to refresh consumer memories, media planning could lead creative. For new products, apart from marketing message / creative balance with media and media planning, it is important that the launched product performs; if the product turns out to be a lemon, then no amount of effective message strategies and efficient media planning will help; the product just does not sell.

Thus it can be summarized that integration of message strategy and media strategy is an important strategic aspect of firm to market communication that pertains to integrated marketing communications.

Leveraging in Firm to Market Communication

Marketing is about value exchanges and for effectiveness, communication is a useful tool to make the consumer understand the firm and align with the values provided by the firm. This means that the firm can find it useful to leverage using communications, its strengths / resources, competencies, its track record, its performance records, its targets, its vision, its future and intent, its consumer reach out plans and procedures. As such leveraging is an important step in developing the marketing programs for value exchanges. For illustration, the appliance maker Maytag has superior track record of reliability from its service records, then the firm has advertised this track record to claim reliability of its appliances and gain competitive advantage.

STRATEGIC ASPECTS OF QUANTITATIVE MARKETING AND RESEARCH

The first prime quantitative consideration that guides strategic marketing communications is the establishment of communications objectives, message strategy objectives and media planning objectives. Communications objectives derive from the marketing objectives and goals of the organization. The quantification of the objectives and time horizon planning for an objective should be carefully decided keeping in mind the state of the target market in terms of its need-use gratification and need-want gratification, as well as the firm objectives and goals. Different communications models are available in literature to aid build communications objectives that include the innovation-adoption model, the AIDA model and the hierarchy of effects model (Kotler and Keller, 2018). The message strategy objectives will be derived from the communications objectives and the marketing

strategy of the product so being laid out. Media planning objectives will be aided considerably by media calculations (discussed below), and segmentation decisions; segmentation is planned using demographics, socio-graphics (social and cultural differences), psychographics including lifestyle and consumer habits, media-graphics or the consumption of media vehicles and audience response to media.

Communications strategy includes both media strategy and message strategy. Media strategy pertains to the optimal use of the multiplicity of media vehicles, optimization of costs of communications, integration of communications across media vehicles referred to as integrated marketing communications, and market coverage considerations. Media planning also includes the selection of the target audience as discussed in the earlier section, the ability to map demand pockets (including seasonality of demand) with geography and media availability / product availability, media penetration, timing considerations such as those of prime time, festivals, major events, and sponsorships. (Kelley and Jugenheimer, 2007). Basic concepts of media calculation include reach, frequency, impact and continuity. Important measures include circulation for print and billboards, audience for broadcast media and internet; accumulative audience for single media vehicle calculations, unduplicated audience for multiple media vehicle calculations; rating (percentage of exposed households or members for an advertisement or communications, to all households or members subscribing or owning a media vehicle); share (percentage of exposed households for an advertisement or communications to all households or members exposed to the media vehicle at that time the communications was made); gross rating points or the sum of the rating points for a pre-specified number of advertisement insertions ($GRP = \text{reach percentage} \times \text{frequency}$), target rating points is the GRP for the target market or target audience, total audience impressions (reach numbers multiplied by frequency); cost per thousand circulation with notation CPM (cost per mille), cost per rating point with notation CPR or CPP. Apart from cost and efficiency calculations, choice of media vehicles and intermedia comparisons are made most importantly on the basis of impact of the advertisement or communications, other factors include use of colour, motion or demonstration requirement, scheduling (continuous, burst, intermittent, waves), reach and frequency considerations, threshold reach calculations and coverage, exposure versus insertions judgments and calculations, relevance of the media vehicle to the product category. Other competitive measures of calculation for media planning (Kelley and Jugenheimer, 2007) include (i) share of communications spending of a brand or firm to the total of communications spending for the product category often abbreviated SOS (share of spending); (ii) share of voice (SOV) indicating the share of impressions of the brand or firm to the total of category impressions; and SOS/SOV calculations; (iii) advertisement to sales ratios and models; and (iv) trends in spending.

The third prime quantitative consideration is the development and evaluation of the message strategy itself. Message strategy includes decisions on (i) message content and the type of appeal given to the message – rational appeal, emotional appeal, and moral appeal; (ii) message structure or the evaluation feelings of positivity and negativity imparted to the message – one sided messages are typically positive messages whereas two sided messages are having both positive and negative aspects communicated; (iii) message format or the style, tone and words with which the message is said; and (iv) credibility of the message source that includes trust, likeability and expertise (Kotler and Keller, 2018). An important quantitative consideration that arises in message strategy is the impact of the message (treatment) on purchase likelihood (effect) given a particular message source credibility (extraneous); as well as the impact of the message source credibility (treatment) on purchase likelihood (effect) given a particular message and its positivity, negativity or a net valence (extraneous). Given the possible interaction between media and message it is useful to

separately consider and account for in advertising experiments, the message strategy effects on purchase likelihood, and the media strategy effects on purchase likelihood.

The fourth prime quantitative consideration that guides strategic marketing communications is the establishment of communications and advertising budgets. Media inefficiencies that include excessive media overlap, excessive frequency and excessive spending need to be avoided, so as to enable optimal use of media budgets (Kelley and Jugenheimer, 2007). Though advertising as a decision stimulus to competitive choice has lag effects, marketing strategists cannot overrule the importance of recency in gaining business. Appropriate allocation of resources for advertising experiments and advertising research, is necessary to rationally spend the huge media budgets. Further firms need to explicitly consider resource allocation to different communications types such as advertising, promotions, personal selling, mobile marketing, online marketing including social media marketing, direct / database marketing and events and experience. Important within functions allocations is the promotion advertisement split. High outlay of promotion and communications expenditure is a key resource in building competitive advantage, also called deep pockets.

The fifth prime quantitative consideration that guides strategic marketing communications is the research and examination of communications effectiveness – pre testing and post testing. A most important yardstick used by marketing strategists is advertising sensitivity to market share which is obtained from aggregate econometric models of market share that may include lagged effects of advertising. Market research to gauge marketing communications effectiveness against objectives laid out (of inform, persuade, remind, and reinforce) is another eye opener into the strategic aspects of the communicating value element. Effectiveness research for advertising includes copy testing. It should be thus also possible to account for assessing direct effects of advertising on purchase intention as objective effects (such as those of inform, persuade, reinforce, and remind) with mediating variables of attention, and read-through (or see-through), representing advertising effectiveness (as obtained in copy testing).

An associated qualitative research issue is the appeal analysis (rational, emotional, and moral) in advertisement research. Competitive advertising expenditure estimates needs to be examined to infer about competitor's efforts; in addition marketing strategists should assess the competitive messages and the competitive positions taken through appropriate perceptual mapping using techniques such as multi-dimensional scaling. As a principle, advertising expenditure impacts both awareness and market share indicating a significant impact of advertising on market performance.

MARKETING STRATEGY ISSUES

Communication of value is an important aspect of the marketing strategy issues that broadly pertain to identification, creation, capture, communication, and delivery of superior consumer value and meaning. The hierarchy of effects model used in strategic communication leads us to insights of how marketing strategists can move their consumers in a step wise manner through the use of enablers for raising the consumer towards the purchase motive and beyond, from the need stage. To illustrate, useful enablers at each stage could be consumer education, cleanliness, positive perception and evaluation, involvement, transparency / fairness, incentives, assurance. The following enablers, mentioned could be used at each stage of the model: (a) awareness to knowledge → consumer education; (b) knowledge to liking → cleanliness; (c) liking to preference → positive perception on evaluation; (d) preference to intention → involvement; (e) intention to conviction →

transparency / fairness; (f) conviction to purchase → incentives; and (g) purchase to post purchase → assurance

The second most important aspect, that pertains to marketing strategy issues of firm-market communications relates to the consumer value proposition. The consumer value proposition is a 'saying reality' of the firm to the consumer, and firm to market communications to leverage the focal value elements of the consumer value proposition is critical to market success. For illustration, if 'safety' is one of the focal value elements of the Volvo car, then communicating the value proposition to emphasize safety could include (i) consumer end documentation to indicate collision characteristics and thereby underline safety; (ii) making safety part of the tag line; (iii) safety as one of the brand identity elements that could be promoted and featured as the unique selling proposition (USP); (iv) make safe driving education as a firm responsibility (corporate social responsibility) towards consumers.

The third most important aspects pertains to cultural issues. Communications within and across cultures involves understanding cultural diversity; becoming aware of cultural stereotypes; assessing the organization situation with respect to communications within and across cultures – is it just a domestic organization or already having overseas relations and if so what is the effort made by the organization in learning about its own and other cultures; are the enculturation processes in domestic organizations and acculturation processes in global organizations, appropriately placed throughout the organization; the enculturation or acculturation elements that marketing communications should have; selection of the right media vehicle for cultural communications; understanding cultural interpretations of work space, market space and time; language translation and back translation to get the message right; and understanding body and sign language in different cultures (CMI, 2015).

There is a need for unifying message for diverse culture markets in geographies such as India as well as in international / global markets, much akin to the unity in diversity concept; it is important to recognize subtle differences between global themes versus unifying messages - while global themes revolve around homogenous characteristics in global markets, unifying messages tie together diverse cultures. For illustration, SURF detergent of Hindustan Unilever which now retails a higher end product SURF EXCEL (with a focal element of removing stains) became very successful in the 1980s in India with their campaign build around the slogan "Surf ki kharidhari mey aour bhi samajdhari hi" meaning that "there is now an increasing understanding in the purchase of SURF" and the understanding revolved around the value consciousness aspect of SURF; this is clearly a unifying theme in the Indian market that has various ethnic subcultures, and purchase habits. It is also possible to consider for detergents category, "whiteness in washing clothes" as a unifying message. On the other hand, a product such as Hershey's Kisses is marketed all over the world and in different cultures on the strength of the homogenous requirement of bite-size candies.

The fourth most important aspect is the use of communications as a tool in the process of micromanaging markets. One of the objectives of micromanaging markets is to enhance brand image. Consumers buy imagery. Brand image is the reflection of brand identity in the target market. Effective brand image reflection is possible only when the communications detailing of the brand identity has been done effectively. Another aspect of micromanaging markets is to deliver the right experience to the consumer; communications is a key experience provider and includes advertisements in TV, Print, and Radio; events and sponsorships; website and electronic media; spatial environment communications including flagship showrooms, lounges, and product displays; and verbal and visual identity signage. In effect communications plays a vital role in the consumer's holistic experience that can be analysed using the five strategic experiential modules of sense, feel, think, act, and relate.

The fifth most important aspect of marketing strategy issues regarding firm to market communication is its impact on the marketing mix. Repositioning brands can happen through communications with emphasis on advertising; further the simplest adaptation in global markets takes place through appropriate communications to suit the needs of overseas markets. Communications goes hand in hand with branding. Rebranding may need visual and verbal identity signage changes, supported by changes in the communications program. Further information is a key transaction facilitator, and provision of information before, during, and after sales is possible only when accompanied by good communications programs. In this regard, documentation is an integral part of marketing communications; also consumer education is possible only when accompanied by the right communications. Further search intensive consumers have to be provided with detailed information that is possible only with effective communications programs. Integrated marketing communications serves to fill the void of providing a coherent and consistent message to the target market; this raises the issue of diversity through multiple media vehicles and inclusion effects of messages through these media vehicles as against integration of communications message both at the sender end and the receiver end and the consequent possibility of having the benefits of exclusion.

LINKAGES FOR FIRM TO MARKET COMMUNICATIONS

Linkages for firm to market communications with other elements of strategic marketing are the linkages between market communications strategy, and business marketing strategy that includes competitive marketing strategy.

The first important linkage effect occurs due to communications for public image management. Firms have to develop relationship with key publics or key stakeholders such as investors, financial institutions, government, consumer action groups, and vendors. This is possible only if communications procedures and systems are put in place. Communications can be used to leverage reputation that is so important for the credibility of the firm and its products among the stakeholders. Public Relations (PR) and publicity issues are relevant for launching a brand through PR and sustaining a brand through PR. As of recent times, PR and marketing are converging with the introduction of social media (Scott, 2015). There has an expansion of content based marketing with direct access to buyers, to be able to tell compelling stories, educate buyers, and engage with buyers in conversation and to market to them. Online marketing (with the power of content marketing, search engine optimization, and images to reach buyers), enables buyers to ask questions and firms respond with tailor made answers, rather than have firms communicate uni-directional messages with uncertainty about buyers having got these messages, and waiting for them to respond. No longer is PR thought of only as publicity and public relations, but has been extended to direct communications with buyers through blogs, video and image sharing, news releases, chat rooms and message boards, review sites, social book marking, and mobile applications. With the addition of social networking, the power of PR through online means is as important as PR through traditional methods and traditional media. This implies that content building is one linkage of marketing communications strategy that has value building effects with the consumer. However, the importance of traditional PR continues to hold for issues pertaining to (i) gaining publicity in traditional media, (ii) managing public image crisis, and (iii) issues of overcoming traditional PR problems, of bad image, fading image, upgrade image, and dull image.

Closely associated with public image management is the building of corporate image; one way firms build corporate image is through the use of advocacy advertising (such as the Intel advertisement on “sponsors of tomorrow”). Corporate image also requires building

good faith, communicating good infrastructure and building positive attitude in employees at consumer interfacing point.

The third most important linkage of firm to market communications for business marketing strategy lies in leveraging customer satisfaction scores and ratings, leveraging brand ratings and brand values. Announcements on customer satisfaction ratings and brand ratings provide an appropriate signal to reassure consumer of effective firm performance. In this sense announcement signals can be a technique for leveraging communications of firm strengths.

The fourth important linkage is the need for the firm to increase or further the share of consumer wallet that goes beyond market share considerations. This may require products and services to be supported by well-meaning sales force capable of taking multiple products and services from the same firm to the market. Further arenas chosen by business acumen, have to be supported by appropriate communications that places the firm well in obtaining a good consumer share of wallet, and ties it in to firm competence. In fructifying competitive advantages for realizing business gains, competitive communications has to be in place; this includes the differentiation of messages so that the brand stands out. Advertising and communications is a key signalling criteria in a differentiation strategy of competitive advantage.

The fifth important linkage is for market communications strategy to address the strategic aspects of (i) long term implications for strategic decisions and the consequent need to build brand equity, that has cascading effects (including lag effects) with market communications; (ii) huge investments in sustained advertising campaigns, sponsorships of mega events such as the Super bowl, Olympics, and Wimbledon; use of expensive celebrities who have social equity to rub off on brands; and (iii) the consequent risk of wasted advertising if it does not produce the desired impact.

IMPLICATIONS

Marketing strategists need to consider underlying psychological processes in strategic firm to market communications with an intent to continually improve their understanding of consumer perceptions through the processes of perceptual acuity. While buyer behaviour studies focus on the firm to market communications from the view point of the consumer, marketing strategists need to view buyer behaviour from the view point of the firm but with consumer centricity that includes consumer empathy. This combine of viewpoints (called concurrent triangulation in qualitative research) by the marketing strategist from both the consumer side and firm side could lead to the promotion of the holistic marketing concept that could possibly stretch the marketing strategists beyond the insights provided by integrated marketing communications. Marketing strategists could thus use quantitative research viewed in this holistic capture of consumer insight to increase communication effectiveness. Last but not the least is to actively explore links of strategic firm to market communications with other processes and programs of value identification, value creation, value capture and value delivery to explicitly attempt to increase the meaning of the market offering in addition to the value of the market offering.

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