Inter-functional collaboration and inter-organizational relationships in communications strategy implementation

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Abstract

There is a dearth of empirical studies focusing on marketing implementation, especially regarding the interplay between different functional areas and service providers. To fill this gap, this paper explores running a communications campaign across several organizations. It takes a practitioner perspective via agency and client interviews embedded within a longitudinal case study. We find that practitioners argue that closer collaboration between sales and marketing functions is vital. However, there appears to be little awareness of some of the processes that influence successful strategy implementation, particularly the impact of inter-personal and inter-organizational relationships.

Key words: marketing strategy implementation, sales and marketing collaboration, inter-organizational relationships, communications campaign.

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1. Introduction

Understanding the challenges in implementing marketing strategies has long been an issue within marketing scholarship. Despite the notion that marketing activities should be organised in ways that fit the implementation requirements of a proposed strategy (Vorhies & Morgan, 2003), research indicates that marketing plans often suffer from poor facilitation (Simkin, 1996). The complexity of implementing marketing strategy is widely recognised: for instance, Slater et al. (2010) note the impact of individual business unit strategy on implementation; Menguc et al. (2007) postulate that leadership competencies are central to the implementation of marketplace strategies; and Dobni et al. (2001) stress the importance of context-specific behaviours.

Some scholars argue that marketing implementation is “rarely scripted by plans” (Sashittal & Jassawalla, 2001, p. 50); whereas others suggest that “an implementation environment characterised by hierarchal structures and strong top-down influences” will be more effective (Thorpe & Morgan, 2007, p. 659). Given these sometimes contrary views, we concur with the assertion of Chimanzi and Morgan (2005) that there is a dearth of empirical studies focusing on marketing strategy implementation, especially regarding the interplay between different functional areas. Moreover, we agree that “more analysis of the daily lives of mid-level employees is essential” to improve the understanding of implementation, as well as more research being needed on “the influence of firm factors such as culture, structure and management style” (Thorpe & Morgan 2007, p. 659).

To explore such issues, this paper undertakes a qualitative study (Hackley, 2001) of an integrated marketing communications (IMC) campaign. IMC has steadily grown in legitimacy within academic circles (Kliatchko, 2008) and the practitioner realm (*Campaign*

2012). There appears to be an almost taken-for-granted sense of what IMC should comprise and how it should be managed. Having said this, there has been considerable debate over the implementation of IMC (Cornelissen & Lock, 2000; Laurie & Mortimer, 2011). There are many normative accounts of IMC management, but very few that highlight the processes and politics involved in execution (e.g. Ots & Nyilasy, 2015). As previous studies have shown (e.g. Triki et al, 2007), issues of inter-organisational and interpersonal relationships are critical in such contexts, especially when conflicts can so often arise between stakeholders representing different organisations and functional areas. However, little has changed since Cornelissen (2003, p. 217) maintained that irrespective of "all the discourse and rhetoric concerning the appeal of IMC, comparatively little empirical investigation…exists to supply evidence on its actual adoption".

Noting this continuing gap, this paper engages with two aspects of IMC: content and process (Cornelisson, 2003). In addressing the former, the study seeks to stimulate debate about managing the constitution of the communications mix; and, for the latter, it builds on existing discussions concerning implementation. Specifically, the research explores some challenges in incorporating personal selling as part of a marketing communications project and examines the issues encountered when running a campaign delivered by traditional communications agencies and their sales agency partners.

Managerial control and coordination of communication activities are imperative (Hackley & Hackley, 2015). For Duncan and Moriarty (1998, p. 9), "partnering with communication agencies that understand and practice integrated brand communication", as well as cross-functional management are critical. They add that "communication must be managed as a boundary spanning activity" (p.10). Given the growth in the outsourcing of specialist functions, the current study plots how relationships evolve across these inter-firm boundaries during a communications campaign.

By building on initial interviews with client and agency practitioners with a longitudinal case study (Rinaldi & Cavvichi, 2016) of an IMC project, the current study demonstrates the advantages of a qualitative methodology in unpacking some of the complexities in marketing strategy implementation. The paper thus valorises the views of "everyday" practitioners as opposed to what Kover (1995, p. 597) calls "better-known advertising pundits". This presumes that practitioners possess "informal knowledge" about the workings of IMC (Nyilasy & Reid, 2009) and responds to "repeated calls for marketing academicians to connect with marketing actors" to see how managers portray their practices (Ardley & Quinn, 2014, p. 97). The paper's approach is partly driven by the fact that, while two of the three authors are academics, the first is a classic "middle man" (Kover, 1976, p. 343), that is, a practitioner who circulates between his firm "and occasional visiting lectureships at universities", a role which Kover believes is "extraordinarily useful" in building bridges between theory and practice.

The paper continues with a discussion of the literature to help conceptualise key issues and lacunae in scholarly knowledge. It then explains the qualitative research design. Subsequently, detailed findings from both stages of the study are presented. Theoretical contributions are highlighted, and managerial implications and limitations of the research noted. Finally, the conclusion summarises the study's main contributions.

2. Literature Review

IMC has been conceptualised as "an audience-driven business process of strategically managing stakeholders, content, channels and results of brand communication programs" (Kliatchko, 2008, p. 140). Cornelissen (2003, p. 219) notes how the literature makes a distinction between the "content" and "process" of IMC. This framing of the constitution and the implementation of IMC is used to structure the following review.

2.1 Content: the role of the sales force

In terms of content, while Cornelissen (2003, p. 221) lists a raft of "communication disciplines" that the IMC literature tends to argue should be integrated into a single organizational unit, this list does not include personal selling. Yet, Christensen et al (2009, p. 210) cite Gronstedt (1996, p. 39), who notes that "companies communicate with everything they do", to argue that firms not only communicate with "the messages they deliberately select for publication" but also with the performance of their products and "the behaviour of their staff" and thus, one might justifiably surmise, their sales staff too. Moreover, the direct interaction of sales personnel with potential and existing customers allows them to do more than just impart a marketing message to those customers; their ability to engage in dialogue in social networks outside the organization means that they can play a key role in developing marketplace knowledge (Arnett & Wittmann, 2014).

Nevertheless, most authors in IMC devote insufficient attention to sales departments in discussions of content or with respect to the interdependencies between functional areas. For instance, the "marketing communication activities" in McArthur and Griffin's (1997, p. 22) exploration of client views of IMC do not include personal selling. Similarly, while sales levels in relation to the strategic integration of communications are studied by Duncan and Everett (1993), the sales function itself is not seen as a component of the communications mix. In a similar vein, we find Keller (2001, p. 821) mentioning personal selling at the very end of a list of "communication options" for an IMC program. Thereafter, examples of what are described as "five major communication types" are boiled down to TV, print, sales promotions, sponsorship and interactive communications (p. 835).

As such, this review has to agree with Rouziès et al. (2005, p. 113) that "IMC coordination efforts within marketing largely ignore the most significant marketing tool for communicating and influencing relationships with customers – the company's sales force".

Their proposed framework for integrating sales and marketing is followed by the recommendation that the activities of both functions should be consistent and their timing coordinated (Rouziès et al., 2005). This suggests that IMC content can influence process; and, although these authors focus on internal or intra-organizational integration, this lends support to the importance of understanding inter-firm IMC implementation, particularly when those firms include advertising and sales agencies.

A further consideration is that a client's decision to adopt an IMC approach, often including digital activities, now means that a central advertising agency can be faced with a variety of outcome-based remuneration models. This is because performance measurement can be linked to outcomes, such as sales transactions, rather than behaviours (Ross et al., 2004).

2.2 Process: implementing communications campaigns

Cornelissen (2003, p.220) shows how IMC proponents argue that marketing communications professionals should holistically "consider and choose over and beyond their traditional, specialist approaches...those techniques and media that are most effective for a given communication assignment". The fact that the sales function is generally located inside the organization in a different department to these "marketing professionals" means there are likely to be control and coordination issues. In addition, if the necessary expertise is not available in-house, this invariably entails working with external agencies. To compound these issues, advertising agencies can utilize subcontracted relationships, bringing in other agencies with relevant skills in order to provide the client with a complete offering (Laurie & Mortimer, 2011). These managerial challenges indicate a need to explore the process of IMC implementation and, in particular, the literature on inter-organizational (i.e. client-agency and agency-agency) contexts.

Outsourcing success often depends on an integrated process of collaboration designed to avoid hostility in buyer/seller relationships (Ots & Nyilasy, 2015). Despite the assertion that integrated communications must involve the "vertical integration of business partners" (Christensen et al. 2009, p. 210), such integration may be difficult to achieve. Coordination problems and turf battles in client and agency relationships are likely to grow in significance in the inter-organizational context created by an IMC approach (Beard, 1996). These issues are exacerbated by perceptions on both sides that boundary spanning personnel in client firms, as well as agencies, may not have all the skills required (Heo & Sutherland, 2015). Conversely, Beverland et al. (2007) suggest that agencies should be more proactive within client relationships. The coordination required for an IMC campaign that is delivered between a client and several agencies will exacerbate such challenges for inter-firm boundary spanners.

It has been argued that effective marketing and sales relationships positively affect market performance (Guenzi & Troilo, 2007). Thus strong inter-functional and inter-organizational relationships are needed between the actors responsible for implementing marketing communications campaigns. Frustratingly, however, inter-firm contexts have been underexplored in studies of the cross-functional relationships often necessary in IMC. For instance, Christensen et al. (2008) adopt an entirely internal perspective in their discussion of communications integration. More recently, the relationship between sales and marketing functions is studied by Arnett and Wittmann (2014) who note the importance of tacit knowledge exchange between these two areas. Their focus remains on the internal organizational transfer of knowledge; but once the arena of client-agency relationships is considered, the need for adequate facilitation of information exchange is even more critical.

When communication is impaired between functional areas within a firm there is a risk to effective strategy implementation (Rapert et al., 2002). The implementation process is more likely to be vulnerable if it occurs between external work groups who may not share the same understanding of strategic priorities. Noble (1999) reviews two perspectives in response to such problems: structural, which entails working within formal elements including roles, reporting lines and control mechanisms; and interpersonal, comprising a range of interactional and cognitive processes as managers interpret strategic initiatives. Early involvement in the strategy process by a wide range of organizational members is likely to ensure success in implementation, especially when a strategy is new. Noble, however, remains focused on the complexity of implementation as an intra-organizational issue.

Managing across boundaries on behalf of the client is a prerequisite for campaign success. Yet, when implementing a service offering, marketers often construct boundaries around their own areas of expertise and then seek legitimacy in other functional areas (Ellis & Ybema, 2010). The role of boundary-spanners in this context is potentially crucial, both as employees following codified organizational rules and processes (Hackley, 2000), and as individuals building personal relations internally and externally (Haytko, 2004). Boundary-spanning may be challenging in a communications campaign when expectations are markedly different for each partner, particularly if notions of what constitutes IMC are under-defined, making boundaries unclear and risking duplicating skills/service offerings. These professional and personal issues mean that developing close inter-personal relationships within the context of client-agency relations is crucial (Haytko, 2004). This becomes more complicated and pressing when one considers the use of third party external specialists.

2.3 Research questions

It is clear that the literature would benefit from more interpretive exploration of practitioner perspectives on the content and process of IMC. There is little qualitative research into clients' perception of what constitutes IMC and how it is implemented, particularly in terms of engaging with multiple organizations and managerial levels. Indeed, very few researchers truly “get out and get in” to “real-life” contextual data (Woodside, 2016, p. 378). Given these gaps, the paper poses two research questions: (i) what are practitioner views on the inclusion of personal selling in the content of marketing communications, and (ii) how do inter-organizational and inter-personal relationships affect ongoing campaign implementation processes?

3. Research method

The research design involved two sets of empirical data: a series of exploratory interviews followed by a case study. In stage one, informant views were gained from a wide selection of client and agency personnel. Stage two involved a single case study which incorporated three phases of interviews coupled with participant observation as a communications strategy was implemented by three organizations, none of which had been interviewed at stage one. A qualitative design was selected with a balance between emic and etic perspectives that endeavoured to give due regard to “ground up” informant views which were evaluated relative to existing theories (Gould, 2004).

In both stages, purposive sampling was used as informants were selected based on the insights they were believed to be capable of providing on their “day-to-day experiences” of management processes (Hausman & Haytko, 2003, p. 548). Appropriate guidelines such as observing processes in real life contexts, the collection of data across several periods, and interviewing more than one person in each organization, were followed. Iterative comparison of interviews and participant observation provided rigour via triangulation (Woodside, 2016).

3.1 Stage one

Eighteen client and agency side interviews were carried out in mid-2012. Recruitment of agency informants was based on trade body membership and the agencies’ positioning as single vs. multiple service providers. From the client side, trade listings were also used capture sectors which tended to use outsourced partners in marketing and/or sales. Informants were mostly senior executives, as they possessed wide levels of experience in making marketing communications decisions (see Table 1). Access to managers was facilitated by the first author having worked in the agency sector in Ireland for 25 years. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Overall, each interview took an average of 64 minutes and in total interviews yielded 160 pages and 62,000 words.

<Please insert Table 1 about here>

Table 1: Informants for stage one interviews

3.2 Stage two

This centred on the implementation of an integrated campaign involving the marketing and selling of a client firm's TV services. Perhaps surprisingly, digital media did not appear to be salient to the client for this particular project. However, the case facilitated the study of a project where the client (Company A, which offered consumers TV subscription packages) was combining marketing and sales services (from Companies B and C, respectively) within a single campaign under the coordination of one of the outsourced service providers (i.e. Company B) – see Figure 1. The case focused on the management of the communication activities towards the right hand side of Figure 1, as well as on the relationships between the various organizational stakeholders.

<Please insert Fig 1 around here>

Figure 1: Main actors and activities in stage two case study

The case study focused on the incorporation into a project that ran from Summer 2012 to Spring 2013 of the activities of a sales agency (Company C) that was responsible for selling Company A's services to the public. These included retail/venue-based marketing and door-to-door direct sales. This case involved the first author's firm (Company B) acting on behalf of Company A to provide an integrated offering of sales and marketing, and managing the sales agency. Historically, Company A has used various outsourced partners, including both Company B and C, but the two functions of marketing communications and personal selling have always operated separately.

Data in stage two were collected from the three firms via a combination of interviews and participant observation. The use of interviews as the main source of data was based on the revelatory opportunity (Yin, 2009) afforded by the availability of informants. This resulted from the first author's position: although he was not directly involved with the project under scrutiny, his status allowed him to observe and take contemporaneous notes on meetings throughout the project in addition to interviewing eight informants on three separate occasions, i.e. 24 interviews in all. These occasions represented three phases of the communications project: pre-implementation; three months into the project; and on completion (after nine months). The interviews lasted an average of 62 minutes, resulting in a total of 227 pages and totalling 108,000 words. Interview transcripts were analysed and compared to the insights gained via participant observation to assess the impact of the new strategy from the perspectives of relevant client and agency staff (see Table 2). In addition to the informants listed in Table 2, two Business Development Managers (BDMs) were employed by Company B at the later phases of the case study period.

<Please insert Table 2 around here>

Table 2: Case study informants for stage two

3.3 Analytical approach

The initial organising framework for the coding of data was informed by a combination of concepts drawn from the literature and the first author's personal experience in the agency sector. This allowed the analysis to build on previous scholarly insights, but care was taken not to "force" data into the framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Indeed, as the interviews progressed for each stage of the study, the emergent coding became increasingly driven by the emic responses of informants.

To explore whether different themes underpinned perspectives within each company as the case project was implemented, patterns of occurrence of each theme within informant's talk were analysed over time. This three phase approach provides the structure to the second stage of the findings and analysis section.

4. Findings and analysis

4.1 Stage one

Within the exploratory interviews, it was apparent that personal selling had never been considered as part of marketing communications by some informants, although they generally believed it could be successful. Certainly, many took the view that it was desirable to include sales in a campaign, but this was acknowledged as demanding close inter-functional collaboration.

Clients saw current manifestations of IMC content as excluding the sales force, and being constituted by advertising, direct marketing, sales promotion, public relations and digital services. However, they also defined IMC more broadly as delivering message and sales unification: "*Integrated marketing to me is very much reflected through a definite program in the above-the-line through below-the-line activity, which can then be followed up and supported by sales activity*" (Informant J). This informant indicated that traditional agencies currently struggle to offer integrated services as part of their mix, so many clients simply choose what is commonly available: "*The sales activity tended to be a separate piece bolted-on (…) so I think there is a gap in terms of how sales activity is clearly co-ordinated and integrated*" (Informant N).

When examining current processes, clients confirmed that agencies are measured mostly on behaviours and to a lesser extent on outputs. The integration of sales and marketing was depicted as a positive move. Linking outcomes to remuneration was also a prominent feature of informants' talk: "*I think that you could end up with a model whereby the agency does get paid by performance of their sales guys*" (Informant K).

On the whole, client views suggested a strong demand for integration of content, including personal selling. The perceived benefits of integration were readily identified as revolving around message unification, improved performance metrics and the facilitation of change in agency compensation.

Amongst agency interviewees, there were frequent assertions that IMC was no longer about message unification. Rather, it was a strategic issue, implying, that company operations had to change: *"On a single insight around a consumer (…) the communication and the commercial strategy, how the salesmen work, how things are designed is related back to that insight*" (Informant B).

Another issue related to inter-functional communication requirements within an agency or a client company, or between several agencies: "*It all involves breaking down some of those traditional barriers, so in the past you would have various agencies or internal teams working in silos*" (Informant F).

Overall, from the agency side, commensurate with client perspectives, there was agreement that the inclusion of sales in a communications mix was to be welcomed, once measurement and attributions could be addressed. Nor did agency informants see the integration of sales as particularly challenging from an implementation point of view, although the propensity for turf wars was a common refrain.

4.2 Stage two

The order in which results are discussed below is based on three phases of the nine month project: i.e. pre-implementation; three months into the project; and at completion. For each phase, the themes are illustrated with exemplar quotes from all three partner organizations where appropriate, thereby reflecting the multiple stakeholders involved and their sometimes diverging perspectives.

First phase - At this point, personal selling was not a prominent theme. Instead discussions revolved around how to integrate marketing communications to help drive sales and how performance could be measured. Each party saw trade-offs between collaboration, compliance and control, with some tensions revealed around how Company A were thought to be seeking the last while espousing the first. A senior manager from the client firm argued that the new inter-organizational structure for this campaign would address any process issues: "*What we are using now is a sales and a marketing agency to partner and help us bridge the gap*" (Informant 1). However, perspectives on existing organizational and departmental silo structures indicated some concerns: "*I think sometimes the notice we get in regards to marketing changes are very slow in getting down to the likes of ourselves*" (Informant 7).

It seemed that each company had differing views of what success post-project would look like, with agents feeling they would be given some autonomy under collaborative partnerships. Thus most stakeholders indicated that greater collaboration was required and indeed welcome: "*I think they (Company C) would welcome a bit of support*" (Informant 6). Nonetheless, it was apparent that some viewed collaboration as being more about gaining greater control: "*I think the first focus for us has to be on the sales side. It's about beating them into some shape*" (Informant 2, Client Company A).

There was general agreement that the existing marketing communications activity was disjointed in acting as an effective sales support. There appeared to be an appreciation that brand activity is important, but this was difficult: "*Taking a brand message and turning it into a message to ask a customer to do something is a big challenge*" (Informant 7). Moreover, there was a perception that the sales agency had not been complying with brand guidelines in the past: "*From a marketing perspective, they (Company C) are not on brand*" (Informant 5). This raised a further issue as each party had, prior to the implementation of the case project, operated in isolation, maintaining their own information system and sharing very little knowledge: "*The current model, there's no integration between the two, they (Company A) don't even know if they spend it [budget] at all on marketing*" (Informant 4).

It appeared at this pre-project phase that all parties were reasonably open to an approach where sales and marketing worked closely together with a lead agency. This said, each stakeholder had a somewhat different view of ultimate objectives and how collaboration may work in practice.

Second phase **–** A new theme emerged at this point, namely boundary-spanning. Not only did this theme not emerge in the first phase of case study interviews, it did not arise in the exploratory client and agency interviews in stage one. This suggests that certain implementation issues are not considered significant by stakeholders when introducing IMC.

Boundary-spanning relates to the role of staff whose responsibilities included building relationships between all three firms, most notably between Companies B and C. Mixed views arose, suggesting that boundary-spanners were alternately viewed as colleagues and a delivery mechanism for Company A's dictates: "*To a large extent our staff would perceive them as someone to control us*" (Informant 7). Counter-assertions were reflected in the perceptions of Company B's staff that trust had improved between partners: "*They (Company C) felt threatened but now it's come full circle and they see myself and the guys [BDMs] as a welcome addition*" (Informant 4). Having said this, the same informant questioned the boundary-spanners' loyalty: "*I notice that with one of our people, they are more on the side of the independent (Company C)".*

Power asymmetries between organizational stakeholders began to emerge more clearly. A lack of trust was expressed in relation to Company C for the first time at this point, with control becoming increasingly important: "*The ambitions were always about control and predictability*" (Informant 1); and "*Do we trust them (Company C) more? No, we manage them more closely*" (Informant 4).

There was also a clear divide between Company C and the other two stakeholders about how the integrated sales and marketing operation was working. Company A and B informants referred to improved processes and closer collaboration: "*Now there is a common and consistent message*" (Informant 2); and "*The agents are more welcoming to Company A contacting them. They tell Dave [BDM] their feedback*" (Informant 5). Departing from this picture, Company C thought that nothing had changed and that the client did not appear to welcome much in the way of proactivity from either agency: "*The marketing communications is still the same, the exact same*" (Informant 8).

Overall, three months after the new form of IMC was introduced, informants regarded closer integration with ambivalence. Boundary-spanning and control was a frequently articulated theme, perhaps in recognition that collaboration meant that tacit work practices were more visible for previously distant organizations. This said, the requirement for greater collaboration came with signs that boundary-spanning may mean intrusion into long-standing ways of working.

Third phase **–** In this final phase, a number of new themes emerged. Inter-firm relationships were discussed repeatedly but, in contrast with the area of inter-personal relationships (see below), there was little unanimity over their significance for the success of the project. Thus it was felt that organizational relationships had improved, but there was also a view that Company A continued to operate in a hierarchical fashion towards its sales partner. This was underlined by Company C informants who felt that levels of opacity had actually increased as a concomitant of the client's desire to develop greater collaboration.

This informant was largely positive: "*It's brought a lot of transparency, to the relationship between Company A and the key independents*" (Informant 4). But some negative views were conveyed: "*The relationship has changed absolutely, from a situation where one felt a certain level of co-operation to now being we just take the orders*" (Informant 7).

All stakeholders felt that inter-personal relationships between individual boundary-spanners had improved: "*They know who I work with and I think it's definitely a positive thing. We were never able to do that before*" (Informant 5). Inter-firm relations, even so, were not always depicted positively: "*Personal relationships are good, but relationships between the two companies are strained*" (Informant 7). Nevertheless, this statement in support of the boundary-spanning role performed by Company B's BDMs was typical: "*They tell us what's going on out in the field, not snooping but they can give us feedback that you're not going to get from spread sheets*" (Informant 1).

Trust was an issue for all informants. Most felt it had increased, but all companies indicated that management practices and confused goal-setting militated against maximising trust: "*Company A do a lot of work to try and build a bit of trust and then they do something that completely erodes it*" (Informant 6); and "*To work together, it's been very, very hard and it's back to I think (…) just sometimes objectives are different*" (Informant 1). Arguably, such responses reflect project participants' formal roles (see Table 2) which may have impacted on their understanding of specialisms beyond their own.

Although the original plan for the case study was to evaluate the financial outcome of the campaign, in the opinion of a senior manager at Company B who was not part of the project team: "*The client found IMC to be more challenging to implement than they'd thought!*" Subsequent discussions over confidentiality meant that detailed outcomes did not form part of the data. Despite this, the third phase of the case revealed that almost all the informants believed the project would result in increased sales and, some argued, "*improved costs per sale*". Thus it was generally believed that the project had been successful, albeit for sales as an outcome as opposed to selling becoming part of communications content. Improvements were claimed in levels of collaboration and integration: "*I know a lot more about what's going on and I feel a lot more involved. I think Company C would probably say they feel the same*" (Informant 5).

Whatever the role of personal selling in IMC, the overwhelming view was that developing closer relationships between sales and marketing functions was desirable , and that this had been achieved in this case: "*We here internally have the integration going really well in terms of how above the line links up with all of our sales planning*" (Informant 1).

Overall, inter-firm relationships were perceived as improving by two of the stakeholders (Companies A and B). As a counterpoint, staff at Company C felt that relations between the three companies had deteriorated. Even so, all parties were supportive of the concept of collaboration, and Companies A and B stated it had increased, particularly with respect to information sharing. Despite some reservations, boundary-spanning processes as means to improve implementation were considered successful.

5. Contributions and implications

5.1 Theoretical contributions

This research has explored client and agency perceptions of the provision of sales services as part of a marketing communications strategy. A case study of an IMC campaign examined how communications programmes are implemented through outsourced service partners. The study makes contributions to understandings of strategic marketing communications planning in terms of inter-functional collaboration and inter-organizational relationships.

Collaboration between sales and marketing functions – A notable feature of the stage one interviews was the broad consensus across clients and agencies on what constituted IMC, both currently and in the future regarding the need to include personal selling in communications content. This is a significant finding since prior conceptual and empirical studies (e.g. Keller, 2001) appear to have neglected the sales force as a potential strategic IMC tool for communicating with customers and influencing relationships (Rouziès et al., 2005).

Likewise, there was a general agreement that sales should be a measurement objective and linked to rewards, thus reflecting the importance of evaluation and ROI in IMC (Hackley & Hackley, 2015). As well as a close scrutiny of implementation issues (see below), what was novel in the stage two case was the examination of the inclusion of the sales function as part of a "real-life" outsourced communications offering. Results affirmed the proposition that collaboration between sales and marketing functions is imperative in improving business and IMC success (Beard, 1996).

Managing relationships during implementation – A further important finding was the apparent lack of awareness in the contemporary marketplace of some process issues that influence successful IMC execution. Prior to the case study project's commencement, informants from both stages of the overall study envisaged few problems arising during implementation. This said, as the project progressed, informants' accounts foregrounded topics such as sales and marketing collaboration, trust, and relationship management which were not prominent in the stage one interviews or found in much of the IMC literature, despite the salience of these issues in marketing scholarship more generally.

The impact of inter-personal and inter-firm relationships was apparent during implementation. These required the management of inter-functional and inter-firm conflict as increasing tensions were registered between the client, lead agency and, most notably, the sales agency. The absence of shared goals coupled with high levels of tacit working procedures (Hackley, 2000) generated lower levels of trust as controls were introduced, creating perceptions of an "*ivory tower*" approach to collaboration. The preceding term was used by one participant to refer to the idea that senior level personnel were unaware of and not interested in day-to-day issues. Others took this further and suspected that the client firm saw the project as a way of evaluating whether to bring a partner's sales expertise in-house. This suggests that perceptions of self-serving behaviours may have generated a loss of trust among participants supposedly working together (cf. Ots & Nyilasy, 2015).

Under these challenging circumstances, informants felt that boundary-spanning activities were a positive development since they helped integrate communication activities and systems, not just across functions, but also between partner organizations. Thus, negative issues of trust and control appeared to be related to organizations rather than to individual boundary-spanners (cf. Haytko, 2004). The high level of interpersonal effectiveness reported was generally welcomed, but was sometimes a concern when individuals were perceived to have "*gone native*" (i.e. to be closer to the partner firm than to their employing organization). A fine balance of discipline-, firm- and project-specific responsibilities and communication skills is therefore required by those actors charged with managing the IMC implementation process (cf. Rapert et al., 2002).

5.2 Managerial implications

Marketing professionals seem to accept that IMC will remain a desirable framework for managing communications due to the benefits it promises (Hackley & Hackley, 2015, p. 87). Such optimism at the outset of a project might be naïve, as tensions in managing relationships between firms may only emerge as implementation unfolds. One of the key findings of this research is the need for management to consider the collaborative setting and sharing of objectives and evaluation criteria with all stakeholders. This enables process issues to be addressed at the planning stage and facilitates employee/partner engagement at all levels. Where communication was lacking, there was a perception of the concealment of the "*real objectives*" of the client's senior management. This shows the importance of good inter-personal relationships between boundary-spanning personnel in partner firms.

The inclusion of sales as part of the outsourced IMC mix content was understood as a positive move by most informants. Findings from both stages of the study suggest that personal selling could usefully be integrated when sales can be directly attributed to agency activity. It must still be appreciated that this study focussed on straightforward attribution for a project with rather limited marketing support and a direct sales force. It is likely to be more difficult in the context of an FMCG brand with high levels of social media communications, sales promotion and retailer activity.

5.3 Limitations and future research

As with all case studies, the classic trade-off for setting research in a particular situation relates to generalizability. This research is no exception, and could benefit from replication to ascertain if findings are consistent with those of a wider constellation of companies and client industrial sectors. Furthermore, given that the focus of the overall study was on the Irish advertising industry, the findings could be considered country-specific. Having said this, many of the participants had international experience or exposure to IMC in their current or previous role(s) and this may enhance transferability of these findings.

Inter-firm relationships are not simply a matter of weighing up costs and benefits such as increased sales; they also comprise socially constructed aspects including a sense of shared history, commitment and trust, aspects that not always perceived in a consistent way across organizations (Biggemann & Buttle 2012). Within these dynamics are power relations that can be affirmative and destructive of ongoing connections. At present, though, there is limited research examining how the so-called “dark side” of relationships might influence future relational dynamics. Thus, while Skarmeas (2006) and Finch et al. (2013) have explored inter-functional and inter-firm conflict, the empirical examination of constructs like uncertainty and opportunism continues to remain neglected. Our findings suggest that this is a field worthy of greater study.

There is merit in exploring the views of more stakeholders. Such an approach might draw on Gould’s (2004, p.68) suggestion to triangulate “discourses and meanings among various parties to marketing communications, including agencies and their various functionalities, clients, and not least, consumers”. And, if “integrated communication is …a project of power …to define the limits of integration and by extension select the signs that represent the organization and reject the ones that do not” (Christensen et al., 2009, p. 212), then there is the potential to undertake discourse analysis to make explicit the connections between IMC texts, organizational identities and boundary construction (Ellis & Ybema 2010).

6. Conclusion

This paper contributes to our knowledge of marketing strategy implementation by adding to the limited number of empirical studies in the area. It does so by embracing a context-specific approach that accommodates the role of different functional areas and senior and mid-level employees in the implementation of a communications campaign. Moreover, by exploring the impact of inter-organisational relationships as well as interpersonal relationships, it confirms the importance of organising marketing activities to fit strategic aims.

The study has shown that clients and agencies support the proposition that collaboration between sales and marketing functions is vital for improving communication strategy success. In terms of implementation and control, they believe the quantity and quality of sales should be measurement objectives and explicitly linked to rewards for agency partners. This has implications for academic definitions of IMC which almost always omit sales. Equally significantly, the study found there to be little awareness in the marketplace of some of the social processes that influence successful campaign implementation. The impact of inter-personal and inter-firm relationships is not apparently well understood by marketing communications practitioners. Consequently, despite the efforts of individual boundary-spanners, differing perceptions of levels of trust and control between partner organizations may impede implementation and the development of longer-term relationships. It thus appears that both practitioners and academics need to give closer consideration to the tensions stoked by the uncertainty and opportunism that can emerge when attempting to implement IMC in an inter-organizational context.

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Table 1: Informants for stage one interviews

Informant	Role	Firm	Sector
A	CEO	Advertising Agency	Agency
B	CEO	Advertising Agency	Agency
C	CEO	Digital Agency	Agency
D	CEO	Advertising Agency	Agency
E	CEO	Advertising Agency	Agency
F	Head of Unit	Healthcare Agency	Agency
G	CEO	Digital Agency	Agency
H	CEO	Advertising Agency	Agency
J	Head of Sales	Insurance Company	Insurance
K	Head of SME Banking	Retail Bank	Banking
L	CEO	Digital Real Estate	Property
M	Account Director	Medical Company	Healthcare
N	Head of Marketing	Postal Service	Motor insurance
O	CEO	Bank	Motor finance
P	Head of Marketing	Gas/Electricity Provider	Utility
Q	CEO	Security Company	Security
R	Head of Marketing	Brewery	Brewing
S	Head of Marketing	Retail Bank	Banking

Table 2: Case study informants for stage two

Informant	Role	Company	Project responsibilities	Relationships
1	Head of Retail Sales	A Client	Ultimately responsible for all sales via retail channels	Most senior point of contact for other project stakeholders
2	Sales Manager	A Client	To ensure that all partners comply with Company A's rules and that sales volumes are achieved	Day-to-day contact for the project; reports to Informant 1; in contact with marketing functions internally and with Company B
3	Marketing Executive	A Client	To ensure that agents have adequate numbers of trained staff with daily sales targets	Front line member of staff in contact with Companies B and C
4	Project Director	B Marketing Agency	Responsible for the Company A account and delivery of the integrated program	Based in Company A's offices 50% of the time, with the balance split between Companies B and C
5	Senior Account Manager	B Marketing Agency	Acts as the liaison with Company A and Company C	Works closely with all stakeholders to deliver the project; reports to Informant 4
6	Data Analyst	B Marketing Agency	Analyses data on behalf of Company A and responsible for creating metrics	Based in Company A's offices for most of the week; outputs are shared with all stakeholders
7	Managing Director	C Sales Agency	Ultimately responsible for sales performance of Company C	Main senior point of contact for Company C in relation to the project
8	Sales Manager	C Sales Agency	Responsible for sales and compliance both internally and with Company A	Main day-to-day contact for the project; reports to Informant 7

Figure 1: Main actors and activities in stage two case study