Selecting an IMC career: influences, choices and destinations

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Abstract

Integrated marketing communication incorporates both customer and non-customer stakeholder groups. While the literature commonly refers to this distinction as marketing communication and corporate communication, respectively, and practitioners accept the need for these roles, this study aims to explore the student perspective. US-based research suggests that students are more interested in marketing communication activities such as promotion that target customer stakeholders, and less interested in corporate communication activities that target non-customer stakeholders including employees, investors, and government (Bowen, 2003). The findings of this study match its US counterpart, and present implications for both the education and practice of marketing communication.

Keywords: student, career choices, marketing education

Literature summary

Integrated marketing communication (IMC) has had a significant impact on both industry and the academy (Gould, Grein, & Lerman, 1999; Kitchen & Schultz, 2003). Defined as a "collective term for all the various types of planned messages used to build a brand", marketing communication integrates advertising, public relations, sales promotion, direct marketing, personal selling, packaging, events and sponsorships, and customer service" (Duncan, 2005, p. 7).

The multi-disciplinary focus of IMC has implications for the academy, especially for universities that offer discrete programs in advertising, sales, and events (Wightman, 1999). Wightman (1999) argues that students are forced to select one major and that this specialised knowledge comes at the expense of an understanding of an organisation's complete communication environment. In turn, the education of marketing communication students impacts on their career expectations. As a result, this study aims to explore the course and career expectations of undergraduate marketing communication students in order to provide guidance to educators as they build curricula to attract and retain students and to industry professionals as they face the challenges of a changing workforce.

Student selection of courses and careers is influenced by a range of sources including family, location of universities, school guidance counsellors, and career interests. Media impressions and interpersonal sources such as influential students can also influence student decision-making (Bowen, 2003). Perhaps more significant is the student selection of universities and courses that allow quick transition to work placements. Through his role as the former chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley, Kerr (1995) suggests that universities have become the port of entry for growing professions, which emphasises the importance of curricula design and the student experience in preparing future professionals. As such, the expectations of employers have also become a consideration for educators and students.

Although the skills and attributes that increase student employability should be integrated into Australian courses (Holt & Sheehan, 2004), universities are mandated to provide learning

opportunities that extend beyond discipline-based knowledge. According to research undertaken by The Australian Council of Educational Research, universities value skills in communication, problem solving, interpersonal skills, critical thinking, ethics, commitment to lifelong learning, and familiarity with technology (Trapper, 2000). Further, both the academe and industry recognise that students need to be prepared for entry level as well as senior roles that require knowledge beyond promotion and communication tactics (Van Leuven, 1999). Supporting the call for educators to prepare students for lifetime careers, Turk (1989) encourages the incorporation of management skills into teaching programs. However, a major US study showed that while students expected to learn about publicity and special event planning, they were shocked and surprised that an understanding and application of strategic decision making, relationship-building and research methodologies was also required (Bowen, 2003).

While much of IMC relates to the consumer, a number of authors suggest the need for communication to target non-customer stakeholders as well, such as investors, employers, regulators and others (Belch & Belch, 2002; Kitchen & Schultz, 2003; Proctor & Kitchen, 2002). In fact, Proctor and Kitchen (2002) believe the nexus between IMC and corporate communication has significant implications for stakeholder judgements of organisational effectiveness. Non-customer stakeholders are targeted through corporate communication, which is defined as the advice and counsel offered by senior executives about the organisation's image and reputation (Duncan, 2005). Corporate communication targets stakeholders through activities including corporate advertising, lobbying, financial relations and corporate sponsorship (Kitchen & Schultz, 2003; Semenik, 2002). Once exposed to these different areas within IMC and corporate communication, students may select a career in the broad field or within one of the specialist subfunctions.

Armed with an understanding of educator and industry expectations for students and graduates, this study seeks to explore the student perspective through the following research questions:

> *RQ1: What sources influence Australian marketing communication students' course selection?*
> *RQ2: What is the preferred area of practice for Australian marketing communication students?*
> *RQ3: What is the preferred organisational setting for Australian marketing communication students?*

Research Methodology

In order to answer the research questions, a survey design was implemented to capture the perspectives of business students at a large metropolitan university. A questionnaire was compiled which posed a series of questions about the students' preferred areas of practice, their preferred place of work, that is as an internal practitioner or as an external consultant, and the information sources used by them to help select their course of study.

Data were collected from first year undergraduate students enrolled in one of the entry or principles courses in an IMC sequence across four consecutive semesters in 2004 and 2005. The questionnaire was administered in the lecture period following a series of lectures on

career options and different areas of practice to ensure that students had some exposure to their different options.

The sample for this research consisted of more than 800 students and 363 valid responses were gathered across the four semesters. Similar to Bowen's (2003) study, participating students included those who were only taking the introductory subject as an elective unit as well as those who were undertaking a sequence of study in the area. Participation was anonymous and voluntary as per the University's ethics standard for research on current students. Results from the questionnaire were entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Frequency counts and descriptive statistics were calculated for relevant variables with chi-square analyses conducted where appropriate.

A number of limitations impact the findings of this study. The study was limited to students enrolled in an entry or principles unit, and did not extend to other units which could be included as part of the IMC discipline area. The questionnaire was limited to a finite number of questions in order to fit into learning and teaching requirements for the course and therefore did not explore all possible career outcomes for students. The study was conducted at only one university and this study considers only undergraduate students so the results may not be representative of all universities, especially those that involve distance and/or postgraduate education. As the survey was undertaken early in the course of study for the students, the results capture their impressions of career options when they enter the course. As Bowen (2003) found, these perceptions may change over the course of further study once students are exposed to a wider range of options.

Results and discussion

RQ1: Sources of influence on Australian marketing communication students' course selection

Students were asked to identify the strongest influencing factor on their choice of study at university. The strongest influence was written information which had been available either through mass media or more specialised media. The traditional influences of knowing someone working or studying in the area or school counsellor recommendations rated at very low levels across the sample. From the sample, 48.2 percent selected reading information or watching television or movies portraying the study/practice areas as the strongest influencing factor. Only 3.2 percent selected knowing someone working in the industry as an influencing factor, and 1.4 percent selected guidance from a school counsellor. More than 60 students (18.4 percent) enrolled in the course because it was a requirement of their degree structure. Other factors (24.2 percent) were also selected as an influencing factor.

RQ2: Preferred area of practice for Australian marketing communication students

Students were asked to identify their preferred area of practice from a range of options Students could select from five specific practice areas drawn from the marketing communication and corporate communication literature or specify other options in writing. The preferred area of practice was marketing communication (56.7 percent of the sample). Only 14.2 percent chose the areas more closely associated with corporate communication discipline and practice. Of the sample, 20.4 percent was undecided and 8.7 percent preferred an area of practice outside those listed (see Table 1).

Students' preferred practice areas		Percent	Total Percent
Marketing communication	Publicity and promotion	32.7	56.7
	Event management	24.0	
Corporate communication	Issues and crisis management	7.0	14.2
	Financial relations	4.2	
	Lobbying	3.0	
Others	Undecided at this point	20.4	29.1
	Other	8.7	
	Total	**100.0**	**100.00**

Table 1: Preferred areas of practice

These findings were considered against sources of influence (see Table 2). Publicity and promotion was selected as the primary preferred area of practice for those students influenced by school counsellors, written or television communication, or existing student. Those students who were influenced by someone working in the industry, selected event management as their preferred area of practice. No statistical relationship was found between the influencing factor and preferred area of practice (χ^2 (36, $N = 325$) = 49.268, $p > .05$), however the chi-square test for significance was affected by a high level of small cell counts.

Influencing Factor	Preferred Area of Practice			
	Primary	Percent	Secondary	Percent
Someone working in the industry	Event management	58.0	Publicity and promotion	6.7
			Issues and crisis management	6.7
			Financial relations	6.7
School counsellor recommendation	Publicity and promotion	60.0	Event management	20.0
			Issues and crisis management	20.0
Read information on marketing communication	Publicity and promotion	29.4	Event management	19.8
Watched television or movies portraying marketing communication	Publicity and promotion	40.7	Event management	37.0
Someone studying marketing communication	Publicity and promotion	63.6	Issues and crisis management	9.1
			Financial relations	9.1

Table 2: Preferred area of practice rankings by influencing factor

RQ3: Preferred organisational setting for Australian marketing communication students

Given the diversity of careers in marketing communication within Australia, students were asked to identify whether they preferred to work within an organisation or externally through a consultancy role. Inhouse roles were preferred over consultancy positions with approximately 57 percent of the sample selecting this option. Internal preferences were also ranked in terms of the size and scope of the organisation with large organisations being

preferred over small to medium organisations and both corporate positions being preferred over government positions (see Table 3 for full details).

Type of organisation		Frequency	Percent
Inhouse	large organisation	126	37.1
	small to medium organisation	49	14.4
	Government	17	5.0
Consultancy		51	15.0
Undecided at this point		97	28.5
Total		**340**	**100.0**

Table 3: Preferred organisational type

Further analysis suggested a statistical relationship with the preferred area of practice (χ^2 (24, $N = 318) = 84.965$, $p < .001$). Table 4 outlines the preference in area of practice in rank order for three organisational types. Students who preferred to work in consultancy rated publicity and promotion as their preferred area of practice, whereas this ranked third and second for inhouse positions with large organisations and inhouse positions with small to medium organisations respectively. Lobbying was the least preferred option for those seeking to work in consultancy and in house with large organisations and the second least preferred option for those seeking to work in house with small to medium organisations.

Ranking	Inhouse		Consultancy
	Large organisation	**Small to medium organisation**	
1	Financial relations	Event management	Publicity and promotion
2	Issues and crisis management	Publicity and promotion	Financial relations
3	Publicity and promotion	Financial relations	Issues and crisis management
4	Event management	Lobbying	Event management
5	Lobbying	Issues and crisis management	Lobbying

Table 4: Preferred area of practice rankings within organisation type

Implications and further research

Overall, this sample suggests that the average Australian marketing communication student is likely to be influenced by written or television media and wants to work in inhouse publicity and promotion for a large organisation. Although popular, these impersonal sources of influence present only one side of IMC, marketing communication targeted at customers. Personal sources of influence are more likely to have exposed students to corporate communication activities. While popular communication provides a good information trigger for potential students, stronger communication about the diversity of IMC needs to be presented by both industry and academy. The findings highlight the need for educators and practitioners to emphasise skill sets that extend beyond graduate roles and offer students greater flexibility in career options. This is significant as most students selected to work in in-house positions when much of IMC education focuses on the agency experience. Educators should consider incorporating diversity into their programs through cases that involve both customer and non-customer communication and presentations by industry leaders from the disciplines that inform IMC.

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