# Evolutions Of An Online Generation: Education, Industry And IMC

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## Abstract

This paper traces the evolutions of a new generation of students who are predominantly the 'online generation'; explores the emerging impact of this generation on industry; identifies the changing role of education from traditional classroom to an online environment; and explores the contribution related to integrated marketing communications (IMC). Educational requirements from a business perspective must incorporate global business demands; virtual learning environments progress the online generation towards a post-modern learning state. The central proposition of this paper is that the emergence of IMC in evolving industry practices is influenced by student generations who are producing a new paradigm of alignment between education and industry. This is purely a conceptual exploration using limited examples to provide some context and illustrate the questions raised for consideration.

## Introduction

The Internet has blurred distinctions between educational requirements for a new generation of learners with that of the requirements of business. The Internet culture has created a digital educational revolution and our classroom walls have become virtual with the Internet becoming students' natural environment. More advanced educational requirements, mean more efficient processes, while leaving some traditions behind. Educator's cyber-blackboard has never been so exciting allowing students to be in an endless time zone where learning and activity can take place whenever the students desires (Luck and Whiteley-De Graaf 2004a).

Virtual learning environments expand the education space and create enhanced opportunity for ongoing educational experiences. A future trend for education is towards a more active learner, participating in activities where communication is inside and outside the classroom (Northcote 2003). Practices are continually being developed by universities that suit the ever changing and evolving student cohort who requires 24/7 access to learning. The emergence of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) is evolutionary, both for marketing as a discipline and as a practice in terms of its significant contribution to the changing face of the 20th Century business environment. This paper reviews changing education practices and their relationship with evolving business needs and to IMC. We will address the way a new paradigm is emerging that supports industry in adapting to this generation of option seekers, and what can be done to align IMC education and industry for the future.

This is a conceptual inquiry into the alignment between emerging theory surrounding the value of relationship management and its contribution to the concept of interactive customer relationships and emergent practices in industry.

## Education

A population of students with increasing diversity challenges today's academics (Ekroth 1990). Students have greater autonomy and control over their learning processes and technology overcomes the many diverse student needs. Location, gender and race become irrelevant.

The role of university education in preparing graduates for workplace demands is continually being examined (Davies 1988, Rickard 2002, Rowland 1996. (Breen article). It can be assumed that skill, knowledge and practical applications acquired at university should translate into professional situations. Good practice is taught and should be grounded in good theory (Seeman, 2003).

While universities struggle to adopt the rate of the new generation of students, there has been traditionally a chasm between universities and a real world industry driven education. Technology is bridging this gap. However, online learning is sometimes viewed as an lesser form of education (Eastman and Owens-Swift 2001).

New teaching methods and flexible learning approaches are constantly being researched in education (Graham and Scarborough 1999; McLoughlin 2002). Many educators are now implementing new technology into their courses such as online syllabus, Internet term project and online homework assignments (Clarke III, Flaherty et al. 2001). The use of technology in online classrooms can encourage creative teaching and promote learning within smaller classes with students who can work on their own and, require learning flexibility (Abernathy 1999; Benbunan-Fich 1999; Eastman and Owens-Swift 2001).

## IMC and Education

Commentary both supporting and, the controversy of IMC as a concept is longstanding. The theories of IMC make perfect sense, however major obstacles to ongoing development and implementation of IMC seem to be the lack of people who understand what IMC actually is. Few texts offer a well expressed and believable rationale for IMC (Patti 2003). Academic literature is closely focused on advertising.

The essence of IMC, is building positive relationships by placing consumers or stakeholders first, and using any tools of research, information technology, and communication to meet those needs (Swain 2003). IMC provides a set of steps that are intended as a guide towards an outcome. This outcome should echo the corporate philosophy and the value proposition of the brand. All message delivery, however creative in its content should offer a familiar consistency that links the consumer with the brand and engenders a reliable and trustworthy perception of the company that encourages repeat transactions and nurture a long term relationship. Marketing communication can aid and strengthen Universities attributes. It is an integral part of the service experience from the customers' perspective (Madden and Perry 2003).

## The Online Generation

The emerging generation of managers is successfully developing entrepreneurial approaches that allow them to establish a set of processes, define the associated practices and entrust the day to day tactical activity to those who are suitably qualified. Managers of the future do not work in offices, or 9 to 5. They work remotely, using technology as their main resource. They are interested in achieving financially viable and self driven ventures. Futuristic students are often professional working adults in full time positions with computer literacy and Internet experience (Luck and Whiteley-De Graaf 2004). Essential to futuristic students is the convenience of online classes (Luck and Whiteley-De Graaf 2004). The younger generations live in an age of movement. Working overseas, an important concept that can help managers and students choose appropriate cross cultural communication technologies and tools (Winters 2001) and cultural fluency (Scott 1999). Cultural diversity can promote personal growth as well as improve the educational experience (King 1999). The futuristic student becomes Post Modern.

Marketing academics and practitioners, recognize the impact of post-modernism on consumer culture and marketing practices (Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver 2004). Contemporary teaching utilises familiar and tested practices repackaged in unconventional methods to appeal to varying cohorts.

The postmodern consumer has the inclination to purchase lifestyles, experience and emotion (Leach 2000). Therefore, universities can connect with potential and current students via constructing brand (University or course) imagery and linking experiences. Just as Australia's Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and Griffith University has done successfully. QUT have used a 'University for the Real World' campaign by having 'real' students on their web pages and ad campaigns who have 'made it in the real world' or are 'just breaking into the real world after graduation'. Griffith University have used internationally recognised advocates including Sir Bob Geldof, Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, Hiroshima's most photographed child and Ray Charles. No longer does the audience (in this case – students) need to be offered a rational benefit of study. Students can connect with 'real' people whether famous or unknowns. Marketing communication can play on emotive imagery and angles that are meaningful in terms of employer expectations, student realities and lifestyles. Post modern communications can be vague illustrations designed for arousing inquiry through the use of imagery focusing on lifestyles.

The differing approaches of traditional marketing and IMC may be considered representative of the generation gap that exists in today's business environment. In understanding the emerging independent workforce, there are some key indicators of the preference to work smarter not harder.

**Measurable Marketing: IMC and the Online Generation**

Is IMC really a new discipline in the field of marketing or is it more of a management technique? The debate continues as varied standpoints exist amid academics and practitioners (Gould 2004). Perhaps it would be better considered a process driven orientation toward ensuring that objectives are clearly charted and strategically met. One may claim IMC as the education industry's reaction to a postmodern generation

of managers emerging in industry and demanding 'measurable marketing'. Is it industry or education producing this new breed of managers? What is known, is that most organisations regard IMC to be a key competitive advantage associated with marketing, although growing evidence suggests mis-communication and ineffective communication internally and externally is what is really happening (Schultz and Kitchen 2004).

**IMC and Industry needs**

The concept of Integrated Marketing Communications evolved largely as an attempt to synergise traditional marketing communications functions. It was recognised that this relationship would, in the ideal scenario, perpetuate itself beyond the single sale cycle (Duncan, 2002). The firm has become the 'saleable' brand (Schultz and Kitchen 2004), including organisational identity an culture in which it operates (Swain 2004), personality and image.

Today's economy is global, and as communication and information technologies continue to develop, so too does the general business population's acknowledgement of systems and processes. These allow a consistent and evaluative analysis of past behaviour, as key indicators of future potential. IMC was not created so much, as it emerged as part of a natural revolution of the business environment. It can conciliate industry moving toward a range of marketing communication that clearly see the consumer a winner (Kitchen, Brignell et al. 2004).

IMC seeks a cross-functional commitment by blending and coordinating different communication tools for a brand. An integrated one-voice marketing communications campaign translates into a company wide commitment to a consistent, transparent and customer-centric journey toward message delivery. This commitment reflects cohesion and requires an internal communication within organisations that for the most part, was previously absent.

**Implications**

Technology can enhance learning experiences. Critical to marketing education and to what is applied, is a reflection of the real world (Luck and Whiteley-De Graaf 2004a). Employers and industry demand skills from graduates including creativity and ability to communicate interpersonally and to possess problem solving skills (Kennedy, Lawton et al. 2001). Industry wants people who can think. Developmental and conceptual skills are key to the functional application of theory. This raises the question regarding the best way to measure the intangibles of human behaviour. To what extent do relationship skills, key concepts of IMC practice (Duncan 2002) play a part in successful marketing and how we develop theory that supports the ongoing measurement and evaluation of human interaction, what is it's relationship to theoretical concepts?

Creating an environment whereby students have choice in their learning activities, supports students' responsibility to higher order thinking and research skills. Do industry want a student cohort who can memorise by rote? No, they want students with generic skills, such as intellectual curiosity, critical thinking, effective communication, problem solving, logical and independent thought. Personal attributes

such as being creative, possessing intellectual rigour, imagination and possessing values such as ethics, integrity & tolerance ((AHEC) 1992; McMulle 1998). It is essential that theory reflects societies changing requirements, that education supports industry so that a real and lasting relevance for theory continues to exist. Educational preferences and priorities are key access points that align industry and theory.

## Conclusions

Marketing managers for highly intangible services such as education, may have been overlooking opportunities to strengthen their brands through IMC (Grove, Carlson et al. 2002). If this field is to continue its academic and practically oriented maturity, education and acceptance, we cannot ignore the demands from students and business. Students are consumers demanding value driven education. The future of education can only become more customer focused given the changes in lifestyle. A reflection of societies changing needs is as relevant to education as industry. We must begin to address the questions that surround marketing theory, to be with the tensions between theory in practice and the relationship to the evolution of society. Innovation is perpetual and theory must evolve in alignment to retain its relevance to industry.

The online educational environment has evolved with students demanding that learning have a direct link between study and work environments (Northcote 2003). However, key questions still remain. Virtual learning environments can create opportunity for educational institutions, but practices must continually be developed with constant monitoring being essential.

## Future Research

This paper has examined the role of IMC within an industry driven educational context and conclusions can be drawn. Clearly, as trends towards globalisation increase, the distinction of consumer differences based on different culture and lifestyle will cause educators to focus on understanding behaviours that define specific segments to improve education. The applications of IMC can help marketers and educators integrate structure focusing on consumer demands and needs and adopt programs and tools that promote this effectively for both current and potential customer segments.

In addition, researchers have typically studied the effectiveness of marketing communication options in relative isolation, failing to recognise that potential interactions may exist among the marketing communication options that can significantly affect consumer response to any one option. Future research can incorporate the skills required by employers and the skills undertaken by students.

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