

Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) Used in Food Truck Business: A Case Study of Five Burger Food Trucks in Bangkok's Metropolitan Area

Tonghathai Likhitweerawong
Graduate School of Business
Assumption University, Thailand

Kitikorn Dowpiset, Ph.D.
Associate Dean
Graduate School of Business
Assumption University, Thailand

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine how Integrated Marketing Communications or IMC is put into practice by the management of food trucks in Bangkok area. In this study, data was collected from interviews with ten respondents who are the managers of five food trucks in Bangkok. Contextual observations were also made on the site of the food trucks and on other communication channels. Data was analyzed by content analysis and categorized into themes corresponding to each of the five key features of IMC. The insights gained from this study shows that IMC as adopted by the management of the food trucks has the five key features of IMC. The findings can help the management of the food truck business or new entrepreneurs in effectively applying IMC in their business practices.

Keywords: Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC), food truck, small to medium-sized enterprises

Introduction

The food truck business in Thailand is quite new and the context of the market, consumer preference, and even the culture might be different from the popular and successful food truck business elsewhere in the world. The restaurant industry is one of the business sectors that are already extremely highly competitive where customers have freedom of choices with so many kinds of alternatives. Therefore it is vital that management of a food truck business to understand how to communicate with their customers and their potential customers in order to help them to be aware of this emerging trend, and to convince them to eventually buy from food trucks.

Food truck is a new creative and strikingly attractive business model emerging in our society (Panya, 2014). Therefore, it will be very useful to conduct a research to

understand how the people who run food trucks can apply Integrated Marketing Communications in their business. This research was conducted using qualitative method due to the small number of this kind of business within the Bangkok area. The aim was to gain insights from the management of food trucks regarding their use of Integrated Marketing Communications. The findings from this research provides new insights and more understanding of the problems besetting the food track business.

Although Integrated Marketing Communications requires a lot of dedication and effort from an organization, it also delivers a number of benefits (Smith and Taylor, 2004). It can help the business to have a competitive advantage associated with marketing over the competitors (Kitchen, et al, 2004). It can also help the business to have an increase in sales and profits while also saving money and time (Fam, 2001).

This research used qualitative research conducted through interviews and observation checklists. The focus were food trucks selling American-style fast-food/ street food (such as burgers/ hotdogs/ sandwiches) along the main roads of Bangkok metropolitan areas such as Silom Road, Kaosarn Road, Sukhumvit 38, Sukhumvit 55 and Phaholyothin Road. The target respondents were the managers of the food trucks.

The two objectives of the study were: (1) to find out the marketing communication practice used by the management of the food truck business; (2) to determine and understand how the Integrated Marketing Communications employed by the managements of food trucks contribute to the success of the food truck business.

Review of Literature

Integrated Marketing Communications

The term Integrated Marketing Communications or IMC has been around for the past few decades. It has emerged mainly due to changes in three main areas; the market place, media and communications, and the consumer. During its early years, IMC had always been in the “paradox of conceptualization” (Kwangwoon and Ilchul, 1982) which means, according to the general social science study methodology, IMC was back then a brand new theory or concept that started with a hypothesis which was later tested by empirical studies, and in turn, the results from the tested hypothesis was then adapted in order to analyze the phenomena of implementation of the Integrated Marketing Communications concept.

However, until today, there has already been a wide breadth of conceptualizations for Integrated Marketing Communications suggested by many scholars, and the concept of Integrated Marketing Communications has become the accepted norm of businesses on the global stage (Kitchen, et al, 2004). Nevertheless, Integrated Marketing Communications still possesses dynamism as its main characteristic. This is why the conceptualization process of Integrated Marketing Communications has taken over a

decade to be outlined and accepted in the international scale. Moreover, along with the endless development of technologies, especially in communications, there is also no absolute end in sight for the conceptualization process of Integrated Marketing Communications (Kitchen, et al, 2004). Therefore, Integrated Marketing Communications concept will be discussed in following paragraphs according to the conceptualization for the term suggested by many scholars and researchers that has developed over time.

One of the early definitions that have been the most cited is the one of AAA (1989) or the American Association of Advertising. It regards Integrated Marketing Communications as a concept, but not a process of marketing communications that uses multiple communications tools to communicate with one voice. However, Kitchen, et al. (2004) points out the inadequacy of this definition is that it only focuses on a bundle of communication tools to be used, which can be managed internally (inside-out approach), and in contrast with the outside-in approach that also has to consider customer as well.

However, the more recent definitions and conceptualization add considerable value to the term Integrated Marketing Communications. Kitchen, et al. (2010) discussed that the definition suggested by Schultz (2004) seems to be more appropriate to the twenty-first century, as he acknowledges the importance of Integrated Marketing Communications as a strategic business process. It is also suggested that Integrated Marketing Communications employs holistic brand and marketing communications, evaluation and measurement of the process, focus on customer and prospect, as well as other internal and external stakeholders.

It seems evident now that Integrated Marketing Communications has become no longer limited as a communication process, but it has also associated with brand and management, and has become more than an inside-out approach for bringing promotional mix elements together (Kitchen, et al, 2004). Kitchen, et al. (2004) discussed that the term Integrated Marketing Communications as described by Schultz (1993) is the process of developing and implementing various means of persuasive communications with customers and prospects over time. The goal of Integrated Marketing Communications is initially to influence or affect the behavior of the customers who are the audiences of each selected communications source. Integrated Marketing Communications considers all brand contacts or touch points which a customer or prospect has with the product or service as potential communications channels. In sum, the Integrated Marketing Communications process starts with the customer or prospect and then works back to determine and define the forms and methods through which persuasive communications programs should be developed.

According to Shimp (2000) each concept of Integrated Marketing Communications suggested by most of the scholars or researchers contains five significant features, namely:

- The process should start with the customer or prospect and then work backward to the decision on the usage of different types of brand communicator.

- Integrated Marketing Communications should use all forms of communication and all sources of brand or company contact or touch points as prospective message delivery channels.
- Integrated Marketing Communications should speak with a single voice.
- Integrated Marketing Communications requires the establishment of a relationship between the brand and the customer in order to be successful.
- The communication effort should be directed at the consumer to affect behavior of consumer.

Research Framework and Methodology

Research Framework

The researcher adopted the concept of the Integrated Marketing Communications introduced by Shimp (2000) as part of the conceptual framework of this study (Figure1)

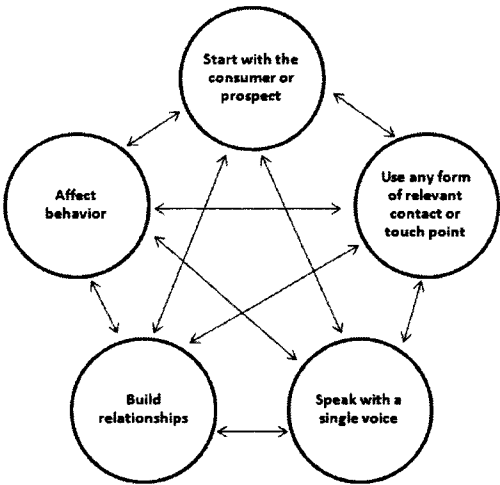


Figure 1. IMC’s key features
 Source: Adapted from Shimp (2000) for this study.

Research Questions:
 The following research questions specifically refer to the IMC as used by the food truck business:

- Does IMC *start with the consumer or prospect*?
- Does IMC *use any form of relevant contact or touch point*?
- Does IMC *speak with a single voice*?
- Does IMC *build relationships*?
- Does IMC *affect behavior*?

Research Methodology

The case study research was used as the qualitative research method. The purpose was to use empirical evidence from real people in real organizations (Brikci & Green, 2007), which in this case came from the management of food trucks that operated in Bangkok's metropolitan areas. The evidence was mainly derived from personal interviews, and some of other useful data was also drawn from contextual observations, which are both on-site and media observations.

The qualitative approach used in this research aimed to understand the perspectives of participants from food truck businesses regarding Integrated Marketing Communications and their adoption of the Integrated Marketing Communications in breadth and in depth.

The researcher used *semi-structured interviews* as the main method of data collection, where the interviews were conducted on the basis of a loose structure made up of open-ended questions framing the area to be studied (Brikci & Green, 2007). The raw data from all the interview sessions were collected through voice memo recording and field note taking.

Moreover, the researcher also employed *contextual observations* throughout the period to overcome the discrepancies between the information received from the respondents and what the respondents actually did. By carrying out the contextual observations, the researcher was able to capture some interesting information that might have been overlooked or not covered by the interview and also uncovered some behavior which the participants themselves may have not been aware of (Brikci & Green, 2007).

Results and Discussion

Content analysis was used in this research to analyze raw data retrieved from the observations and interviews. The contents from interviews were put into a table and separated into parts according to each question in interview guideline. The contents from observations were put into a table according to observation checklists. The data from both interviews and observations were analyzed and coded into themes corresponding to each of the key characteristic of Integrated Marketing Communications which are shown below.

IMC's features	Corresponding themes
(1) Start with the consumer or prospect	(1) Factors that affect the brand communicator choice
(2) Use any form of relevant contact or touch point	(2) Types of communications tools used
(3) Speak with a single voice	(3) Message contents in different communicators
(4) Build relationships	(4) Relationship with customer
(5) Affect behavior	(5) Results from the marketing communications

Research Findings

The results findings will be discussed in five parts, each part is devoted to each of the five key components of the Integrated Marketing Communications.

Start with Consumer or Prospect

When asked what determined the tools and contents of the marketing communications used, all of the respondents indicated that they did not consider the customers as the primary determiner of how and what to communicate in the first place. Some of the respondents also mentioned that what affected their decision the most was their financial capability. Some indicated that they just chose the easiest and most familiar way of communication to start with at the early stage in their marketing communication program. Some of them mentioned both factors.

The interviews results align with Fam (2001) that all of the respondents tend to favor tools that they have seen effectively used by others or the tools that they are familiar with, such as the online outlets.

Furthermore, all of the respondents agreed on the point that they actually considered the customers in their decision for communication tools and messages, especially the use of social media.

Use any form of relevant contact or touch point

The results drawn for this feature of Integrated Marketing Communications were unanimous. None of the respondents used mass media, such as television and newspaper advertisement for marketing. All of them mainly used the online social media tools like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. They also promoted themselves by selling in pop-up store events occasionally. The result conforms to Gabrielli and Balboni's study (2010) that most firms are still focused on single communication activities and do not have much variety of tools across both mass media and online or digital media. The result can also be linked to the previous section that all the food trucks have constraints in choosing mass media as communications tools due to lack of internal financial resources and knowledge of various communication tools. However, regardless of the lack in actual use of the mass media, some respondents (40 %) indicated that they realized the impact that mass media can make to boost business sales.

Moreover, aside from the online marketing communications tools, all of the respondents pinpointed that another vital tool of their marketing communications towards customer is the appearance of their trucks. The attractive and unique decoration of the trucks can increase brand visibility.

Speak with a single voice

A relatively high proportion of the respondents (60 %) could be considered to have adopted the synergy and consistency of the message being communicated to customers. These respondents consistently and frequently communicated the same message to customers over time across all of their communications means. Another 40 % of the respondents also have the unison of messages in their marketing communications; however, they do not communicate as frequently as the other group of respondents. This smaller portion of the respondents shows the same implication as the result from Tsikirayi, Muchenje and Katsidzira (2013) that there are a number of companies that are not so much engaged in consistent marketing communications, or do not communicate frequently.

The messages being communicated to customer are mainly about the sites where the food trucks were located and their brand statement. All of the respondents regarded the taste, innovation and quality of their products and services as their main brand statement.

Build relationships

All of the respondents have not yet started any kind of formal customer loyalty programs such as stamp collection. . However, some respondents were aware of its importance plan to utilize this in the future.

The majority of respondents (80 %) were focused in retaining their current customers by enhancing customer experience via social media and face to face interactions. This result corresponds with the finding from MacGowan and MaKeown (2013) that companies developed through social contacts and relationships mediated on personal face to face basis.

Affect behavior

Results reveal that all respondents used marketing communications with the expectation of raising awareness of the brand among customers. All of them claimed that they were successful in this regard. Baidya and Maity (2010) indicated that Integrated Marketing Communications has significant and positive effect on sales. It is found that their marketing communications created awareness and positive perception among people especially on social media.

Conclusions

To sum up the findings from this research, the researcher has developed an Integrated Marketing Communication process diagram as shown below.

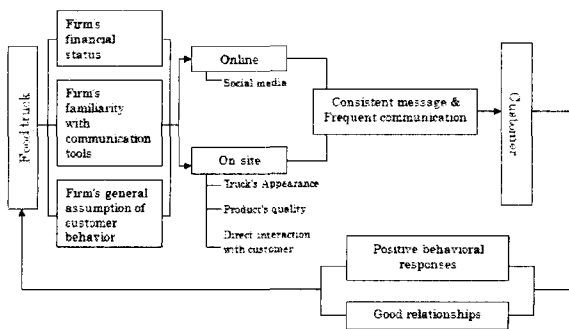


Figure 2. IMC's key features used in food truck business

From this diagram, the study has shown that the management of the food trucks usually started with the business' financial factors and their feeling of familiarity as determinants of what communication tools to use and generally assumed that most people use a lot of social media.

The management of food trucks use only two main types of communication tools, namely: (1) online social media tools like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter; (2) they communicate through on-site communications such as the truck's appearance, product's taste, quality and innovation, and face-to-face interaction with consumers. There was a lack of the use mass media channels.

There is also an evidence that the messages communicated to customers across all channels were in sync, consistently done, and were almost identical in all communication channels. Moreover, the managements of food trucks also used all communication tools to communicate frequently with customer, and not only an ad hoc or one time communication.

For relationship building with customers, they focused on direct experience through face-to-face interactions. There is no use of any loyalty program.

Thus, the practice of Integrated Marketing Communications by the management of food trucks helped the business to gain more brand awareness and boost sales.

References

- Anonymous. (2006). The importance of marketing strategy. *Strategic Direction*, 22 (8), 23-25. doi: 10.1108/02580540610675425
- Baidya, M., & Maity, B. (2010). Effectiveness of integrated marketing communications. *Journal of Indian Business Research*, 2 (1), 23-31. doi: 10.1108/17554191011032929

- Brikci, N., & Green, J. (2007). *A guide to using qualitative research Methodology*. Retrieved from Medecins Sans Frontieres Web site: <http://fieldresearch.msf.org/msf/bitstream/10144/84230/1/Qualitative%20research%20methodology.pdf>
- Eagle, L., & Kitchen, P. J. (2000). IMC, brand communications, and corporate cultures. *European Journal of Marketing*, 34 (5/6), 667 – 686. doi: 10.1108/03090560010321983
- Fam, K. S., (2001). Differing views and use of integrated marketing communications – findings from a survey of New Zealand small businesses. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, 8 (3), 205-214. doi: 10.1108/EUM00000000006821
- Gabrielli, V., & Balboni, B. (2010). SME practice towards integrated marketing communications. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 28 (3), 275-290. doi: 10.1108/02634501011041426
- Gilmore, A., Carson, D., Grant, K. (2001), SME marketing in practice. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 19(1), 6-11. doi: 10.1108/02634500110363583
- Holm, O. (2006). Integrated marketing communication: from tactics to strategy. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 11 (1), 23-33. doi: 10.1108/13563280610643525
- Kasikorn Research Center. (2014). Retrieved from <https://www.kasikornresearch.com/th/k-econanalysis/pages/ViewSummary.aspx?docid=33507>
- Kitchen, P. J., Brignell, J., Li, T., & Jones, G. S. (2004). The emergence of IMC: a theoretical perspective. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 44 (1), 19-30. doi: 10.1017/S0021849904040048
- Kitchen, P. J., & Burgmann, I. (2010). Integrated Marketing Communication. In *Wiley International Encyclopedia of Marketing*. Retrieved from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781444316568.wiem04001/full>
- Kitchen, P. J., Schultz, D. E., Kim, I, Han, D., & Li, T. (2004). Will agencies ever “get” (or understand) IMC?. *European Journal of Marketing*, 38 (11/12), 1417-1436. doi: 10.1108/03090560410560173
- Manager. (2014). Retrieved Jan 26, 2015, from <http://www.manager.co.th/iBizchannel/ViewNews.aspx?NewsID=9570000133804>

- Ministry of Tourism and Sports. (2011). *The National tourism development plan, 2012-2016*. Retrieved from http://marketingdatabase.tat.or.th/ewt_dl_link.php?nid=24
- Motor Trivia. (2014). Retrieved Jan 26, 2015, from <http://www.motortrivia.com/2014/report-02/203/dfsk-motor-expo-2014.html>
- Office of Small and Medium Enterprises Promotion. Ministerial Regulations (2002). Retrieved from <http://www.sme.go.th>
- Panya, Duangkamol. (2014). *Food from the back of a truck: the wheels are rolling on Bangkok's latest food trend*. Retrieved from <http://www.bangkokpost.com/print/412903/>
- Prachachat. (2014). Retrieved Jan 26, 2015, from http://m.prachachat.net/news_detail.php?newsid=1417612507
- Shimp, T. A. (2000). *Advertising Promotion: Supplemental Aspects of Integrated Marketing Communications* (5th ed.). Fort Worth, TX: The Dryden Press, Harcourt College Publishers.
- Shimp, T. A., & Andrew J. C. (2013). *Advertising, promotion, and other aspects of Integrated Marketing Communications* (9th ed.). South-Western, OH: Cengage Learning.
- Simpson, M., Padmore, J., Taylor, & N., Frecknall-Hughes, J. (2006), Marketing in small and medium sized enterprises. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour & Research*, 12 (6), 361 -387. doi: 10.1108/13552550610710153
- Siu, W., & Kirby, D. A. (1998). Approaches to small firm marketing. *European Journal of Marketing*, 32 (1/2), 40 – 60. doi: 10.1108/03090569810197417
- Smith, P. R., & Taylor, J. (2004). *Marketing Communications: an Integrated Approach* (4th ed.). Malta: Gutenberg Press.
- Tourism Authority of Thailand. (2015). *Tourism Thailand.org/marketing database*. Retrieved from http://marketingdatabase.tat.or.th/ewt_news.php?nid=659
- Tsikirayi, C. M. R., Muchenje, B., & Katsidzira, Z. (2013, January).
- Impact of integrated marketing communications mix (IMCM) in small to medium enterprises (SMEs) in Zimbabwe as a marketing tool. *Research in Business & Economics Journal*, 7, 167-178. Retrieved from www.aabri.com/manuscripts/121362.pdf

Tsimonis, G., & Dimitriadis, S. (2014). Brand strategies in social media. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 32 (3), 328-344. doi: 10.1108/MIP-04-2013-0056
& *Planning*, 32 (3), 328-344. doi: 10.1108/MIP-04-2013-0056