Finding your level in integrated communications

In the second of two articles, John Griffiths, Planningaboveandbeyond, looks at how integrated campaigns may be developed, and the implications for agencies

THE term 'integrated communications' has lost much of its meaning, as it has become bandied about – just as it became partly discredited when vocal proponents went through successive attempts to bundle or unbundle the separate offerings.

Put simply, integrated communications can be seen as the attempt by agencies – of all kinds – to secure more business by bringing together a number of separate communication disciplines, in the hope that by doing so turnover can be increased as clients put more (or all) eggs in the one basket; or that the different margin structures of different businesses can magically meld, so that one and one can equal three or even four; or maybe that offering clients whatever they want makes it difficult or impossible for them to take their business anywhere else.

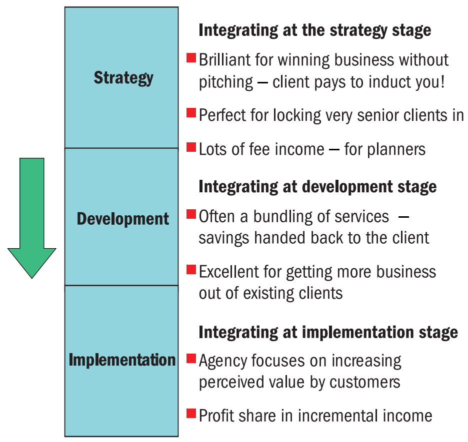
It has not proved to be the case.

Clients have, in most instances, refused to place the entire clutch of eggs in any basket, demanding instead integrated thinking (apparently for similar retainers as those offered to single-discipline agencies). The bringing together of different income streams has been a nightmare: robbing below-the-line Peters to subsidise above-the-line Pauls, or, still worse, assembling federations of buccaneers who proceed to cut each others' throats rather than co-operating to deliver something to the client. And the construction of extended communications supermarkets does not appear to have made clients a whit more loyal.

This is an account planner's perspective on integrated communications, since account planning has often found itself cast as the glue that holds the different pieces together – with the danger that planning gets blamed when things come unstuck. In my first article (1), I covered how planning needs to deliver within the business model of each individual discipline, and how the integrated account planner needs to harness the generalist and specialist skills of the rest of the team. In this article I want to consider where and how integration happens within the development process, and how the planning contribution varies depending on the agency's own objectives.

EXHIBIT 1

Three stages of campaign development



Phases of campaign development

The development of every campaign can be considered in three phases: strategic formulation, campaign development and implementation. Each communication discipline has its own development model, with related timelines.

There is the very practical problem that when an integrated team is brought together, the point at which the strategy moves into creative development and then into implementation differs by discipline. Agencies typically address this in two ways: either they concentrate on developing as much of the campaign as they can on the drawing board at the strategy stage; or they take the marketing objectives and develop a single campaign theme at the development stage, looking to draw the best out of each individual discipline working together. But the implementation stages are in themselves so different in timing and nature that, in practice, co-ordination becomes more and more difficult. Everyone is racing for the finishing line.

What this actually means is that although agencies claim that they offer integration at every stage, in my experience integration has taken place either at the strategic or the campaign development level, and there is never time or budget to ensure that integration happens consistently all the way through to implementation. So in reality every campaign has a unique centre of gravity where the integration of the different elements takes place.

Corresponding to the different emphasis on the three stages of campaign development, there are three strategies that agencies (and their clients) can adopt (Exhibit 1).

Integration at strategy stage

Agencies that integrate at the strategic stage usually mutate the planning function into a variation of marketing and brand consultancy. Of course, clients may choose to do this themselves, but it is a classic opportunity for the agency to demonstrate its role as a business partner. The brand character is defined, then executed using a 'media-neutral' communications strategy. In practice, this means that much time is spent hammering out the details together with the client.

This is a highly effective way of winning and locking in clients, because very

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often it is done at board level, upstream of the marketing department. This is how to win business without a pitch – and a perfect justification for the agency having a dedicated strategic function as a profit centre in its own right. And it is usually extremely profitable, with planners charging their time out by the hour and spending most of those hours doing consultancy for the client. In effect the client is paying the agency to learn about their business – as is true of most consultancy operations.

However, the downside of integration at the strategic level is that most of the planning happens in client meetings, not with the development team. The honed campaign brief emerges from the away-day, but there is little time to shape it further. In fact, to challenge it would undermine the process from which it came – with which the client is fully in agreement. In principle, this places the onus on the account planner to keep the brief on track and to adapt it to ensure that it works for each part of the account team. In practice, it can seem as if the brief is laid out on tablets of stone.

The upside is that the creative work can be presented to clients as the product of a brief in the development of which they have played a major role, so it should be much easier to sell in creative work. However, this also gives too much room for post-rationalisation: virtually every creative variation fits the grand strategic idea and, to the untutored eye, the resulting campaign does not look integrated. Everything has been based around a single strategic thought, but that thought does not have enough room to grow during the development process. And the development team (most of whom have not been present during the strategic formulation) are restricted to simple, formulaic implementation.

Integration at the strategic level is an established method for locking in clients, though I would argue that the process usually does not result in an integrated campaign at the implementation stage. Nonetheless, this approach, beneficial as it is for agency new business departments, also benefits client organisations. The client organisation develops a much clearer view of what the communications task is from board level and down through the marketing and communications departments.

I still recall with disbelief a meeting with a financial services client with whom the agency had been doing brand consultancy for several months, running a number of syndicates to help middle management own and apply a brand positioning the board had bought into. We were wheeled from one meeting at which we were facilitators to another where we became an agency supplier. The participants were exactly the same as in the preceding meeting. We walked out with the account minutes later. So if you want to use integration to win new clients, re-badge your planners as consultants, draw up your fee structures and schedule that away-day.

Integration at the development stage

This is when the client issues an integrated brief to the assembled specialists from the different disciplines. They then respond in one of three ways:

- *Thematic linking*. This is when a single campaign thought is worked through in each of the different disciplines. It may involve developing a separate brief for each part of the campaign, but each brief is subordinate to an overall campaign brief. Each discipline is encouraged to push the idea as far as it can. This approach gives considerable autonomy for best practice to each discipline.
- *Visual Linking*. This is when the art direction for the campaign is fixed and applied to everything. It usually derives from an advertising idea, which is then applied elsewhere. The resulting campaign looks integrated. The danger is that the other elements become window-dressing and lack selling power of their own. Advertising ideas do not necessarily translate well into communication channels, which are evaluated by their ability to generate response or interactivity.
- *Association*. This falls between points one and two. The individual disciplines are given autonomy, but encouraged to create linkages which may include a tagline or a logo or a loose thematic link. This can barely be said to be integration at all. The benefit is that each discipline is given full autonomy, and so can function unconstrained by a single, confining brand thought.

All three approaches place huge responsibility on the planner to stop the various elements spinning off by themselves. Visual identity can be policed within the account handling and creative function, but deciding how much latitude to give mailing, which is to be evaluated purely by response, comes down to judgment and constant watchfulness.

Box 1: Honda Accord

The Honda Accord was launched through CDP. The client briefed the agency to provide a complete package from TV ads to point of sale.

The integrated account group had a single planner, but separate advertising, DM and PR teams. The planner worked with the account director to prepare a common campaign brief.

A targeting team ensured that the several target audiences were consistently defined, to cater equally for buying (eg) national newspaper space or mailing lists from brokers.

The ad creative was developed first, and the concept then developed through the line, but enough time was allowed for the DM creatives to adapt the concept for direct marketing – in fact one of the DM pieces that evolved from the ads won a gold award for automotive DM.

Timescales dictated that some mailers had to be sent out before the advertising shoots, so it was impossible to use common artwork, but the creative concept of a mirrored maze could be communicated without needing to use the ad imagery.

Integration went right through to the telephone call centre, where operators were briefed to incorporate key ad messages in their scripts.

Advertising agencies using integrated teams may feel instinctively that the creative idea for the campaign has to come from an advertising idea. So the rest of the team have to wait until the advertising idea is conceived (and tested) before they can get to work. This serial approach to creative work may result in strong advertising ideas, but there is no guarantee that they can be translated effectively into other disciplines, largely because, correspondingly, the rest of the team have less time to develop the idea.

And when it comes to presenting the integrated campaign to the client, the structure of the client's own marketing function may be such that the campaign has to be unbundled and sold in piecemeal. So there is no guarantee that the final campaign will be integrated.

Most integrated campaigns are produced using this model of integration, and the level of integration is primarily judged by how the campaign concept is carried across communication channels: the creative work either hangs together or it doesn't, whatever the brief behind it.

The benefit of this type of integration is client-focused like the first model: there are fewer profit centres to feed and fewer teams to brief. The agency owns co-ordination of the integration process, so again there is less work for the client. It is a great way for agencies to get more work out of existing clients, as new disciplines are drafted in to make their lives easier. The more overtaxed the client, the greater the agency's chances of success. The danger, of course, is that this is a volume offer, where services are bundled together and the savings are handed back to the client.

And it often falls down at implementation level. The campaign may feel very integrated on the starting blocks but it won't necessarily look that way when it is implemented. Consumers may not even notice that it is integrated. And even if they do, what is the commercial value of them making the connection? Does it lead to increased involvement? A higher rate of sale? Or is it just window-dressing? For a case study, see Box 1.

Integration at the implementation stage

I am proposing this third approach as an alternative model, to produce integration that is consumer-focused. Using this model, an integrated campaign can be critiqued on the basis of whether the consumer notices and cares whether the elements are integrated. In other words, integration needs to add value to the consumer experience of the brand.

This is similar to the way film and TV programme production companies evaluate what they produce. It is taking a long time for the penny to drop that communications do not promote products, so much as actually being the product. The consumer's involvement in communications can be at least as much as that in the products being promoted.

'Agencies should function as the programmers for the brand'

Furthermore, communication channels that create high involvement can potentially generate their own income streams. The agency would look to use channels that could create new income streams, of which they were entitled to a share. A campaign developed using this approach would have revenue targets of its own, alongside the marketing objectives for the client.

The centre of gravity in the development process for this third model does not lie in the client's boardroom or for that matter in the agency account group, but in getting noticed, persuading consumers to give a damn. If the campaign creates sufficient consumer involvement, then ultimately the formulation of strategy or the style of co-ordination becomes incidental – integration gets payback. For a case study, see Box 2.)

Box 2: Tango

Britvic Soft Drinks ran a Tango campaign in which the advertising by HHCL included an offer to buy an orange Tango doll for £2.99. David Atter, marketing manager at the time (1995) was initially sceptical that Tango drinkers would spend six times the price of a can of Tango to buy an orange doll.

However, the concept was carefully researched, with respondents pushed hard to explain why they would be willing to buy a plastic doll.

In the event, the campaign sold no less than 300,000 dolls, making a good profit for Britvic.

Atter commented 'It worked precisely because it was a rather silly plastic doll that caught people's imaginations, which is why we went ahead, despite the capital risk of buying all that plastic from the Far East'.

The effect of the offer was that sales increased enough to more than cover the costs, and more than £1 million was added to turnover from selling merchandise. It is a rare example of an offer worth many times the value of the product generating massive consumer involvement and spend.

Changing the agency financial model

The benefit is more than financial. By creating work that adds value to the consumer experience of the brand, agencies make it much more difficult for clients to move their business elsewhere without there being a direct knock-on effect to the business, so agencies would be protecting themselves against client moves. Agency remuneration would be linked to the client's bottom line, rather than to their cost of doing business.

This should not be a pipe dream. With digital TV having penetrated over a third of the market and the internet at long last moving towards subscription models, it seems anachronistic that agencies continue to function as suppliers, bemoaning dwindling margins and loss of influence with the client. Surely agencies should function as the programmers for the brand, and need to reshape their financial structures to make the most of this? ■

1. J Griffiths: 'Above and beyond advertising planning'. *Admap*, Feb 2002.

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