

# INTEGRATED COMMUNICATIONS: A REPORT FROM THE FIELD

BY MICHAEL WITKOSKI

During fall 2001, Michael Witkoski interviewed nine communicators about integrated communications. This article examines six issues that arose during those interviews and discusses the implications these issues may have on the practice and future of integrated communications.

## INTRODUCTION: THE INTERVIEWS AND THE PARTICIPANTS

Speak with nine professional communicators about integrated communications (IC) and you discover confusion over what IC is and what it does, disputes as to what activities are properly part of the profession, and recognition of the importance of evaluation, coupled with the admission that we just do not do enough of it. Clearly, these are interesting times for the communications profession.

The days before discovery becomes orthodoxy are among the most fertile in any field, and the early stages of a discipline are a time for experimentation and flexibility. Integrated communications currently enjoys that enviable position. This study is based on a series of interviews that help show how a small, but representative, group of communications professionals (seven men, two women) are literally creating the field as they practice it. Participants in the interviews spanned the range of organizations involved with integrated communications — agencies, consultants, non-profits, manufacturing companies, governmental entities, financial institutions, real estate developers, cultural groups, academics and the media.

From these conversations, six broad ideas about integrated communications emerged. While some practitioners may hold divergent, even contradictory, views on these issues, they are central to IC as it is currently practiced. Briefly, they are:

- IC is widely accepted among professional communicators.
- There is no commonly agreed upon definition of IC.
- The practice of IC can be a source of confusion.
- Organizations often practice IC successfully while lacking formal "knowledge" of the discipline.
- Organizational barriers to IC continue to exist.
- Evaluation, or measurement, remains the weakest aspect of IC.

As one can see from these various points, the interviews revealed that considerable diversity exists in what communications professionals think and what they practice with regard to integrated communi-

cations. This diversity exists not only between organizations, but frequently within them. In fact, it is common for these professionals to firmly espouse a theoretical view of integrated communications and then cheerfully outline their successes with a rather different, if not totally opposite, practice. When it comes to this paradoxical aspect of communications, it seems as if we are still far from fully integrated (Witkoski, 2001).

In a sense, this article itself incorporates much of that paradox. While the tools and technology of IC are only a small portion of the entire discipline, this article focuses on those tactical points, rather than the strategic aspects of IC. The fact that all of the practitioners interviewed agreed that IC is more than message delivery tactics, but then unanimously

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focused on precisely those features, tells us something very important about IC at this time. Therefore, while the relationship between organization and customer (or constituent) as embodied by the message lies at the heart of IC, that relationship is admittedly slighted in this article. The ensuing discussions are more about specific implementations, whether of a particular campaign or of an individual set of communication vehicles, than about overall visions.

## IC ISSUE ONE: THE IMPORTANCE OF IC IS WIDELY ACCEPTED

The varied participants engaged in these dialogues all had not only heard of integrated communications, but were aware of most of its premises, practices and results. In a cost-conscious time (when "inte-

#### **PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN THE INTERVIEWS INCLUDED:**

\* The senior advisor (equivalent to a vice president) of an international communication agency, headquartered in Canada.

\* The president of a national communication agency originally based in South Carolina, but with an extensive coast-to-coast client base.

\* An associate dean of the University of South Carolina College of Journalism and Mass Communications, formerly news and general manager of some of the East Coast's most highly rated television stations.

\* The founder and president of a marketing and communications agency specializing in Hispanic consumers.

\* The executive director of an international import/export consortium based in Columbia, SC, the state's capital, who is also on the board of a regional musical festival.

\* The executive director of one of South Carolina's largest and most active philanthropic foundations.

\* The associate director for community and media relations of a premium automotive manufacturer with a major production facility in upstate South Carolina.

\* The executive director of a regional government alcohol and drug abuse prevention agency.

\* The vice president of marketing and community services for a regional financial institution and formerly director of public relations and marketing for a premier master-planned community in central South Carolina.

The sessions were more conversations than highly structured interviews. After a brief autobiographical introduction, participants gave their definition of integrated communications then expanded it with specific examples from their professional experience and concluded with a forecast of the future of integrated communications.

grated" might be a synonym for "lean" or perhaps even "down-sized") all types of contemporary organizations recognize the vital importance of successful IC. All of the organizations represented here certainly understand the essential role of communications and the discussants clearly believed that integrated communications — whatever it is and however it is implemented — is central to what they do and what their organizations seek to achieve. However, aside from the broadest generalizations, they (and their organizations) defined integrated communications in differing fashions when they addressed specific applications of the discipline. That leads to the second issue.

#### **IC ISSUE TWO: A GENERAL "WORKING DEFINITION" OF IC EXISTS, BUT THERE IS NO SINGLE, CONCISE AND GENERALLY ACCEPTED DEFINITION**

As even a quick review of the current literature reveals, certain latitude exists in the definition of integrated communications — how it is practiced, what its benefits are and how it should be evaluated (Belch, 2001; Smith, et. al., 2000; Swain, et. al, 2001). The interviews for this article reflect that uncertainty.

To begin with, participants readily acknowledged the vital role of the audience (consumer, customer, constituent) in successful integrated communications. However, this aspect of the discipline quickly receded as discussions focused more on specific tactics, techniques and technologies of communication. The audience re-emerged as a component of these specific points. For example, the director of marketing and PR for the master-planned community was emphatic about the need to include children as a key component in her audience of family homebuyers. Since she had this appreciation, her communication tactics included child-oriented vehicles such as puzzles, games and coloring books, all related to the marketed community.

However, while participants acknowledged the importance of their audiences, the fact that the audiences per se received such little overt attention during these discussions indicates that a significant weakness may exist in the generally accepted definition of IC as it is currently practiced.

On a more technical level, while participants concurred that integrated communications is the intelligent merging of all communication vehicles available to an organization, beyond that it became increasingly difficult to find common ground for how rigorously organizations defined IC either as a concept or as an application. There is a division between those organizations that see IC as a separate discipline and seek to enlarge its scope and those organizations that regard their current activities as already encompassing IC and therefore do not seek to expand IC's role.

#### **THE SUCCESS THAT IC CURRENTLY ENJOYS IS ONLY THE THRESHOLD OF ITS POSSIBILITIES.**

Participants whose organizations are more concerned with communication's methods rather than its effects focused on the theoretical aspects of IC and were attentive to "mixing and matching" the available channels of communication in the most productive way. For example, the president of the South Carolina-based communication agency spoke of the need to fashion strategies that used a variety of communication options, including those not currently offered by the firm. He found that

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strategic partnerships brought the advantages of expanded resources without the disadvantages of permanent organizational commitments. The agency selected the most effective communication tactics for the particular situation and then utilized them for a deliberately limited period of time. For example, when undertaking a campaign for a highly specialized product being introduced by one of its technology clients, the agency used a contract consultant to develop communication products such as individually targeted CDs. In contrast, attempting to make the most of its available resources, the alcohol and drug abuse program constructed its communication efforts — in particular, its public service campaigns — only using available internal resources.

While these different strategies are partly due to the divergent natures and missions of the two organizations, equally important is a fundamental distinction in perspectives. Professional communicators (advertising agencies, public relations firms and other IC providers) share an intense interest in developing and expanding the range and scope of the discipline to ensure their current and future success. In general, this group was more focused on the methods and techniques of IC than on the messages those tactics presented. Although they recognized the importance of the message they were frankly more intrigued by the varieties of presentation. Organizations where communications is important, but secondary, to their primary purpose (such as public service for government agencies, community assistance for non-profit foundations or goods for manufacturing concerns) are generally satisfied with the most effective use of currently available in-house techniques, especially those available at little or no additional cost. Precisely because these organizations are more likely than outside agencies to understand the nuances of their messages and the psychologies of their publics, their primary concern is with content, rather than method. This dichotomy is by no means unique to IC. In almost every discipline there is frequently a distinction between those who are technically accomplished and those who are more emotionally involved. The ideal combination, to use a musical analogy, would be a passionate virtuoso.

### **IC ISSUE THREE: IC PRACTICE CAN CAUSE CONFUSION**

Some of the participants believe IC is "complete as it is," while others called for a "need to expand" IC practices. The limited applications of IC among many otherwise capable and successful practitioners illustrates this discrepancy.

Logically, participants from broad-based, multi-faceted companies — in particular the two communication agencies — saw IC as comprising a wide array of tactics and methods that could be combined in various ways depending on the client, the goal and the available resources. The South Carolina communications agency, for example, devised a plan that included "pickets" surrounding the site of a trade convention; the picketers' "protest signs" focused on the agency's

client, a start-up technology company. The stunt was clearly a spoof, with the "pickets" dressed identically in passé beatnik clothing holding protest signs with obviously hyperbolic complaints. As intended, the stunt caught the local media's attention and, by carefully preparing the client's spokespersons to respond appropriately to questions, the agency reaped maximum free media benefit and generated favorable interest for its client during and after the convention.

Similarly, the South Carolina charitable foundation adopted a broad view of communications since it needed to reach a variety of audiences with its message of "strategic philanthropy." The concept of strategic philanthropy — charitable giving that encourages systemic changes — is a rather new concept in South Carolina. To reach its many audiences, the foundation used newsletters, an on-line presence and other vehicles. It also developed "Faces of Poverty," a dra-

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## **CLEARLY, IC CAN SUCCEED DESPITE AN ORGANIZATION'S LACK OF FORMAL KNOWLEDGE OF THE DISCIPLINE.**

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matic traveling photo exhibit that brought the reality of poverty home to South Carolina residents during its multi-year tour of the state. Exploring new and innovative methods of communication — one of the hallmarks of IC — is typical of this organization.

By contrast, most of the other participants and their organizations displayed a clear inclination to select from a more narrow range of communication techniques and to re-use those already proven effective for them or similar organizations. The alcohol and drug abuse prevention agency, for example, employed a series of television spots in which South Carolina college athletes warned youngsters about the dangers of substance abuse and urged abstinence. While this was not a bad series of public service ads overall, the campaign was clearly conventional and received only limited support in the free media.

In a similar fashion, the regional music festival focused on just three communication methods: news stories, limited advertising immediately prior to the festival and word-of-mouth in particular. The festival's board member explained that festival organizers believe word-of-mouth will play a key role in future regional — and perhaps national — attendance at the festival, regardless of the specific acts booked year to year. Festival organizers regard this viral marketing tool as a cost-effective method that provides the maximum return from a few specific audiences (music lovers, festival aficionados, college students on spring break) at minimum cost and effort. Still, the question lingers — is reliance on this technique the result of weak financial resources or a lack of familiarity and comfort with IC?

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#### **IC ISSUE FOUR: IC IS OFTEN SUCCESSFUL DESPITE AN ORGANIZATION'S "KNOWLEDGE" OF THE DISCIPLINE**

In a sense, the question of confusion in the practice of IC leads logically to issue four, which is that the success of IC efforts is not necessarily based on prior knowledge or experience with integrated communications. IC is something successful organizations do whether they've been "taught" to or not. The executive director of the philanthropic foundation can serve as a model for this particular point.

Established in 1994 as part of the sale of a church-owned hospital in central South Carolina, the foundation's mission is to address poverty throughout the state. The board and staff of this new foundation were largely unversed in the practice and theory of communications and consequently had little grasp of the concept of integrated communications. However, they shared a firm idea of what they wished to accomplish through "strategic philanthropy." Instinctively, the foundation created an integrated communications strategy that employed tactics including newsletters, special print and video productions, a monograph series on specific topics relating to poverty, proactive media relations, innovative traveling exhibits (the "Faces of Poverty" exhibit mentioned above), a web site, special events, educational activities and political activities (although, not lobbying).

Two communication firms assisted the foundation with these IC tactics. However, the foundation established the framework by setting the communication goals and selecting the methods to achieve them. The consultants served more as executors than creators of the IC efforts and, while both agencies certainly encouraged and

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expanded the foundation's IC thrust, played a subordinate role. Clearly, IC can succeed despite an organization's lack of formal knowledge of the discipline if the organization has a clear vision of its goals, a solid commitment to its core messages and the necessary agility to adapt its strategy and tactics. Indeed, the fact that organizations should know their customers (or constituents) far better than an outside agency makes them more likely to be successful in combining the content and the containers in an IC campaign. This fact suggests an obvious corollary: Much of IC seems to be simple common sense and native intelligence, a conclusion that must be simultaneously encouraging and disquieting for IC professionals, in particular consultants and academics.

#### **IC ISSUE FIVE: ORGANIZATIONAL BARRIERS CONTINUE, BUT ARE BEING AGGRESSIVELY CHALLENGED, AT LEAST BY SOME**

For decades, a common lament among public relations professionals has been their exclusion from "a seat at the executive table." In a similar fashion, IC practitioners strive to have the capacity to unify an organization's total communication efforts and "bring them under one umbrella." Typically, marketing, advertising and public relations — as well as management itself, in many cases — have all resisted these efforts, thus creating some of the "organizational barriers" to truly integrated communications (Pettegrew, 2000). Perhaps the most common barrier is the tendency of organizations to see communications as a series of discrete functions undertaken for their own sake rather than linked activities directed toward a common goal. Human resources departments, for example, have much to do with an organization's communications, but are generally separate from both public relations and marketing — two areas that are so often intertwined.

To varying degrees, all participants noted they have experienced frustrations because of these organizational barriers. Communications firms confront the issue in advising clients; public agencies encounter barriers when working across bureaucratic lines and with elected officials; and internal communicators face barriers when dealing with management and, especially, other divisions within the company. This last situation offers the most instructive example.

One of the participants, the associate director for community and media relations of an international automotive manufacturer, also had responsibility for various facets of employee relations, especially those areas where the company's employees could be highly effective spokespersons — if they had the guidance, tools and motivation to play that role effectively. The barrier to effective communication stemmed from a largely informal but highly developed belief among the manufacturing and administrative sections of the company that they should not "interfere" with the communication function. In other words, because of the highly disciplined and organized nature of the industry (and of the particular company) potential communicators were reluctant to fully participate and were tacitly supported in their reluctance by their management.

The associate director responded by involving the company's rank and file employees in activities which, while not overtly communications-related, in fact directly addressed many of the company's key audiences. For example, employees were encouraged to participate in community activities such as building parks and playgrounds, assisting with the Boy and Girl Scouts and working with charitable efforts of local faith-based organizations. A quarterly newsletter was produced, two copies of which were sent home with each employee — one for his or her family, the other for neighbors. In the newsletter, the associate director made a conscious decision to feature line employees rather than management or

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administration. In less than a year these efforts had become something of a self-fulfilling prophecy: when employees saw their friends and associates active in local churches and community groups, mentioned in news stories and featured on the local television stations, they too began to take a more active role. Actions became communications. And, since they were effectively (if quietly) folded into a larger, more comprehensive strategy, they became a key part of integrated communications.

### **IC ISSUE SIX: EVALUATION REMAINS THE WEAKEST PART OF IC**

If the interviews brought out one point where the ideal and reality confront one another, it is here: when it comes to integrated communication, we simply do not conduct enough evaluation or measurement and we do not do it the way we know we should. That, of course, should be no surprise. Evaluation, while growing in recognized importance, is traditionally the weakest component of any communication program (Corder and Thompson, 1999; Hon, 1998).

The temptation is to measure success by the short-term results and equate effectively accomplished tactics (the well-done brochure, the innovative web site) with planned objectives actually achieved (the target audience reached and persuaded, the proposed legislation deferred or defeated). The participants and their organizations were no exceptions to this tendency, even when they realized that a measurable objective — a "stand-alone" evaluation procedure — was, at least theoretically, essential to current success and future growth. Several participants expressed a dilemma: "No sooner done with one task than it is time to go on to the next."

A common thread that emerged was that the evaluation portion of any campaign is neglected largely because no specific value is attached to it. Often, evaluation is disregarded because it is too difficult to quantify fiscally — there is no line item for it in the budget. We value what we pay for and we pay for what we believe is valuable. Often, clients are not specifically asked in advance to pay for full-fledged, comprehensive evaluations of campaigns; therefore, they are satisfied with clipping files, placement statistics and largely impressionistic summaries. Government agencies and not-for-profit organizations can be content with a favorable "cost per placement" ratio that can be manipulated through the use of PSAs and other "freebies." And special events organizers can be happy if attendance meets or exceeds expectations, and do not proceed to ask what strategies worked and which did not.

Until evaluation carries a price, it will not be valued sufficiently to be performed consistently and correctly. It is time for professionals in the discipline of integrated communications to begin specifically and overtly charging for evaluations. Agencies should seriously consider adding an "evaluation fee" to their campaign budgets, and be prepared to convince their clients of the importance of project

evaluations. While it might seem that clients should be especially concerned with evaluation and measurement to insure that money is well spent, in practice they often balk at paying the costs associated with these activities.

In-house communicators in both the public and private sectors must be willing to tackle the same task in a way that explains the importance of evaluation to boards and legislatures. One participant,

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the president of the South Carolina-based communication firm, suggested a strategy that could work with both the private and public sectors — making more use of the argument that equates evaluations with audits. The concept of evaluation as a sort of audit that determines the value, impact and cost-effectiveness of communications is one that most cost-conscious clients and agencies can grasp.

In the end, the prime beneficiary of better, more rigorous and more widespread evaluations will be the profession itself. If there is one point that we maintain that distinguishes integrated communications from all its cousins and competitors, it is that IC is the most effective way to achieve an organization's goals. But without evaluation and measurement this assertion has no more compelling claim than any other — including, unfortunately, that integrated communications is only the latest in a series of passing fads and fancies. Our discipline deserves and we must provide better than this.

### **CONCLUSION: WHAT DOES THE REPORT FROM THE FIELD TELL US?**

William Faulkner once likened writing a novel to "trying to nail together a henhouse in a hurricane" (Kenner, 1989, p. 204). There are certain similarities between Faulkner's artistic predicament and the more modest goal of accurately examining an emerging discipline such as integrated communications.

For many, integrated communication is still more a concept than an actual discipline; however, while many are still grappling with how to define the practice, others are busily engaged in implementing it. This "report from the field" provides evidence that practitioners are approaching the subject from remarkably similar viewpoints, especially in terms of practice. They are aware of the ideal practices of inte-

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grated communication even as they engage in its realities, and they know there are times when the ideals and realities merge. Although they differ in their level of conscious application, all of the participants interviewed accept that "integrated" communications means that all relevant aspects of communications must be combined in the most effective and efficient fashion to achieve a pre-determined goal. The major difference is not in the doctrine but in the practice: The number of forms and the variety of channels of communication depends upon the experience and the point of view of the practitioners. To use the familiar phrase, they are all "singing from the same page in the hymn book," but some of them know more verses than others. And not enough of any of them — as they will be the first to admit — are sufficiently acquainted with the verse on evaluation.

Above all, these discussions strongly suggest that, at least among everyday practitioners, many of those engaged in integrated communications are quite willing to focus on the tactical aspects, seemingly to the neglect of the larger, more strategic vision. One reason for this focus on the immediate and practical is the success that these practitioners have experienced with these tactics. Success has bred, if not complacency, then at least comfort, and comfort can be the enemy of innovation and the larger vision. If this is indeed the case — and further research clearly is required to test its validity — it further suggests that the success which IC currently enjoys is only the threshold of its possibilities. Now, at a time when the discipline is still in a period of experimentation and flexibility, a re-focus on broad strategic issues, especially among practitioners, could take IC to its next level and lead to even greater success in entirely new areas.

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