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USING EVENTS TO DRIVE AN INTEGRATED MARKETING MODEL

by Mary Fehrnstrom & David M. Rich

ABSTRACT
Event marketing, a surprisingly effective channel to drive integration efforts, has in many cases become the connective, centralizing element of a campaign, drawing upon every other channel to optimize the brand experience and drive brand engagement. Getting there, however, requires fundamental changes in the way teams and talent work together, how departments are structured and the way in which the various agencies interact. For events to work as a lever to drive a marketing integration, these changes must be based on a new set of guidelines and strategic experience mapping (SEM).

As audiences increasingly turn to multiple sources for information and companies acknowledge the futility of simply turning up the advertising volume, the value of integrated marketing communications (IMC) is becoming more apparent. Highly choreographed and targeted, integrated campaigns draw upon the strengths of broadcast, digital media, online social networking, advertising, direct mail, live experiences and other media to efficiently engage and move audiences through the sales cycle—wherever they live, work and play.

After years of industry debate and experimentation, what has become clear is that IMC requires more than mere adjustment of tactical plans to include multiple disciplines. Truly integrated marketing changes the brand communications planning process and builds integration into the DNA of a campaign.

One possible framework for implementing IMC lies in Cisco System’s use of proprietary processes developed by its experience marketing partner George P. Johnson to design and implement experiential marketing activities. This paper examines the forces driving integrated marketing and Cisco’s unique approach to IMC through the lens of live experiences.

In today’s complex business environment, organizations look to integrated marketing to create a more efficient and cost-effective approach to engaging consumers and business customers, from the acquisition phase, through nurturing and loyalty. In an integrated marketing model,
marketing is about profiting from long-term customer-centric relationships, as opposed to short-term transactional gains.

The discipline has taken hold. A recent survey by the Association of National Advertisers (ANA) indicates that 74 percent of brand marketers employ IMC for most of their brands (ANA, 2008).

One factor driving IMC is that no single channel (advertising, public relations, digital, direct, etc.) reigns supreme in the consumer experience. People access disparate sources of information for decision-making, whether it is a multi-million dollar IT solution or which shampoo brand to use. The traditional command and control, ad-centric model has evolved to adapt to more nuanced decision making. As Pine and Gilmore put it, “An experience designed to be exactly what an individual person (or business) needs at an exact moment in time can't help but create what is often called a life-transforming experience.” (Gilmore and Pine, 2007).

Figure 1 demonstrates that there are many unpredictable ways consumers receive information that influences purchases. The sources are fragmented. Matching the right brand interactions to various stages of the sales cycle (awareness, consideration and purchase) is a complicated task. Conversely, properly timing brand messages and selecting the media best suited to the market’s needs and expectations lead to quicker conversion and lasting brand preference.

Even as the external objective to engage customers pulls CMOs in the direction of integrated marketing, an equally powerful internal force pushes them towards it: corporate belt-tightening. When marketing budgets merely hold steady or contract, CMOs desperately apply well-defining ROI to their marketing spend (“Budgets flatline in first quarter,” Advertising Age, June 2008). A clear connection between marketing and top-line business impact is critical to achieving C-level support.

With this in mind, integrated marketing promises to make truly efficient marketing a reality by streamlining the number of interac-

![Figure 1](source: Strategic Oxygen 2008)
tions needed to generate a sale. It is a premise best articulated by marketing pioneer Bernd Schmitt (2003):

When using an integrative approach to connect with customers, the company speaks with one voice and does not dissipate communicative impact in (the messaging) clutter …integration can be a cost-effective way to achieve the same impact as that of a larger, but less connected, campaign.

With so much at stake, it is no wonder that IMC remains hotly debated year after year. Many marketers still rate their attempts at implementing IMC poorly. The same ANA report mentioned previously finds that only 25 percent of marketers rated the quality of their IMC programs as “excellent or very good.”

As seen in Figure 2, impediments to integration are numerous but generally fall into one of several categories:

- Silos of information and talent split between internal teams, and their agency support, across various marketing channels;
- Lack of measurement;
- Lack of branding or messaging consistency.

The common cause behind each of these challenges, and the primary factor driving discrepancies between IMC’s importance and its dismal execution record, is that CMOs tend to look at integration too close to the campaign activation phase. Instead, marketers should focus on building an integration orientation into the campaign planning process; thus driving the development of a truly integrated strategy for specific campaigns. The solution belongs earlier in the campaign planning process. A new approach to planning is required in order to achieve IMC’s ultimate promise.

**Transforming marketing planning**

* A new model for intelligent decision-making

Cisco Systems’ worldwide event marketing team relies on a few powerful frameworks to drive efficient experiential marketing programs. Their highly integrated marketing programs arise from this same process, called Portfolio Planning. The experiential world’s equivalent of a media planning service, Portfolio Planning is a framework for evaluating the marketplace and mapping out where target demographics live, work and play. The Planning process also identifies which of Cisco’s marketing touchpoints prospective buyers will encounter throughout the marketing and sales cycle.

This broad view is then married with the Strategic Experience Mapping (SEM) process, a methodology created by Cisco’s experience marketing agency, George P. Johnson (GPJ), and one of the key elements of GPJ’s Program Strategy practice. The output of SEM is an extremely detailed view of not only a campaign’s target audience but also its sub-segments. In turn, this comprehensive view enables Cisco’s marketing team to develop a deep understanding of the emotional and rational levers responsible for achieving brand objectives (Figure 3). This roadmap to designing experiences creates purposeful reactions among its audience members. SEM operates out of the participants’ need for information and the experiences by which to receive it.

With this groundwork in place, Cisco marries SEM with Portfolio Planning to project
the necessary number, cadence and types of brand interactions using multiple media necessary to move audiences to a specific action. With hundreds of worldwide events executed annually, Cisco’s marketing leadership uses these two processes, along with a variety of supplementary tools, to create, manage and measure a large portfolio of third-party, proprietary and internal events; ranging from trade show exhibits to massive conferences.

Without these tools, the sheer number of activities and physical assets necessary to generate live experiences could become misaligned. Large corporations risk disorganization because of multiple business units, geographies and the fact that they are competing in a less than coherent fashion.

As seen in Figure 3, broadly speaking, SEM and Portfolio Planning empowers Cisco's event marketing team to design truly customer-centric integrated campaigns that encompass the full range of marketing touchpoints.

The resulting plan aligns marketing investments with clear business objectives while also insuring optimal, consistent experiences across Cisco's portfolio for each target audience. Non-performing activities are driven from the equation so that decisions are based on data and research, rather than on political concerns.

What remains are only the essential components that will deliver the right experience to the right audiences. The result is a lean and totally integrated marketing model that leverages multiple marketing channels in the appropriate sequence and to the correct degree.

**How events drive integrated marketing**

*Cisco’s unique approach*

Cisco’s approach is unique to event marketing because it joins teams from across Cisco’s marketing functions at the earliest planning stage. These meetings offer a melting pot of talent—multi-discipline teams drawn from advertising, analyst relations (AR), public relations, online, partners (channels), sales, consultants, executive communications, new media and more, as well as each discipline’s agency support.
In the context of planning for a specific event or a series of events for a new product launch, a branding campaign or any other goal, each of these teams brings a deep pool of talent and respective expertise. Brought into close proximity with each other at this crucial stage, cross-functional teams are empowered to launch simultaneous campaigns that reflect and amplify marketing activities occurring elsewhere. Of course, each of these groups has its own perspective on the market and target audiences. SEM brings these groups together effectively to build consensus so that the subsequent planning produces a unified view of marketing activities and a recognition of each group’s contribution to IMC.

This is one of the inherent strengths of using events as a focal point for IMC planning: events cannot happen in a vacuum. Events require support from other marketing channels in areas such as audience generation, pre-qualifying onsite leads and post-event conversation and follow-up. Experience marketing planning therefore inherently lends itself to driving an IMC campaign. SEM and Portfolio Planning bring internal teams and external agencies to the planning table at the same time and for a shared purpose, centered on specific business objectives, well-understood target demographics, shared creative, multimedia tactics and coordinated actions, each of which are tied to live events.

Events take place at a specific moment in time; they are in a sense “markers” for a business or lifestyle community. For instance, a massive technology trade show at which a new product will be launched is a much more definitive and tangible milestone to build a campaign around than a “soft launch” using a massive ad spend.

Knowing that an entire community of consumers, media and influencers will be in one place at one time has proven to be an effective lens for joining the work of multiple disciplines towards a common goal.

Cisco’s IMC at work

Cisco’s approach of selling to government technology buyers illustrates this methodology at work. The event marketing team convened an SEM in early 2008 to design a messaging and customer journey strategy for the Federal Office Systems Exposition (FOSE), the leading federal government tradeshow. Cisco realized that in order to increase industry visibility and top line sales for its Empowered Government Workforce solutions, it needed to focus on the ‘worker bees’ of the government community, FOSE’s primary audience.

A vital component of all IMC programs is the targeting of a community’s sub-segments with key messages (Dong & Park, Journal of Advertising Research 47). An initial SEM brought marketing teams from a variety of disciplines together to identify key buyer segments, such as federal business unit managers. Identifying the needs, concerns and the kind of messages and media necessary to engage with this segment in an ongoing dialogue became the event marketing team’s first priority.

One of the key themes that emerged from the SEM was the idea of “humanizing” Cisco’s technology offerings and delivering that story in a highly relevant and accessible way to Cisco’s many buyers in this space. Important themes to buyers included technology that is “secure,” “responsive” and “collaborative.” Those ideas, and the complex technology behind those promises, had to be obvious to the buyers. Cisco’s marketing team accomplished this by devising a “storyline” that would play across a variety of media before, during and after FOSE. The campaign would be highly choreographed and scheduled to invite specific audience members to take specific actions related to Cisco’s presence at FOSE.
Cisco created a character, “Fred Federal,” to typify the government technology buyer’s IT predicament. Fred was a “worker bee” for the federal government. Faced with a growing number of technology challenges, both in the workplace, in the home office and on the go, he represented the core sub-segment of FOSE attendees identified in SEM. More importantly, Fred was not connected to the Cisco brand in any obvious way. Buyers who followed his story through web advertising, social networking and Cisco’s FOSE booth presence would eventually encounter the Cisco brand and the Empowered Workforce products, but only at the end of a journey that they recognized they were, in fact, experiencing themselves.

With this strategy in mind, the SEM and Planning processes gave rise to a detailed plan of action involving teams from across Cisco’s marketing function. These included advertising, digital, events and Cisco’s own corporate web and IT teams. Some of the pre-event tactics used included:

• A dedicated Fred Federal MySpace page with links to YouTube videos, where Fred’s story, as an IT manager for a fictional government agency with 24/7 technology demands, was showcased. Every message ended with a call-to-action related to the upcoming FOSE event.
  • YouTube interviews with Fred tied into Cisco’s pre-FOSE marketing materials.
  • Banner ads in vertical media introduced the audience to Fred.
  • Invitations from FOSE organizers to “Meet Fred at FOSE.”
  • Direct mail (e-mail and print) drops inviting the various audiences to meet Fred on-site.
  • Cisco corporate Web site ads, driving the community to meet Fred via an interview between Fred and a Cisco executive.

On-site at FOSE, the traditional trade event model was turned upside down: Fred Federal was the show, the booth, his work and home office, and visitors met and engaged with Fred himself (along with his wife Felicia). Cisco’s “booth” was Fred at work (in office), at home (out of office) and at the airport (mobile). Room drops and e-mail communications to FOSE attendees drove additional awareness by inviting them to “Meet Fred” at Cisco’s booth.

In effect, Cisco’s event marketing at FOSE was simply a hand-off from the multimedia IMC campaign that preceded the live event. The event acted as a culmination of the relationships created and cultivated online and through traditional advertising. More strategically, by taking this approach, Cisco demonstrated a deep understanding of its customer and his/her world. Together, the campaign conveyed thought leadership in a highly articulated and immersive manner.

Post-FOSE integrated tactics included:

• An interactive micro-site with Fred at home, speaking about how he used Cisco’s Empowered Workforce solutions to improve productivity, collaboration and overall success.
• Ongoing posts to YouTube and MySpace pages.

**Key lessons**

It is not surprising that marketers rank integrated marketing as the most important issue confronting the industry. Challenged to adapt to changing consumer preferences, along with the boardroom’s demand for accountability, marketers realize IMC offers the best opportunity to move forward.

As seen in the example cited above, Cisco’s experience using experiential marketing as a platform to enable truly integrated marketing programs suggests a few key characteristics of successful IMC:

• A documented model/framework that happens early in the planning process

The interdependent relationship between experiential programs and other marketing disciplines makes event marketing the natural model for re-engineering how IMC programs are created and activated.
Using Events to Drive an Integrated Marketing Model

involves teams from across the marketing function and stays within the guidelines established at the outset.

• A commitment to a customer-centric approach that informs all activities.
• Experiential marketing’s important role in linking all the marketing disciplines.

This last point is critical. The interdependent relationship between experiential programs and other marketing disciplines makes event marketing the natural model for re-engineering how IMC programs are created and activated.

Perhaps this is an unorthodox idea for senior marketing executives who grew up in the ad-centric marketing mold of the latter half of the twentieth century, wherein events are perceived as both “retail” and execution-oriented. From this perspective, events have little in the way of a strategic purpose. However, in the context of today’s new marketing landscape, events are transitioning from pure tactics at the activation end of campaigns to serve as strategic focal points from which integrated marketing campaigns are made possible. Cisco’s unique approach enables both event professionals and marketers across disciplines to think strategically about events’ roles with the brand communications mix. Doing so effectively creates an entirely new IMC model.

References


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