

Rethinking marketing communication: From integrated marketing communication to relationship communication

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Using as a starting-point the model of integrated marketing communication (IMC), which is based on the tenet that the company integrates the marketing message conveyed to the consumer, this paper switches the focus by highlighting the consumer's message integration. A review of the marketing communication literature on meaning creation uncovered four central factors influencing the process of meaning creation: historical; future; external; and internal factors. However, the literature seems to be lacking a broad model that includes all these factors as well as a specific study of the nature and impact of future factors. Combining insights from marketing communication with findings from research in relationship marketing, this paper presents a holistic model that is based on the consumer perspective and takes into account the impact of all four factors on message integration. By shedding light on the influence of the future time factor on message reception, the paper presents an emerging Relationship Communication Model (RCM). It offers researchers and marketers a useful tool for understanding and managing marketing communication more effectively.

Keywords: relationship communication; integrated marketing communication; meaning creation

During the last two decades, the concept of integrated marketing communication (IMC) has rapidly grown in importance (Schultz and Barnes 1999; Schultz 2003; Kitchen, Brignell, and Jones 2004; Kitchen et al. 2004; Shimp 2007). During the same period relationship marketing has developed into a widely accepted marketing paradigm (Grönroos 2000; Sheth and Parvatiyar 2000; Gummesson 2002; Harker and Egan 2006). A cross-disciplinary concept combining the two fields has been suggested: the concept of relationship communication (Duncan and Moriarty 1997; Lindberg-Repo and Grönroos 1999; Lindberg-Repo 2001). However, so far this concept has been discussed in a traditional inside–out context. In our view a more consumer-centric approach to marketing communication is needed. Such an approach is taken in the present article.

In IMC the central idea is that communication does not take place in a vacuum, but in a broader context which includes not only traditional media but also other communication efforts, as well as product and service encounters (Duncan and Moriarty 1997). However, most of the IMC literature has a company (sender) perspective based on an inside–out view, that is, the company drives the integration and a consistent message is conveyed

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to the consumer. A look at the latest IMC textbooks (Duncan 2005; Pickton and Broderick 2005; Shimp 2007) confirms that the company perspective prevails. In these texts the company produces the integration of the message. A comparison with other recent marketing communication textbooks reveals the lack of a strong *outside-in* focus on the consumer (e.g. Fill 2005; Percy and Elliott 2005; de Pelsmacker, Geuens, and van den Bergh 2007). In this paper we propose an *outside-in* consumer-centric perspective, which allows the *consumer* to perform the integration. When the focus switches to the consumer, interesting and previously neglected questions arise: where does integration take place, what is integrated and how? The main purpose of this paper is to present a conceptual framework that makes it possible to answer these questions.

Instead of studying integrated outgoing messages only, we switch the focus to consumer activity, that is, the consumer performs the integration of messages. In doing so, one concept suggested in the literature, the concept of *meaning* becomes crucial (Buttle 1995; Gayeski 2000). The need to focus on the consumer instead of only on the message sent has been pointed out by several researchers who have studied the importance of meaning in marketing communication (Mick and Buhl 1992; Scott 1994; Stern 1996). Instead of the traditional marketing communication concept, where a sender conveys a message to a receiver through coding, noise and decoding processes (e.g. Schramm 1971; Vakratsas and Ambler 1999), marketing communication should focus more on the receivers and the meaning *created by the receiver* in the communication process. In the extensive literature on meaning, the message is usually combined with some other factor that has an impact on meaning creation (Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum 1961; Belk 1975; McCracken 1986, 1987; Friedmann and Zimmer 1988; Domzal and Kernan 1992; Scott 1994; Stern 1996; Padgett and Allen 1997; Grier and Brumbaugh 1999). However, a model putting all these factors together into a holistic framework has been lacking. In the literature, four categories of factors were found: historical, external, internal and future factors. Friedmann and Zimmer (1988), Domzal and Kernan (1992), Mick and Buhl (1992) and Padgett and Allen (1997) included historical factors in their analysis, whereas for example McCracken (1986, 1987) and Stern (1996) took into account external factors in the message analysis, and Scott (1994) and Grier and Brumbaugh (1999) studied the message considering internal factors as well. However, to our knowledge no studies have explicitly included *future* factors. Interestingly, a discussion of the impact of future factors can be found in the relationship marketing literature (Edvardsson and Strandvik 2000; Ojasalo 2001). Thus, building on concepts from both marketing communication and relationship marketing research, our objective was to develop a marketing communication framework that includes all the four factors mentioned above as an integral part of customers' meaning creation. This model represents a broader approach than is provided by models focusing solely on outgoing messages and the integration of these.

The purpose of this article is to present a consumer-centric perspective on IMC by combining the different factors influencing consumers' meaning creation into a single conceptual model for understanding and managing marketing communication. Thus the model offers a more inclusive approach to marketing communication. It also develops and extends the emerging concept of relationship communication into a relationship communication model.

Based on our research as well as the analysis presented in this article, we offer the following definition of relationship communication:

Relationship communication is any type of marketing communication that influences the receiver's long-term commitment to the sender by facilitating meaning creation through integration with the receiver's time and situational context. The time context refers to the

receiver's perception of the history and envisioned future of his/her relationship with the sender. The situational context refers to other elements internal or external to the receiver.

As the receiver of communication messages, the customer performs the integration, and in this integration process meaning creation takes place. The integration and meaning creation process is usually triggered by the communication message.

Previous research

Previous research in marketing communication has traditionally focused on conveying information, message transfer and hierarchical sequence models (e.g. AIDA, Vakratsas and Ambler 1999). The traditional approach has focused on an active sender and has seen the receiver as a passive object in the communication process (Percy and Elliott 2005). In relationship marketing, where both parties in the process should meet on more equal terms, the view of a passive consumer has been considered inappropriate for marketing communication (Grönroos and Lindberg-Repo 1998; Lindberg-Repo 2001; Finne 2004). Thus IMC has been suggested as a suitable concept for the relationship marketing paradigm. However, as IMC mostly focuses on outgoing messages reaching the receiver, albeit messages from several sources integrated into one consistent message (see Figure 1), this concept still considers the consumer as an object rather than a subject in the communication process.

In order to overcome the problem of considering outgoing messages only, we propose a change of focus. The concept that links marketing communication with relationship marketing is *meaning*. However, meaning as a concept is frequently used in a variety of disciplines, which means that the concept has at least as many interpretations as there are disciplines (Osgood et al. 1961). According to Friedmann and Zimmer (1988, 31) meaning can be described as follows: 'Meaning is one outcome of perception; meaning formation is a process within the perceptual process.' In their view the creation of meaning cannot be seen as a sequence model such as AIDA, but rather as a descriptive frame of reference treating the receiver as a subject. According to Williamson (1987), meaning as a concept becomes interesting because it does not focus on the transaction per se but on *what the product means to the consumer*. Also Fiske (1982), in his semiotic approach to communication, emphasizes the receiver's role in the communication process. In Christensen et al.'s (2006) words, the marketer should be interested in what job a product might do for the consumer. Communicative stimuli in combination with experience (Domzal and Kernan 1992) and expectations (Friedmann and Zimmer 1988) form a whole. Therefore, factors representing time as including both experiences in the past and expectations about the future should not be neglected in studying the communication process.

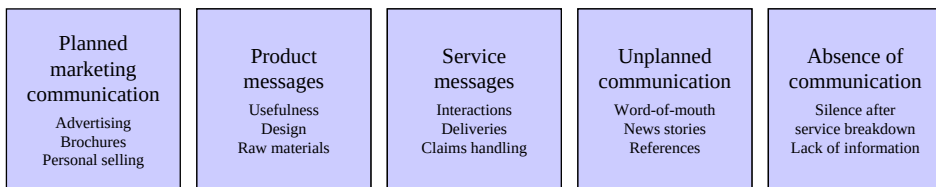


Figure 1. Traditional perspective on IMC: five sources of messages (based on Calonius 1989; Duncan and Moriarty 1997; Grönroos and Lindberg-Repo 1998).

Another category of factors in the marketing communication literature has been introduced by McCracken (1986, 1987): the Meaning Transfer Model, which describes how meaning is transferred from the surrounding society, an external factor, to the individual, an internal factor, through consumer goods. In this model marketing communication plays a central role. Meaning occurs at different levels: in society, in products and in individuals. Other situational factors have been presented by Grier and Brumbaugh (1999), who describe differences in planned and actual meaning. In their model the company communicates *planned meaning*, whereas the consumer perceives *actual meaning*. They found differences in perceptions between target groups and non-targets groups. Target groups understood elements in ads better than non-target groups (Grier and Brumbaugh 1999). Thus, from a meaning creation perspective factors relating to the consumer's context cannot be neglected in the communication process.

A common characteristic of all streams of research reported above is that they combine the communicated message with one category of factors, either historical, future, external or internal factors, in order to understand the individually perceived meaning. These factors can be categorized into two major dimensions: a *time dimension* and a *situational dimension*. The time dimension comprises historical factors (Friedmann and Zimmer 1988; Mick and Buhl 1992; Padgett and Allen 1997) and future factors, and the situational dimension comprises external factors (McCracken 1986, 1987) and internal factors (Scott 1994; Stern 1996; Grier and Brumbaugh 1999). However, in the marketing communication literature future factors have only been touched upon briefly. On this issue the concept of relationship marketing can offer interesting insights. Both time and situational dimensions have been included in a model about critical incidents in relationships (the CIRC Model) presented by Edvardsson and Strandvik (2000), and future factors and their impact on expectations have been discussed by Ojasalo (2001). However, to our knowledge there is no model that combines all four types of factors.

According to Mick and Buhl (1992), if the history of a consumer in combination with his/her goals and means are known by the company, the individual meaning of a communication for that consumer does not have to come as a surprise. Thus, the focus of interest should be on the person who receives a message and his/her individual meaning creation. Next, we will examine what the relationship marketing perspective can add to this approach.

Adding the contribution of relationship marketing

As mentioned in the previous sections, the relationship marketing perspective includes both time and situational aspects. Relationship marketing is based on on-going co-operation between the customer and the supplier, and in this approach the time dimension is essential. Previous experiences have an impact on current interactions and, for example, feelings of trust and commitment can be expected to carry over into the future and create expectations for future interactions. Hence, the time dimension is crucial in relationship marketing (Edvardsson and Strandvik 2000; Grönroos 2000; Holmlund 2004; Rindell 2008). Further, the ongoing relationship is influenced by the relationship context. Edvardsson and Strandvik's situational dimension is based on research by Layder (1993), who describes the situational dimension as levels including context, setting, situated activity and self. These levels represent a continuum of varying factors both outside and inside the individual. Russell and Mehrabian (1976) distinguish between these factors in the following way: external factors are composed of everything outside the person and internal factors are those factors that are independent of external factors. In this paper the

situational dimension has been categorized into two main groups, namely external factors and internal factors.

The Meaning-Based Model of Mick and Buhl (1992) shows similarities with Edvardsson and Strandvik's model, because it also includes time and situational dimensions. In their study Mick and Buhl interviewed three Danish brothers about five ads. Essential in their model is that each person sees the world in a subjective way, and therefore meaning cannot be 'transported' by an ad, only created from it. Despite the fact that these brothers had the same history and social background, that is, represented the same segment, the ads triggered quite different creations of meaning. Mick and Buhl concluded that the meanings created from the ads were influenced by personal interests, ambitions and goals driven by individual interest-based life themes and life projects. However, while Mick and Buhl's model lacks the relational perspective, Edvardsson and Strandvik's model lacks the communication perspective.

To our knowledge, relationship communication has rarely been discussed in the marketing communication literature. Lindberg-Repo (2001) examines the notion of relationship communication, proposing that it represents a holistic perspective which focuses on both parties in the communication process. She offers the following definition: 'Relationship communication is defined as the sum of all actions that convert the message and meaning in a mutually beneficial way and affects the knowledge base between parties' (Lindberg-Repo 2001, 19).

The key features of relationship communication are that: two parties take part in the process, it has a long time perspective, it is a sum of actions and it should lead to a shared knowledge base. However, even Lindberg-Repo's definition is largely geared towards an inside-out view. In contrast, we argue that the consumer alone creates the meaning of all actions taken by the marketer.

To sum up the discussion of previous research, a substantial amount of research can be found where meaning and communication are discussed (see Table 1). In some of this research one category of factors, for example, historical or external factors solely, is taken into account. In only a few cases a relationship marketing perspective can be found. However, in no cases was the holistic approach we propose found, that is, a model combining all the reported factors was lacking. In order to combine all four types of factors with the relationship marketing and meaning creation approaches into a marketing communication framework, the Relationship Communication Model was developed. This model is presented in the next section.

Relationship communication

The Relationship Communication Model builds mainly on the two models presented by Mick and Buhl (the Meaning-Based Model) and Edvardsson and Strandvik (the CIRC Model, see Table 2). Mick and Buhl (1992) bring in the individual aspect and Edvardsson and Strandvik (2000) provide the relationship perspective. By drawing on these two models both an individual as a person and the firm's relationship with that individual can be examined. The Relationship Communication Model has two dimensions: a *time dimension* based on both historical and future factors, relating to the consumer's perception of a given relationship, and a *situational dimension* based on external and internal factors, relating to the consumer's individual context. We suggest that some or all of these factors may influence the consumer's creation of meaning out of marketing communication messages.

Table 1. The occurrence of the key concepts of this study in marketing communication or relationship marketing research.

	Meaning in communication	Relationship perspective	Historical factors	External factors	Internal factors	Future factors
Domzal and Kernan (1992)	x		x			
Edvardsson and Strandvik (2000)		x	x	x	x	x
Friedmann and Zimmer (1988)	x		x			
Grier and Brumbaugh (1999)	x				x	
Lindberg-Repo (2001)	x	x				
McCracken (1986)	x			x		
McCracken (1987)	x			x		
Mick and Buhl (1992)	x		x	x	x	
Padgett and Allen (1997)	x		x			
Scott (1994)	x				x	
Stern (1996)	x				x	

Among *historical* factors, all kinds of messages from the past have an impact on the consumer's meaning creation. Such factors can be found in the consumer's personal history, mainly but not only relating to non-commercial issues (Mick and Buhl 1992) and experiences but also memories and stories heard somewhere relating to a commercial relationship-based history (Edvardsson and Strandvik 2000). *Future* factors can be embedded in the expected future of the relationship (Edvardsson and Strandvik 2000) or in the person's life themes (Mick and Buhl 1992). The former are commercially related, whereas the latter are broader in scope, but may include commercially related aspects as well. Such future factors can be expectations, goals, hopes or visions (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry 1990; Grönroos 2000; Ojasalo 2001). These time factors together constitute a continuum from the past to the envisioned future of the consumer. Traditional marketing communication has usually been situated in the present only. However, in relationship marketing the time factor is central. An individual's perception of a relationship is constructed over time (Holmlund 2004; Rindell 2008) or in an ongoing dialogue (Ballantyne 2004). Thus, the time element is crucially important.

The *situational* dimension consists of external and internal factors. According to Belk (1975) both external and internal factors have to be included. External factors can be

Table 2. Similarities between the Meaning-Based Model (Mick and Buhl 1992), the CIRC Model (Edvardsson and Strandvik 2000) and the Relationship Communication Model.

The Meaning-Based Model	The CIRC Model	The Relationship Communication Model
Individual life history	Relationship history	Historical factors (relationship-based)
Life themes: goals and means	Future of the relationship	Future factors (relationship-based)
Culturally situated	External context	External factors (contextual)
Personal life projects	Internal context	Internal factors (contextual)
The outcome of meaning	Critical incident	Meaning creation

culturally situated factors (Mick and Buhl 1992) or the personal context of the individual (cf. Edvardsson and Strandvik 2000). Such external factors can be trends, traditions, economic situation, the family and alternative choices, including advertising from competing companies and other communications in the surrounding society perceived by the individual. Internal factors are life projects related to the self (Mick and Buhl 1992) or the internal context (cf. Edvardsson and Strandvik 2000). Such internal factors can be attitudes, capabilities, identity or personal interests.

In order to understand meaning creation in a relationship, it is necessary to take both dimensions presented above into account. However, the impact of all factors taken together can be different from the impact of one factor taken out of context. It is important to consider to what extent the factors suggested here are part of meaning creation, and to what extent a communication effort alone can bring about this process. In this paper, an ad or any other type of communication message is considered as one element among several other factors influencing meaning creation. Therefore, in our view the effect of an ad cannot be analysed without taking the context into account. Some of the messages communicated by a firm may be integrated with one or several of the factors in meaning creation, whereas some messages may not be integrated with any other factor but are interpreted at face value. In the consumer's meaning creation the four factors have differing impacts in different situations. Hence, the interplay of factors has to be recognized. If meaning is based on the interplay between, for example, an ad and several factors, the consumer's meaning creation occurs in a relationship context, and therefore it is a case of relationship communication. Thus, when considering whether communication efforts are perceived in a relationship context or not, both time and situational factors have to be taken into consideration simultaneously.

The Relationship Communication Model, schematically presented in Figure 2, represents a broader view on communication than the traditional IMC view (cf. Figure 1). Moreover, the model is customer-centric. A focus on outgoing integrated messages alone is not sufficient, because the scope of what is included in the integration process has to be extended beyond the *sources* of communication messages. When planning marketing communication and the use of various types of messages in communication activities, the influence on consumers' meaning creation of the two time (historical and future) and the two situational (internal and external) factors has to be considered. When doing so, marketing communication will be truly integrated with the customers' point of view, and planning marketing communication becomes a truly *outside-in* process.

From IMC to relationship communication

The Relationship Communication Model helps in conceptualizing and hence also in taking into account the impact of factors influencing the messages in IMC originating from various sources. In some cases several factors may have an impact, that is, are integrated with a communication message, whereas in other cases their impact is more limited. The varying levels of integration of the four factors with a communication message in customers' meaning creation can be viewed as a *meaning creation continuum* (see Figure 3). At one end of this continuum is a situation where the message is more or less taken at face value by the consumer, and at the other end the consumer integrates the message with aspects of all four time and situational factors. When moving from the former end of the continuum towards the latter, more factors and more aspects of each factor at play are influencing the consumer's meaning-making process. In Figure 3 it is also indicated how

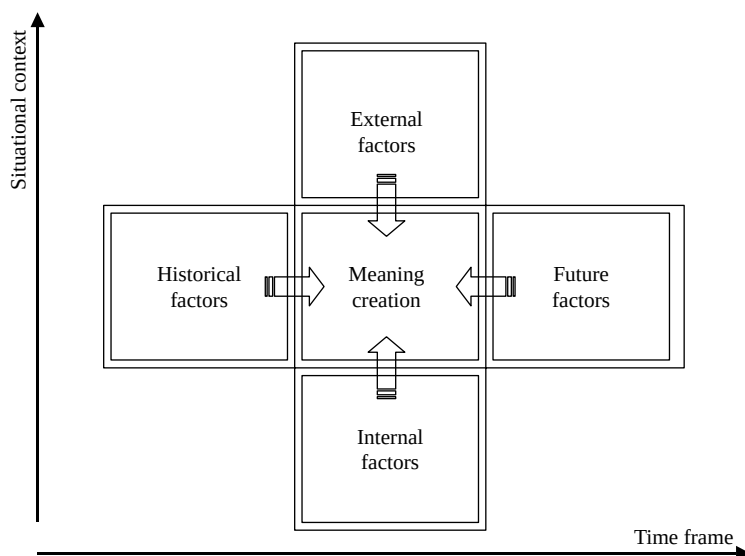


Figure 2. The Relationship Communication Model with time and situational dimensions.

cases illustrated in Table 3 placed themselves on the meaning creation continuum based on the factors integrated by the consumer.

If a communication's message is not integrated with any of the factors (one end of the continuum), the situation can be described as one-dimensional communication. This type of communication is close to the traditional view of communication: a specific message is formulated, sent and received. A typical situation when no factors are integrated with a message is a plain price message or an offer to buy a new product sent by a seller unknown to the consumer. A factor that often influences the consumer is an internal factor, e.g. a negative attitude towards an illustration used in an ad, or limited abilities to interpret the ad. A typical situation of this type is when the consumer dislikes a message so much that he or she immediately stops thinking of it or has no readiness to understand the message (Finne and Grönroos 2006). Thus, in this part of the continuum the impact of factors on meaning creation is limited or non-existent.

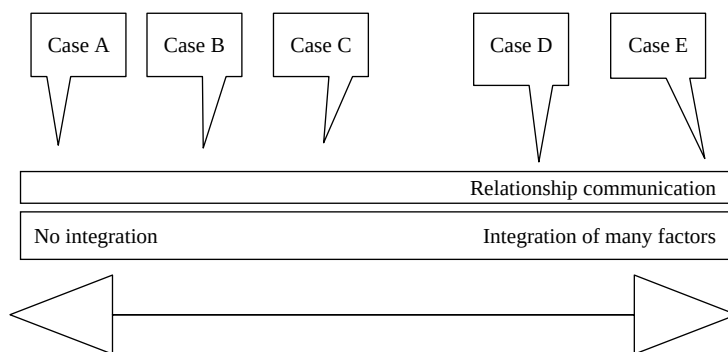


Figure 3. The meaning creation continuum: impact of factors integrated.

Table 3. Meaning creation from ads: A case study (Finne 2004; Finne and Grönroos 2006).

Case	Perceived message/situation	Coding	Factors at play	Integration	Meaning
A	A price message from a provider outside the consideration set	A price ad No other reaction	–	No integration	Some meaning based on one factor only: the ad only
B	Disliking a message very strongly	Negative attitude	Internal factor External factor	Almost no integration	Meaning creation stops immediately, based on two factors
C	Unclear message from unknown source	No ability to understand	Internal factor External factor	Some, limited integration	No meaning, based on two factors
D	A clear message from a preferred provider (existing relationship)	Ability to understand Positive attitude Earlier experience	Internal factor External factor Internal factor Historical factor	Integration of several factors	Meaning based on factors from both dimensions
E	A pleasing message from the foremost provider in the business, enhanced by a long, strong, on-going relationship	Memories, earlier experience A positive attitude and a delighted customer Norms by friends Good ability to understand message Ranking of competitors' messages and products Vision of a shared future	Historical factors Internal factors External factors Future factors	Integration of many factors	Substantial meaning based on several factors from both dimensions

At the opposite end of the continuum the message is integrated with many of the factors in the Relationship Communication Model. This can be described as dynamic multi-dimensional communication, multi-dimensional meaning that both time and situational factors contribute to meaning creation. This type of communication is far from the traditional inside-out view of communication. It is even far from traditional IMC. Of course, since an IMC analysis brings consistency into messages, traditional efforts made by the firm to unify its outgoing messages should not be neglected. However, according to the Relationship Communication Model the consumer also integrates elements outside the control of the company (cf. Duncan and Moriarty 1997). Here the relationship notion plays a central role in providing time and situational factors. The relationship is established, maintained and enhanced over time (Grönroos 2000, 243). Good memories and positive earlier experiences or future expectations related to a trusted provider and similarities in visions are possible influencing factors belonging to the time dimension. Such factors have not previously been seen as relating to the messages sent to consumers, and therefore, they have not been given enough consideration. However, this type of impact can be significant and should be taken into account. A typical situation where factors belonging to the time dimension are integrated with a communication message is when the consumer remembers the first warm welcome he or she received in an encounter with a firm, followed by several trust-enhancing contacts combined with confident expectations about a shared future, that is, a strong belief in an enduring relationship, based on past and future factors.

Similarly, factors from the situational dimension can be integrated with a message. Internal factors having an impact are, for example, feelings such as having confidence, that is, having a positive attitude or good abilities to absorb a message based on earlier interpretations of similar messages in the past. External factors can be other messages from the company (typical IMC), but also messages from competitors, or other inputs from the surrounding society. Other external factors may be the influence of family or friends or the fact that the company in focus plays a major role in society. A typical example of the situational dimension occurs when a consumer is interpreting an ad while making a comparison with a competitor (external factors) or is a pleased and delighted regular customer (internal factors). Meaning creation in communication is based on this logic. Therefore it is important to consider the impact of time and situational factors.

Table 3 displays a summary of how consumers interpreted five different ads. The cases presented in the Table are taken from a study of how meaning is created from advertising when the analysis takes into account both time and situational factors (Finne 2004; Finne and Grönroos 2006). These data are provided as illustrations only. The study itself and the analysis of the ads are not discussed in any detail in the present article.

The second column of Table 3 (perceived message) shows the consumer's perception of the message in the ad. The third column (coding) provides the nature of the perception and the consumer's reflections about the ad. In the fourth column (factors at play) the types of factors influencing meaning creation are listed. The fifth column (integration) assesses to what extent the integration of factors with the ad took place. Finally, the sixth column (meaning) displays what meaning was created from the ad.

In Cases A and B very little integration took place. In the first case there was none, because the source was unknown and the message uninteresting to the consumer, whereas in the second case there was some, although very limited integration. The consumer made some reflections, but due to a negative attitude towards the message the ad was left without much attention. In Case C the message was considered to be unclear and the sender was unknown, but the consumer had some ability to understand the message. Here some

limited integration with situational factors took place. However, time factors relating to a relationship with the sender were not present. The analysis showed that no meaning was created in these cases. On the meaning creation continuum (Figure 3) these three cases are situated towards the 'no integration' end. This type of communication is more or less one-dimensional and can be categorized as non-relational communication.

Cases D and E represent ads that were perceived in favourable ways and which, to varying degrees, triggered positive memories and reflections. A larger number of factors, including relationship-oriented time factors, were at play. In Case D meaning was created from the ad through the integration of its message with factors from both the situational and the time dimensions. In Case E this process went even further and meaning was created based on even more factors. These two cases can be placed towards the relational communication end of the continuum. The ads represent multi-dimensional relationship communication.

Some special cases not included in Table 3 can here be briefly described. There may be a strong impact of several factors, in fact so strong that the message sent from the company as such has limited or even no impact on meaning creation. Typically, this can occur in a situation when a firm is very visible in society, when consumers have many contact points with the firm and the firm is frequently exposed in the media (Finne 2004). In such cases the impact of advertising is so insignificant that less expansive marketing communication is sufficient. The reason for this is that other factors are already doing the job of communication. As a result the company can reduce the communication budget and allow the time and situational factors to do the job. However, a communication message may function as a trigger enhancing favourable meaning creation.

Another type of special case is the opposite of the one described above. Consumers may have mixed perceptions of the firm and its goods or services. Because one factor is signalling something and another factor something else, the situation is confusing. Such a situation may occur when the firm fails to integrate the outgoing messages from various sources (planned, product, service, unplanned communication, absence of communication; cf. Figure 1, Finne 2004, 143) An example of this is when a well-planned advertising campaign accidentally co-occurs with a widely publicized corporate scandal, or a strongly critical debate is running in the press at the same time as the ad campaign. Other similar situations can be caused by poor management, bad planning or weak communication strategies.

Using the Relationship Communication Model as a tool in research and communication management

The Relationship Communication Model works as a tool for the analysis of meaning creation from communication messages. By categorizing the way consumers create meaning for themselves from a message, differences in meaning outcomes can be predicted. Some consumers may create meaning based on the message in, for example, an ad only; others may create meaning based on the ad integrated with several factors simultaneously. The factors to be examined are the historical, future, external and/or internal factors, such as earlier experiences, memories, ongoing strong relationships, expectations or visions, importance of the firm in the surrounding society, a personal project in the family, positive or negative attitudes to the firm or the communication message, the sender or the brand or difficulties in understanding a message.

A variety of factors that have influenced consumer perceptions of meaning have to be assessed. If the meaning creation is influenced by many factors, and the findings indicate

that shared meaning between the company and the consumer has been created, then the communication is classified as relationship communication. A mutual knowledge base in a relationship can form a successful platform for such communication. If the findings show that shared meaning was not created, for example because of negative attitudes or difficulties in interpretation or some other reason, the communication is non-relational. If the findings indicate that shared meaning was created, but no factor had an impact, that is, shared meaning is based on the message only, according to our model the communication cannot be classified as relationship communication. The special cases described above can also occur: The influence of the ad is minor, but the influences of the other factors are stronger. If the findings indicate that shared meaning is created from these factors, for example based on a strong relationship, the communication is classified as relationship communication. In this special case the ad itself functions more as a trigger than as anything else.

The Relationship Communication Model is also a tool for operative management. By using the model as a framework for sorting data and knowledge about customers in the company database, marketers can identify factors that influence consumers' meaning creation. The identification of such factors may reveal new sources of communication messages, which are outside the firm's direct control. Thus marketers are enabled to develop new types of arguments for communication campaigns that will fit the consumers' situation better. Information about historical factors can be found in customer databases and loyalty programmes, but also from frontline personnel and elsewhere in the organization. Information about external factors can be found in reports about economic cycles, technology developments, fashion trends and in competitor analyses. Marketers can contribute top-of-the-mind surveys. Internal factors can be found in studies about consumer attitudes, satisfaction surveys, data from complaint handling and customer response marketing. Information on possible future factors can be detected among expectations and visions on several levels: customers, personnel and shareholders, as well as consumers' envisioned future prospects. By combining these factors in a holistic analysis, more effective marketing communication can be developed. However, such a holistic analysis requires that data sources in the organization are used across functions and departments in an unprejudiced way. This can be a challenge for many organizations, but on the other hand it can form a foundation for future relationship communication and the creation of shared meaning between the company and its customers, and in the final analysis, more effective marketing communication.

Discussion

The Relationship Communication Model represents a new perspective on integrated marketing communication. The change in perspective is central. Instead of looking at outgoing messages, and assuming that they all or at least most of them are conveyed to the receiver, the focus is on the consumer. In the case study reported, this switch in focus turned out to be fruitful. We identified several factors influencing consumers' meaning creation from marketing communication and categorized them along a time dimension and a situational dimension. The result was a two-dimensional model providing a consumer perspective, a need stated by several researchers (Mick and Buhl 1992; Scott 1994; Stern 1996). Our model is far from the traditional concept of conveying a message from an active sender to a passive consumer that is only seen as an object in the process. By taking the consumers' multi-factor situation as a starting-point, the Relationship Communication Model adds a genuine consumer-centric element to IMC. It should be noted that the model

has been developed based on some initial empirical work, but at this point it is basically a conceptual model that needs further empirical testing.

In the relationship marketing literature, communication has not previously been studied to any great extent, but a first step towards filling this gap is the introduction of the meaning creation concept. As the body of meaning literature in marketing is extensive, we focused on researchers that have similar combinations of factors (McCracken 1986, 1987; Friedmann and Zimmer 1988; Domzal and Kernan 1992; Mick and Buhl 1992; Scott 1994; Stern 1996; Padgett and Allen 1997; Grier and Brumbaugh 1999), that is, a combination of at least one type of factor with a message. However, in this body of literature a broad model organizing the different kinds of factors has been lacking. Therefore, the Relationship Communication Model should be of interest to researchers of meaning.

According to the Relationship Communication Model, there are differences in the impact of different factors in communication. Above we have discussed these differences, highlighting opposite ends of what we described as a *meaning creation continuum*. We described the characteristics of the opposite ends in the continuum and, using a case study of consumers' creation of meaning out of five ads as an illustration, demonstrated how the continuum can be used. At the end of the continuum where several factors influence meaning creation, the consumer's perception of an existing relationship has a considerable impact on meaning creation. The role of the time dimension alongside the situational dimension is especially important here. Communication that can be placed towards this part of the continuum is labelled relationship communication. This type of communication differs in structure from other kinds of communication. Communication that can be placed towards the other end of continuum is not interpreted in a relational context, and here situational factors may have less influence on meaning creation as well. At this end meaning creation is non-relational, and the type of marketing communication that belongs to this part of the continuum is non-relational communication.

The implementation of the Relationship Communication Model does not mean that communication messages should be loaded with relational buzzwords or include themes portraying good relationships or other quick fix tactics. Instead, by being exposed to a long-term comprehensive communication process rich in time and situational factors based on messages from a variety of sources, for example, planned communication and product and service sources, consumers create a relational context with which communication messages are integrated, and subsequently relationship communication effects emerge. The communication process, including a flow of messages, becomes relational. In other words, relationship communication takes place. However, it is the consumer who integrates the time and situational factors that have been developing along with communication messages. Through comprehensive communication efforts the marketer can only create the circumstances needed for communication messages to be perceived in a relational context.

In one of the cases reported earlier, the initial message in an ad as such had no impact on the consumer, whereas existing time and situational factors had a strong impact. This was an interesting finding, because it demonstrates that, based on existing factors in the consumer's context, communicational effects can occur in spite of a communication effort that as such has no influence. In this case, though the ad itself had no direct effect on the consumer, it functioned as a trigger creating a communication impact. Favourable circumstances existed for a positive relational communication impact to occur. Hence, there are possibilities for marketers to keep, for example, advertising costs at a minimum level and still create the wanted communication effects. If favourable contextual circumstances including time and situational factors have been developed in the minds

of consumers, the time and situational factors can do most of the communication job, and the company need not invest heavily in marketing communication campaigns.

To sum up, our article shows how the Relationship Communication Model can be used as a tool in research and management. Thus, the model appears to be a useful tool for analysing meaning creation in marketing communication as well as for analysing marketing communication itself.

Conclusions and implications

In this paper the focus on the receiver as an active part in the communication process is of central importance. Instead of focusing solely on the outbound message, several factors have been taken into consideration. Compared with other broader approaches, for example, integrated marketing communications or analysing messages in combination with one type of factors (McCracken 1986; Domzal and Kernan 1992; Duncan and Moriarty 1997; Padgett and Allen 1997; Grier and Brumbaugh 1999), the concept introduced in this article, integrating communication messages with consumer-specific historical, future, external and internal factors into a single model, considerably broadens the view on marketing communication. In our view, the consumer is the only source that can perform the integration of communication messages with factors that are of importance to him or her. Therefore, what we have called relationship communication cannot be planned and created without making the consumers' perceptions an integral element of the planning and implementation process. Also, the concept suggested here works as a conceptual bridge-builder in linking two different research traditions, integrated marketing communication and relationship marketing, and the combination of the two traditions appears to be highly productive. The Relationship Communication Model sheds light on the emerging concept of relationship communication. Instead of focusing on a planned integrated message unmodified by receiver-specific circumstances, this model takes a step further by including information on consumer-relevant time and situational factors in communication planning.

We have proposed that relationship communication differs from other types of communication, in the sense that several factors influence meaning creation. Relationship communication is characterized by a situation where two parties take part in the communication process as active participants in the creation of meaning. The time perspective is essential, and several factors are included in the creation process. Using the Relationship Communication Model as an instrument of analysis makes it possible for the researcher or marketer to take into account these factors. By integrating approaches from different streams of research, the model makes a contribution to the literature on traditional communication, integrated marketing communication and relationship marketing.

To the best of our knowledge, one category of factors, future factors, has not previously been discussed in the communication literature. Nevertheless, especially in relationship communication the impact of this specific factor seems to be central. How to measure the occurrence and impact of future and other factors is an area for further research. In our analysis we have only briefly indicated where information needed for such measuring can be found.

Another task for further research is suggested by one of the cases described, where relationship communication seems to occur despite a negative perception of the ad. An ad, or any other type of marketing communication, may function as a trigger that engenders meaning creation, without providing any substantial input. If parts of expensive campaigns can be cancelled, with cost savings as a result, and relationship communication can still

be created, the relationship communication concept may enable considerable cost-savings for communication strategies.

From integrated marketing communication to relationship communication

Our analysis demonstrates that integrated marketing communication is an inside-out approach to marketing communication. Therefore, we offer the following consumer-centric definition of marketing communication:

Relationship communication is any type of marketing communication that influences the receiver's long-term commitment to the sender by facilitating meaning creation through integration with the receiver's time and situational context. The time context refers to the receiver's perception of the history and envisioned future of his/her relationship with the sender. The situational context refers to other elements internal or external to the receiver.

As the receiver of communication messages, the customer performs the integration, and in this integration process meaning creation takes place. Hence, whereas integrated marketing communication refers to an integration of messages that takes place at the company level, integration according to the Relationship Communication Model refers to integrating the message with the consumer's time and situation. The integration takes place at the consumer level. Instead of integrating outbound messages the focus is shifted to the consumer's integration of inbound messages.

Because the time and situational contexts are unique for any given person, the integration and meaning creation processes differ between individuals. The same message may trigger different meanings. Hence, relationship communication is not an input that is planned as such and by definition differs from some other type of communication. Instead, *relationship communication is an outcome*. It is the receiver who determines whether a communication message or campaign is relationship communication or not. A message or campaign that triggers an integration and meaning creation process resulting in relationship communication for one person may not result in relationship communication for another person. Its success depends on the time and situational context of the customer, as described by the Relationship Communication Model proposed in the present article.

Although the receiver of communication messages determines whether or not a communication effort or campaign functions as relationship communication, the marketer may, and if it is considered appropriate, should attempt to plan and execute the firm's marketing communication efforts or campaigns in a way that leads to a relationship communication outcome. This, however, requires that the marketer has obtained sufficient information about the relevant time and situational dimensions of its target customers.

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