

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Through a Glass Darkly: IMC's Applicability in Religious Organisations

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Abstract

The relation between religion and advertising/marketing/communication is a two-way street. Advertising may use religious symbols to be more effective, and just like any other organisation, a religious body needs marketing, advertising and communication to develop. What works for any business also has to work for religious organizations. The first three sections of this conceptual research describe the main concepts: religion, religions, and integrated marketing communications (IMC) and its four stages of development. We conclude by drawing these two strands – religion and advertising – together. On the one hand religion and advertising make uneasy bedfellows, yet on the other, pressing needs must inexorably lead to change, and in some cases, the world of business communications has been embraced wholeheartedly even by apparently spiritually-motivated organisations. Based on hard-nosed objective evidence from the world of business – of which all religions are part – we recommend the recommendation of marketing concept, with its current brand-driven communication process, i.e.that of integrated marketing communications always and irrevocably predicated upon a sound understanding of the dynamics of served markets.

Keywords: Religion, Advertising, Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC), Marketing Concept, Dynamics of Served Markets.

1. Introduction

Ideas in marketing come from many diverse disciplines and are extended to other areas of academic relevance and practitioner applicability (Kitchen, 2004; 2017). Every business and organisation - whether wittingly or unwittingly - has to interact with its surrounding environment – locally, nationally, internationally and some cases globally. However, it is not enough to exist. As aptly coined by Peter Drucker: ‘the business that keeps on doing what it’s doing now, will ... fail’. This is because ... environments, including the all-important life blood of any organisation – customers and consumers - continue to change. Every movement, religious or otherwise, inevitably has to take its position in the modern world, the world of today *and* tomorrow.

A managerial concept that has taken significant root in 21st century marketing practice is that of integrated marketing communications (hereinafter IMC). Just thirty short years ago, books on marketing by all authors included chapters approaching communication in a separatist manner. For example, advertising was once the spearheading force leading the charge in business-to-consumer organisations. Something of 70% of communications in the early 1980’s went into advertising, and 30% went on other promotional mix variables such sales promotion, marketing public relations and direct marketing. Given continuous technological change, the demassification and splintering of markets, the aegis and inroads of digital marketing, much more aware consumers, and the associated needs of modern business, it makes

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no economic or communication sense to continue to throw money into broadcast or broadscale media (Kitchen, 2017; Kitchen and Tourky, 2021). The tools and even the strategies of marketing communication need to be adapted accordingly.

Moreover, religious organisations do seem to be flexing their own under developed marketing communication muscles in what appear to be fairly unspiritual domains. While at the level of religion itself, such communications are unnecessary; at the next level, they manifest ever greater import. Spiritual and religious appeals, architecture and iconography, and indeed what ministers do and not do, can and does impact consumer perceptions and behaviour.

This paper attempts to align and bring together these seemingly disparate subjects. We have not taken issue with spirituality as we assume this is innate to all sentient beings, irrespective of religious affiliation or non-affiliation. There is no reason to assume that a specific religious body or its leaders has a greater grasp on spirituality than any other group of men or women.

We commence with the need for communication (*ala* advertising in its broadest sense), that in religion, before rapidly pressing on into the murkier waters of applicability to religions *per se*. Then, we address the subject of IMC in terms of the well-known four stages of development. At this time, we see little to no evidence of IMC's applicability except at the most basic and crudest first stage, a level akin to a type of marketing orientation that has been out of fashion for some decades. However, that may work ...for now ... but as markets change and evolve so slower moving religious organisations are inexorably drawn into business practice. What works in business has also to made to work for religions.

We conclude by drawing these two strands together. On the one hand they make uneasy bedfellows, yet on the other, pressing needs must inexorably lead to change, and in some cases, the world of business communications has been wholeheartedly embraced even by spiritually-motivated organisations.

2. Religion

In retrospect, religion seems almost an inherent part of human progression and growth. Almost from the appearance or evolution of *homo sapiens* upon the earth, there seemed to be a concomitant rise in the desire to worship something, perhaps the earth and its cycles itself. First fetishism had its day, before moving onto higher works of nature such as worship of sun, moon, stars, and even animals. Then came

the age of polytheism (Evolutionist, 1878), or the worship of multiple and diverse deities, (aggrandised humans or part animals), resulting for a while in a veritable pantheon of gods and goddesses with the subsequent need for offerings and appeasement. The ideal of one being to worship was to rise later. Then, hero worship with its accompanying self-declarations of deity with strict obedience enforced. Next came pantheism (Stanford 2020); and eventually the monotheistic emergence among the Jewish race of One God, apparently to rule and reign over the human race. Moreover, a God who would eventually incarnate in bodily form, leading to the admixture of the divine and human in Christianity and modern-day Islam. It could be argued than in the earlier stages, there was no need for priests and prophets, pomp and pageantry, or indeed efforts to systematize beliefs, rituals or practices. Indeed, the need for a clergy of any description was not initially needed or wanted. Yet, the early – perhaps even natural developments - were soon to be structured, managed and led ... and configured for the circumstances into which they were to take root and grow, eventually transitioning into myriad diverse forms. As with other phases, however, these also may have their brief moment of time on the world stage, and be perhaps replaced by other more appropriate forms.

3. Religions

Today, there are almost an infinite variety of religious forms and organisations, the largest of which are Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Sikhism, Judaism and Jainism. There are many others as well. We also have Atheism and Agnosticism which can be discounted for marketing communication purposes, despite their disparate, oppositional and loud voices. In Christianity alone, there were 41,000 separate organisations in 2021. Each of these is inevitably cast into role of a business organisation and of necessity business communicator. Yet, while one may hope for transparency at this exalted level, such is hard to come by. For example, it is extremely difficult if not impossible to ascertain how these organisations actually allocate resources relative to their received income. Both income and expenditure are shrouded in mystery and surrounded by ambiguity. Religious bodies are seen to be part of the charitable sector, and while some charities have to declare income and expenditure in certain parts of the world (the UK and Canada for example), in other parts of the world such as the USA, churches are not even required to make such declarations and are exempt even from producing accounts. Hence,

ascertaining what income is received or indeed how it is spent is next to impossible where religions or formal bodies of religion are concerned. This does not stop these organisations communicating or promoting their specific brand of religion or worship. Inevitably such communications are focused upon what could be termed 'warm and fuzzy' feelings associated with repentance, redemption, forgiveness, fellowship, community and a more certain assurance of a future heavenly existence. They are never focussed upon income or expenditure and great lengths are resorted to, to ensure that such information is never made available to lay members or potential future members. Thus, any attempt at ascertaining expenditure – for example on multitudinous forms of online and offline communications is extremely difficult – at best a guesstimate.

As is made plain by the Pew Research Centre (2020), there is also a generalised decline in church attendance or belief in a specific formalised religious vehicle such as a Church. Simultaneously, many non-attenders claim to believe in a personal God, and to practice and experience somewhat of spirituality. Admittedly, percentages of such claims are higher among those remaining faithful to a specific religious organisation.

For any religious organisation, we take marketing communications in its widest sense. Thus, all elements of the organisation communicate something to someone in some specific context. The existence of a religious organisation alone (i.e. even without buildings or clergy) inevitably communicates something. When the organisation is supplemented with buildings and structures such as churches, cathedrals, chapels, synagogues, mosques, tabernacles, temples, schools, universities, academies, and their popes, priests, vicars, clergy, administrators and laity.. all communicate something. Further, their doctrine or set of adherable beliefs tend to be similar yet variable and form a basis for continual discourse, conjecture and communication... sometimes adversarial in nature. The lay members or laity (if such are used in preaching terms) tend to be different from other believers. Moreover, wars have been fought over apparently competing versions of the same basic doctrine (for example, Catholicism vs Protestantism in Christianity; or Suni vs Shia, Sufi and Ahmadiyya in Islam). Certainly, believers are vociferous and have at times been combative in their religious stances and opinions. The ways these organisations are structured with various hierarchical levels often adorned with priestly robes is also different. Thus, to an extent,

using the four P's of marketing, popularised by E. Jerome McCarthy is both pertinent and applicable in a broad communication context:

- *Product* can be seen as the basic differentiating doctrines of the faith
- *Place* can be seen as the churches, the buildings and infrastructure. Each major religion tends to have a central locale such as Mecca, Rome or Jerusalem.
- *Price* can be seen as the financial structure of the Church, how is it financed? Where does the income come from? Is it sustainable/repeatable? Income sources may commence with its members but rapidly diversifies into multiple income sources.
- *Promotion* or *Communication* tends to be the way the church is self-positioned or identified and here the usual management subjects of brand or corporate image, identity and reputation come to the fore. Such communications are formalised over time. Also, here we can add marketing communications aided by such topics as integrated marketing communications (defined in the next section). It is, however, remarkable to note that in some large organisations significant corruption and widespread abuse is widely publicised, yet seems to have little discernible effect on membership patterns or indeed ongoing environmental support.

These terms are not those usually used inside the organisations, but are used here as a transitional mechanism to the world of business and marketing. Yet, religions and churches are at the same time organisations and businesses. They do not stand above others in some separate hallowed hall of religious piety (or dubiety). Nor should they be exempted from the usual processes of taxation. As organisations commanding significantly greater resources than even the largest businesses such as Apple or Amazon, their activities should not be shrouded by obscurity. In fact, it could be argued that each religion or church should be willing to stand forth, honestly and openly in financial terms, so that all can see they are fulfilling financially the religious objectives proclaimed to be integral to their faith. Speculatively, such openness could open the door to growth opportunities and even greater membership support.

4. Integrated Marketing Communications

Since 1993, this topic has expanded to become one of the most significant marketing management and communications practices. As it been poured into

the crucible of brands and branding, it is now the dominant approach in marketing books, and often cited in managerial and marketing texts. 'Integration' of marketing communications' is the new norm, with calls for papers by marketing, communication and managerial journals. Indeed, organisations representing these disciplines such as the APQC, AMA, IPA and MSI regularly call for more papers and more managerial and practitioner insight into the subject (Kitchen and Tourky, 2021). There is however, rarely smoke without fire, and once the fire of empirical evidence became available, academics and practitioners alike were quick to jump onto the IMC bandwagon. Yet there are some obstacles on the road to true integration. These include:

- Many companies have achieved 'message integration', but not necessarily from a consumer perspective.
- Markets, consisting of customers, consumers and users are not well understood.
- Companies carry out either no research, or poor ineffectual market research
- Databases tend to be focussed upon low-cost outward-bound modalities for communications
- Budget constraints and environmental circumstances are often blamed for lack of deeper insight into consumer needs.

- Messages tend to be outbound or one-way, albeit with an artificial stereotypical sameness.
- Communications, whether led by advertising or some other mechanism, is primarily organisationally oriented, a form of sledgehammer marketing which tends to be annoying and irritating to consumers, while causing existing adherents to the faith some serious questions.

Out with the religious context, just why is Christmas prefaced by multitudinous advertisements to donate to charities? Yes, Christmas is a time for gifts, kindness and generosity, but is it also a time to be pestered ad nauseum to support everything from snow leopards, to hedgehogs, to the homeless and children in need? Leaving that aside, there are some stages which IMC adherents have found useful in delineating how organisations can best apply the concept.

4.1 The Four Stages of IMC Development

These stages have been discussed since at least 2000 and are restated in the book by Kitchen and Tourky (2021). They are depicted in Figure 1 below:

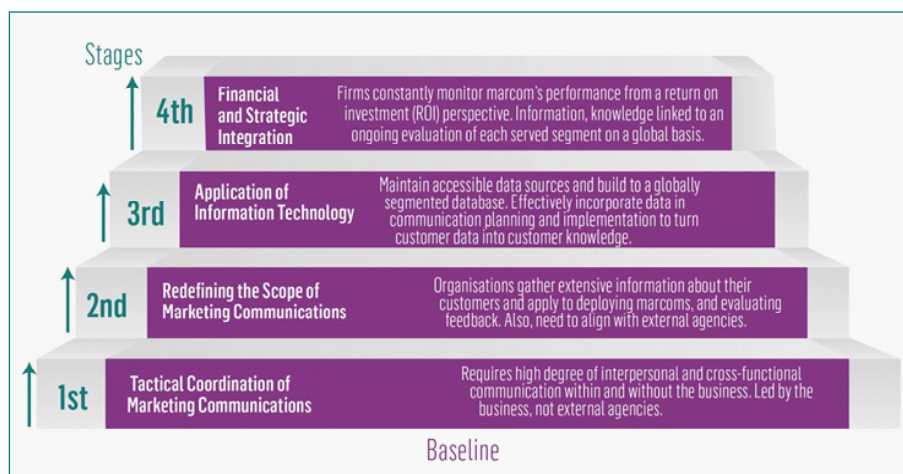


Figure 1. The Stages of IMC Development. Used with the kind permission of Kitchen&Tourky, 2021; and also cited in Kitchen &Tourky, 2020).

Stage 1 is the most basic of all, and simply requires the organisation, religion or Church, to align all communications into a 'one-voice' phenomenon. Hence, advertising, direct marketing, public relations, and all online and offline communications are integrated into a consistently repeatable form. The synergies of each promotional element are brought together so that messages look or sound more or

less the same to the target audience, audiences, or congregations. While stories, actors, scenes, and music will vary, values will be consistently portrayed. However, please note that is all done *internally*, without recourse to understanding or seeking to understand the dynamics, wants or needs of the target markets. It is the most widespread and popular approach. In all of the communications we have seen,

however, never once is the organisational structure or its income or outgoings portrayed. What these messages are in fact, are peripheral route elements that may catch the attention of some who may then act to send an email or make a freephone telephone call.

Such an approach has a lot more to do with selling and little to do with marketing. As early as 1960, Professor Levitt of Harvard University condemned this approach as 'sales orientation' – simple repetitive messaging – with an unwillingness to take into consideration – customer needs (Levitt, 1960). Such a myopic hide-bound approach is doomed to failure in the medium and long term. It is based on a short-sighted narrow view of the market. It is in effect an inside-out approach to marketing communications. Start inside > transmit outside. The stage also corresponds to the worn-out ideologies and communication modalities associated with marketplaces of the 1960s. If such messages reach consumers by online digital modalities in their current marketplaces, often they are blocked by adblockers or treated as spam, unless some way can be found to personalise the generalities.

Stage 2 at least offers the benefit of seeking to understand the dynamics of served markets. Instead of transmitting internally-generated messages outward, the organisation or religion starts with its customers and potential prospects by means of market research. Then, based on an understanding of their needs, reading or viewing habits, the organisation then decides what messages may be most pertinent and attractive. This stage corresponds with modern-day marketing with the aim of satisfying organisational and recipient needs (see Kotler and Keller, 2018). Hence, our advice to religious bodies is to 'start outside' then plan messages and delivery modalities accordingly. While stage 1 treats people as passive pawns on some selling chessboard, in essence, both parties in the communication process are equal and rightly so. For example, there are no powerfully dominant communicators and no weak passive receiver or recipients. Admittedly, the costs of stage 2 dwarf those of stage 1, but bring much richer returns. It is possible that conflicts and problems such as the global financial crisis and of course COVID-19 do impact communication budgets, leading perhaps to reversion to earlier and simpler generic communication forms. However, religious organisations often have sufficient in reserve to ride these temporary storms. Whether they will invest in better, more efficient processes of analysis, planning and implementation of consumer-oriented communications is however, another matter entirely. Despite an extensive literature search, we can

find no evidence of any religious organisation having conducted market research with their constituents to ascertain communication receptivity.

Stages 3 and 4 are self-explanatory and both build extensively on stage 2. But, if religions are uninterested to gather current market data, they will be most unlikely to build extensive infrastructure in terms of data gathering technology nor pay the skilled personnel to use it. That said, virtually all religions monitor their membership carefully, not to reach or teach them necessarily, but simply to maintain membership numbers. Likewise, if attitudes and opinions among the adherents are not taken seriously, it is unlikely that behaviour responses to communication will ever be considered or measured.

5. Drawing the Strands Together

In our view, most if not all religions may see their audiences and potential audiences as passive and compliant in nature and this may well be a correct assumption. But, as attendances continue to dwindle and as criticisms are levelled, certain questions may arise such as:

- Do we understand the bases on which we retain current membership?
- What steps have been taken or are planned to be taken to draw closer to our congregations?
- For those outside the flock, and assuming some type of evangelism, what do we actually know of their spiritual needs and wants? What is the foundation of this knowledge? Where, when and how was the information obtained? When was it last updated?
- Based upon the above, what the best messages and delivery modalities for:
 - Current active congregations?
 - Lapsed or non-participant members?
 - Future potential congregants?
- To what extent does the organisation/religion maintain feedback loops with its congregants? Are these just for 'forms sake' or does the organisation take feedback seriously? How is this evidenced from a congregants' perspective?

Religious bodies seem to be at an early stage of their marketing development. Often organisations cannot be seen clearly, and not at all in terms of income and expenditure. They are protected from taxation in some countries and full disclosure of financial affairs

is impossible. Potential future members are not given adequate information on which to make well-informed choices. Communication from congregant members is often discouraged. Feedback loops – if available – are often delayed for years, sometimes decades, and any feedback proffered is seen as unhelpful and even negative. Communication is always outbound and one way and often based on creedal assumptions which may be far removed from peoples real need for spiritual food and guidance. Yet, it seems as if the underlying need is there and will continue to there. Whether this can be addressed by the current religious forms and structures seems debateable.

6. Summary and Conclusion

As stated above, there is evidence that religion and spirituality do play a role in influencing consumer thought and behaviour, including adherence to specific faith-based religions. Yet, simultaneously congregations are falling with dwindling. Also, many would-be consumers openly proclaim their agnosticism and atheism, or maintain personal levels of spirituality. Indeed, based on the Pew Report (op cit), the sense of deeply-held spiritual values continues to be manifest in all societies. Our proposed solution and recommendation is for religious organisations to learn what members and future members may want or need in terms of current and future spiritual needs. To that end, we readily observe that religions already possess some of the trappings and fripperies of marketing ... such as outbound communications including advertising. Such a one-way approaches resembles or matches that of sales orientation. That is not good enough for current and future retention and growth. Our solution is that religions nail their truths, doctrine and performance ... by becoming much more open, transparent, and ... yes... marketing oriented.

While not in a faith-filled way, but based on hard-nosed objective evidence from the world of business – of which all religions are part – we recommend the whole-hearted adoption of the marketing concept, with its current brand-driven communication process, that of integrated marketing communications

predicated upon a sound understanding of the dynamics of served markets. Yes, they we may see through a glass darkly at present, but this is a direct result of deliberate religious organisational obscurantism, aided and abetted by significant legislative and fiscal advantages. Just as we saw the decline of early worship variants, so the current flock of multitudinous religious forms may also decline into obscurity. Time perhaps for a new approach.

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