

Integrated marketing communication in the digital environment. Advertiser attitudes towards online communication techniques

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Abstract

The growth and development of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has brought with it numerous communication techniques related to the online environment. It has also changed the way in which consumers consider business communication, demanding increased interaction and personalization of the messages. In the face of this concept, it is increasingly necessary for companies to strategically coordinate and integrate the tools that are used in both on and offline channels. This study attempts to determine whether or not the online communication tools are integrated according to conventional techniques, and also whether they consider the consumer when it comes to defining communi-

cation strategies. To do this, an online survey was created for a national sample of 301 Spanish companies, representing distinct sizes and activity sectors. The primary results reveal, on the one hand, a very positive attitude was found between all of the surveyed companies, regardless of size or activity sector, towards integrated marketing communication, mostly between the digital communication techniques in terms of coordinating the messages that are sent out via a combination of on and offline channels. And, on the other hand, the actual communication integration level in companies is more tactical than strategic.

Keywords: communication; Internet; communication strategies; communication planning; consumer.

INTRODUCTION

TODAY'S highly competitive world is increasingly demanding that companies organize and coordinate their mixture of communication with a main objective: to ensure that the message clearly, coherently and uniformly reaches the target audience (Navarro-Bailon et al., 2010). This

Data de submissão: 2018-01-13. Data de aprovação: 2019-03-18.

A *Revista Estudos em Comunicação* é financiada por Fundos FEDER através do Programa Operacional Factores de Competitividade – COMPETE e por Fundos Nacionais através da FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia no âmbito do projeto *Comunicação, Filosofia e Humanidades (LabCom.IFP) UID/CCI/00661/2013*.



was declared by Nowak and Phelps (1994) to be “one single voice” in marketing communication, that is, the transfer of an image based on one sole strategy, regardless of the technique and channel used.

This idea, currently widely accepted and recognized by professionals and academics of the sector, began in the late 1980s under the concept of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC), which sought out effective synergy between the distinct tools making up the communication variable for the company. Various authors have declared that IMC produces positive effects such as: offering a competitive advantage to the company, helping improve client relations, increasing brand equity, achieving improved financial results and increasing campaign notoriety (Thorson & Moore, 1996; Schult & Kitchen, 1997; Smith, 2002; Reid, 2005; Navarro-Bailón et al., 2009; Naeem et al., 2013; Luxton et al., 2015).

However, with the rise of the Internet and the development of ICT, the communication context has changed significantly and a large number of techniques based on the online environment have arisen. This has forced companies to include marketing and communication actions based on the new technologies in their strategies and to redistribute their budgets between the on and offline environments.

This study attempts to determine how Spanish companies are tackling the distinct changes taking place in the new context of marketing and communication, specifically in the online environment.

1. Theoretical framework

The first definition of IMC was offered in 1989 when the American Association of Advertising Agencies (AAAA) declared it to be “A concept of marketing communications planning that recognizes the added value of a comprehensive plan that evaluated the strategic role of a variety of communication disciplines, e.g. general advertising, direct response, sales promotion and public relations, and combines these disciplines to provide clarity, consistency and maximum communications impact” (in Duncan & Everett, 1993, p. 31).

Since then, numerous authors have provided distinct definitions in an attempt to describe the concept (Schultz, 1991, 1993, 1996, 1997; Duncan & Caywood, 1996; Kitchen & Schultz, 1999; Kotler, 2000; Pickton & Broderick, 2001; Duncan, 2002; Peltier et al., 2003; Cornelissen, 2003; Kim et al., 2004; Duncan & Mulherm, 2004; Gould, 2004; McGrath, 2005; Kliatchko, 2005, 2008; Torp, 2009; Seric & Gil Saura, 2012). Gould et al (1999) went even further to coin the term “Globally Integrated Marketing Communications”, referring to the global system of coordinating integrated marketing communication when applied to different countries.

All of the authors share the belief that IMC is a strategic element that is crucial to companies in order to create lasting relationships with clients and stakeholders. So, some of the definitions provided by certain authors are of special importance given that they underscore the direction that IMC should take towards the market, specifically, towards the client (Keegan et al., 1992; Reid et al., 2005; Porcu et al, 2012).

However, despite the fact that IMC is considered and accepted as a strategic element that helps companies achieve a competitive position over time (Holm, 2006), the majority of companies

continue to implement it from a tactical perspective. So, some studies have revealed that very few companies strategically integrate communication actions with their company's corporate and financial management (Smith et al., 1999; Kitchen & Schultz, 2000). This means that although IMC is a concept that, theoretically speaking, has been greatly studied, its practical application and full integration remains at very low levels within companies.

IMC has also brought with it changes in the relationship between the advertising agencies and the company (Gronstedt, 1996; Schultz & Kitchen, 1997), a redefining of the roles of each of the participants in the work process (Beard, 1996), as well as the search and appearance of new expert professional profiles in both parts that are capable of fully integrating communication in a strategic manner (Beard, 1997).

Some authors have attempted to determine the most important factors resulting in higher levels of company integration. Specifically, certain aspects have been identified, such as: orientation towards the consumer and the market (Low, 2000); the commitment and implication of upper management (Porcu et al., 2012); the type and size of the same and the leadership position in the market (Reid et al., 2005); the level of development of the marketing within the company (Kitchen et al., 2004).

The appearance of the Internet and the development of ICT technologies have resulted in the need to integrate traditional communication techniques with the use of new technologies. This new orientation has led to other names associated with the original IMC concept including the online concept, such as: "interactive integrated marketing communication" (Peltier et al, 2003), "integrated marketing communication based on the web" (Barker & Angelopuolo, 2004), "online marketing communication" (Jensen & Jepsen, 2008), "integrated online marketing communication" (Gurău, 2008) and "interactive marketing communications" (Keller, 2009).

One relevant example of this integrated vision of the new technologies within the traditional IMC concept is the definition provided by Seric & Gil Saura (2012) which states that "integrated marketing communication is a tactical and strategic business process, strengthened by the advances in information and communication technologies (ICT) and focused on the consumer, which, based on client information obtained from databases, transmits a clear and coherent message through the synergies of distinct communication tools and channels, with the objective of creating and maintaining the brand value and profitable and long lasting relationships with clients and interest groups" (p. 69).

Along with the development and growth of the ICT, other aspects have also led to a recent increase in the importance of the role of integrated marketing communication in companies. Of the most relevant of these aspect we highlight: a decrease in power and loss of trust in advertising (Torp, 2009); the appearance of a new consumer (termed *crossumer*) who is much more informed, demanding and has greater power against the brands (Kim et al., 2004; Gurău, 2008) and who also contributes to creating some of the brand content (*prosumer*); the fragmentation of the mass media and the audiences (Kim et al., 2004; Gurău, 2008; Torp, 2009); the need to look for more effective communication disciplines (Kitchen & Schultz, 2000; Kim et al, 2004; Kitchen et al., 2004) and; an increased concern for the return on the investment by the companies that over recent years have reduced their communication budgets seeking out more economic and efficient alternatives in order to reach their target audiences.

Jensen and Jepsen (2008) declared that the characteristics defining the tools that are found within the online marketing communication (OMC) are: freedom from temporal and spatial restrictions; many to many communication; interactivity; hyper textuality and personalization.

As we have seen, IMC has been a topic of study for over 20 years and it continues to be so, even today. The increasingly complex panorama of communication is forcing companies to strategically integrate distinct communication tools in the on and offline environment, in order to offer a uniform message to the consumer.

2. Objectives and methodology

This study is part of a larger, more global research project entitled “New brand communication scenarios in institutions and companies”¹ researching the brand, the consumer and the digital environment as the three most important aspects for companies over the coming years (Deloitte et al., 2016).

Precisely for this purpose of determining the relationships between companies and consumers in the digital environment, a quantitative methodology study was proposed to permit the dimensioning of the state of the use of interactive communication technologies and media within the planning of integrated communication of the advertising companies.

Among the main research objectives, the following are considered:

- To obtain information on the main attitudes regarding communications technology and the changes that are taking place in the market and how they affect integrated marketing communications and their relationship with sector providers (advertising agencies, technical experts, etc.).
- To determine how the new communication technologies affect planning, especially, with the proliferation of new channels and formats within a wide range of integrated marketing communication tools.
- To determine if differences exist in terms of the type of company and activity sector when integrating communication in marketing.

To conduct this quantitative study, a structured online interview was applied to a sample of 301 marketing managers and/or advertising or commercial communication managers of Spanish advertisers. Fieldwork was carried out during the months of February and March of 2016. Sample error was +/- 5.3% for the confidence level of $p=q=0.5$ and the sampling method was stratified by shares. With this sample error, we should consider the results as indicators of trends, in statistical terms².

1. R&D&i Project examining the challenges of the 2013-2015 Society, Ministry of Economics and Competitiveness. No.: CSO2013-46410-R.

2. For the analysis of the information, the SPSS statistics program was used and some of the analysis techniques employed were: frequencies analysis, contingency tables, descriptive statistics and factorial analysis.

3. Results

3.1. Sample composition

The selected sample has considered the geographic area in order to better represent the greatest volume of advertisers, according to place where the company is located. Logically, 22.9% of the interviewed advertisers were situated in the metropolitan area of Madrid, 15% in the North Eastern area, Catalonia and the Balearic Islands and 14% in the metropolitan area of Barcelona, with these areas being where most activity is concentrated. 48.1% of the remaining advertisers were located in other geographical areas.

As for company size, 45.5% of the advertising companies interviewed were small companies (up to 49 employees), 32.6% were medium sized companies (from 50 to 250 employees) and 21.9% were large companies (over 250 employees). And as for the sector of the interviewed advertisers, Table 1 reveals the distribution based on sectors, with two of the same standing out: public and private services (23.3%) and telecommunications and Internet (15%).

Table 1. Sample composition based on sectors

	Frequency	Percentage	Percentage accumulated
Distribution and restoration	11	3.7	3.7
Banks, insurers, etc.	13	4.3	8.0
Automotive	7	2.3	10.3
Health, beauty and hygiene	21	7.0	17.3
Culture and education	32	10.6	27.9
Telecommunications and Internet	45	15.0	42.9
Public and private services	70	23.3	66.1
Transportation, travel and tourism	15	5.0	71.1
Food and drinks	29	9.6	80.7
Sports and free time	7	2.3	83.1
Energy (gas, electricity, etc.)	9	3.0	86.0
Cleaning and household	8	2.7	88.7
Textile and fashion	6	2.0	90.7
Construction (real estate, etc.)	28	9.3	100.0
Total	301	100.0	

Source: own elaboration

3.2. Integrated marketing communication vs integrated online marketing communication: synergies between the on and offline environments

An important aspect of the research that was conducted is to determine whether or not coordination exists between the distinct online communication tools, and whether or not these techniques developed in the digital environment are implemented considering the traditional communication

tools. That is, if integration truly exists between on and offline communication in the distinct Spanish companies.

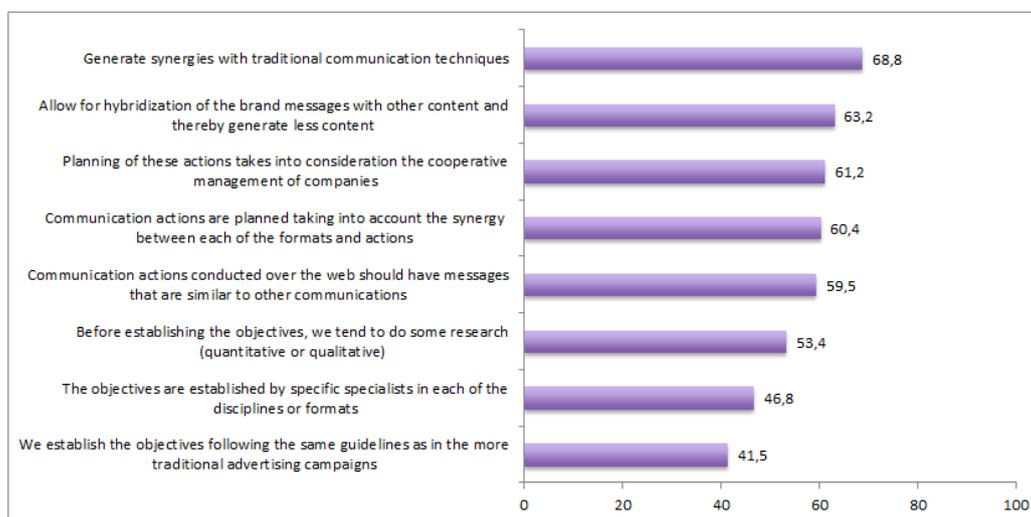
Specifically, 68.8% of the surveyed advertisers are in full or almost full agreement with the idea that digital communication techniques generate synergies with traditional communication techniques. So, in 61.2% of all companies, corporate management is considered when planning these digital communication actions in order to ensure the integration of the corporate values within the set of all communication actions to be carried out by the company, in both the on and offline environments. This aspect is of vital importance given that, as Gurău stated (2008), the first step in order to introduce an integrated online marketing communication model within the company is the integration of the corporate values of the company in the campaign message. Or as suggested by Smith et al. (1999), who consider that effective communication objectives may not be created effectively unless they are coordinated with the marketing and corporate objectives.

Similarly, we observe that companies are aware of the importance of promoting integrated marketing communication, thus 60% of the advertisers understand that the communication actions carried out on the network should have messages that are similar to the other offline communications. Thus, as other authors such as Navarro-Bailonet al. (2010) and Nowak & Phelps (1994) have already indicated, the campaign message shall be the same regardless of the channel and technique used to communicate with the target audience.

Furthermore, 63.2% of the surveyed advertisers believe that online communication permits the hybridization of the brand messages with other content (63.2%) and 6 out of 10 advertisers currently plan their communication actions based on the synergy between each of the formats and actions carried out in the online environment in order to ensure maximum integration between them.

However, although the IMC appears to be important for Spanish companies when it comes to planning their communication strategies, 41.5% of the advertisers that were consulted continue to promote the use of the same guidelines of traditional advertising campaigns in the new digital environment communication forms. Also, 46.8% believe that the campaign objectives should be established by specific specialists in each of the disciplines or formats, with a lack of communication coordination continuing to be found in many of the advertising companies, despite the fact that, as we have seen earlier, their attitude towards integrated communication marketing is quite positive (Graph1). Regarding this, some authors have already declared (Smith et al., 1999; Kitchen & Schultz, 2000) that full integration remains at a very strategic level in the companies.

Graph1. Synergies between on and offline communication: integrated marketing communication

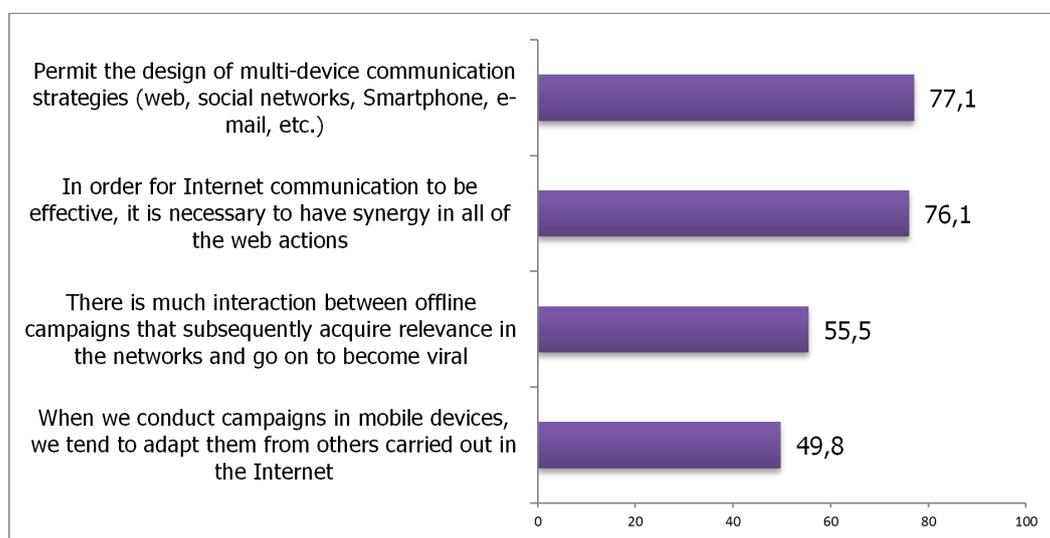


Source: own elaboration

As for integrated online communication, when considering the attitude that is currently expressed by the surveyed companies regarding synergies within digital communication, it is observed that 77.1% of the sample agrees with the possibility that online actions offer of designing multi-device communication strategies. The same occurred with the opinion related to the synergy that should be produced between all actions that are carried out online (76.1%), which according to the advertisers should be coordinated and integrated together in order to offer a uniform and coherent offer to the target audience.

Finally, we find companies that believe that there should be a lot of interaction between the offline campaigns that subsequently acquire relevance in the networks and go on to become viral (55.5%) as well as other advertisers who seek synergy and integration between the campaigns conducted both over the Internet and in mobile devices (half of those interviewed).

Graph 2. Digital communication synergies



Source: own elaboration

One noteworthy aspect is that, even though numerous authors (Low, 2000; Kitchen et al., 2004; Reid et al., 2005 and Porcu et al., 2012), have identified distinct criteria regarding the type of company that have an effect on its greater or lower level of integration, in this study no significant differences were found based on company size or activity sector. So, it appears that there is a generalized attitude among all of the studied companies with regards to integrated marketing communication.

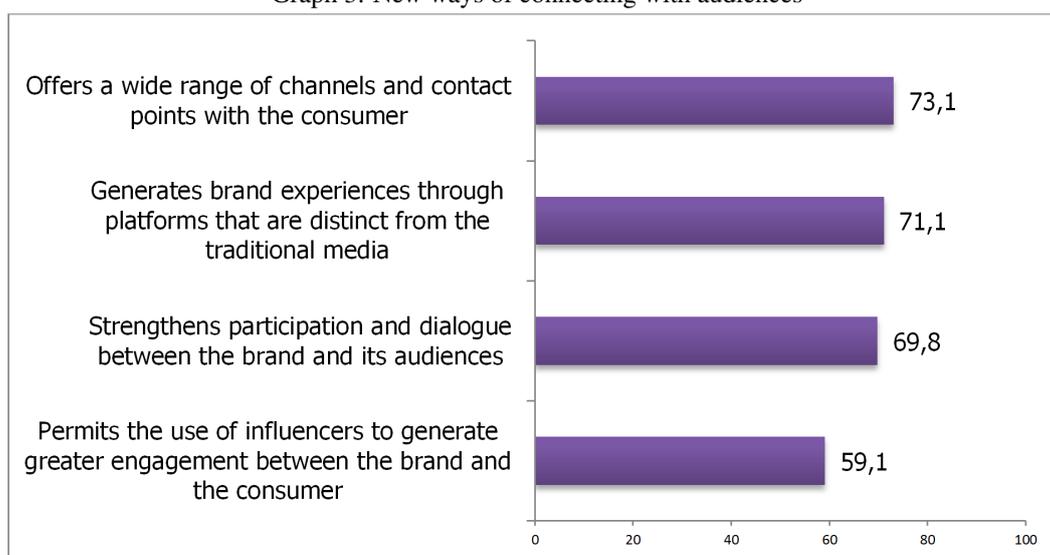
3.3. Advantages of online communication in the face of the new panorama of communication of companies with their audiences

As previously mentioned, consumers have changed and they are demanding that companies find new ways of relating to them, requiring increased interaction and personalization of the messages and forming a part of the creation of content of communication campaigns. Thus, the Internet makes this new relationship between companies and their audiences possible, since it has 3 characteristics that differentiate it from other conventional channels: interactivity, transparency, memory (Gurău, 2008). Peltier et al. (2003) also distinguished 4 exclusive fundamental elements of the interactive media: the two-way nature of the communication system, the level of response control each party has in the communication process, the personalization of the communication relationship, and the use and involvement of data base technology.

So, digital communication offers new forms of connecting with audiences, according to the surveyed advertisers. In general, there was a very positive attitude amongst the surveyed companies regarding how the new technologies help them relate to their audiences. So, if we group

together the responses generated from the first two positions of the scale that was used (“in full agreement” and “in some agreement” or Total 2 box), 73.1% of the sample believed that communication technologies offer a broad range of channels and contact points with the consumer. The belief that the new technologies generate brand experiences through platforms other than traditional methods was accepted by 71.1% and 70% of the advertisers believed that this digital communication promotes dialogue and participation between the brand and the consumer.

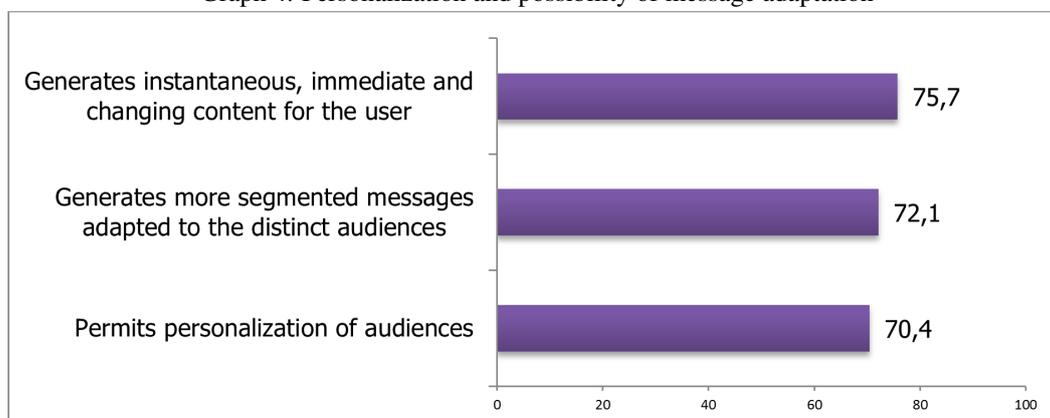
Graph 3. New ways of connecting with audiences



Source: own elaboration

Another group of attitudes relates to the possibilities offered by these techniques to personalize and adapt the message. The majority attitude is that of those companies believing that communications technology helps to generate instant content (75.7%) as well as the opinion related to the idea that it permits the creation of more segmented messages that are adapted to distinct audiences (72.1%). Along these same lines of personalization, 70.4% of the advertisers consider that it permits the personalization of audiences.

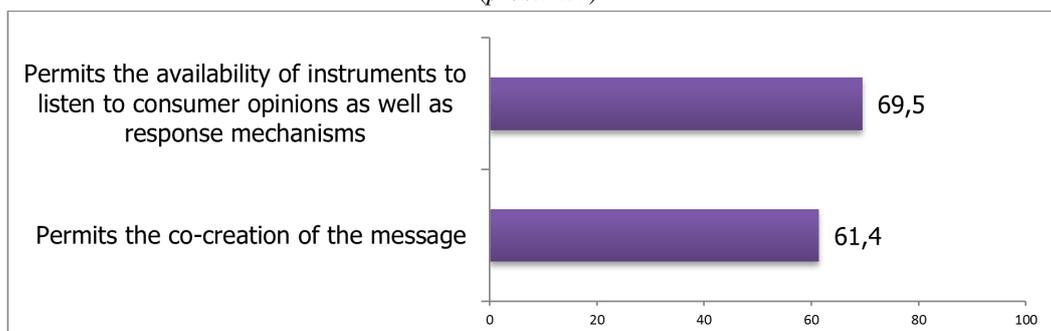
Graph 4. Personalization and possibility of message adaptation



Source: own elaboration

Finally, one very relevant aspect that was observed in the advertisers relates to the importance of the consumer as a part of the strategy (*crossumer*) or as a content creator (*prosumer*). In the former, almost 70% of the advertisers understand that the new communication techniques allow for greater availability of instruments to listen to consumer opinions, as well as response mechanisms. In the second case, 6 out of 10 advertisers understand that they permit the co-creation of the message between the consumer and the brand.

Graph 5. Importance of the consumer in strategies (*crossumer*) and the consumer as content creator (*prosumer*)



Source: own elaboration

3.4. General attitudes of companies towards online communication

In order to determine the main attitudes regarding digital communication and to complete the previous analyses, a factorial analysis has been conducted since apparently there are high

correlations between some attitudes that repeat when considering digital communication within marketing communications.

After extracting the main components (with an accumulated variance of 54.5% and KMO values of 0.915), the following elements appear to be the most significant in determining the advertisers' opinions regarding communications technology (Table 2):

- Criteria focused on NEW WAYS OF CONNECTING WITH AUDIENCES: this element has the most opinions that correlate with it and it relates to the possibilities offered by digital communication so that brands may communicate with their audiences and generate *engagement*. Attitudes such as personalization of audience permitted by these techniques, the generation of brand experiences distinct from the traditional media, the adaptation of the message to each target or the participation and dialogue between the brand and the consumer determine this criterion.
- Criteria focused on the PLANNING OF THESE CAMPAIGNS: another group of correlated attitudes are linked to planning and implementation aspects. That is, the focus of the advertiser lies on aspects such as the search for qualified professionals to execute the campaigns, the establishment of objectives by specific specialists in each of the fields, the establishment of objectives of the same based on prior research and the adequate training and preparation of the specialists in these new communication trends.
- Criteria of INTEGRATED ONLINE COMMUNICATION: activities related to the synergies that must be created between all of the digital communication actions and the proposal of multi-device communication strategies to ensure that collective Internet communication is effective.
- Criteria of CONTINUITY WITH TRADITIONAL MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS: in its planning and measurement, the same guidelines are followed as for traditional advertising campaigns or they are not used too much given a lack of experience.
- Criteria of INTEGRATED ON AND OFFLINE COMMUNICATION: in this last component we find the few favourable attitudes believing that these techniques generate synergies with traditional communication. That is, it is interesting to observe that according to the advertisers, communication integration occurs within the digital communication itself and not so much between this digital communication and the traditional measures.

Table 2. Components matrix

	Component				
	1	2	3	4	5
Offers a broad range of channels and contact points with the consumer	.695	-.324	.067	.166	-.117
Permits personalization of audiences	.742	-.295	-.093	.102	-.105
Strengthens participation and dialogue between the brand and its audiences	.707	-.291	-.025	-.015	-.027
Generates more segmented messages adapted to different audiences	.717	-.276	-.110	.071	.139
Generates immediate, instantaneous content	.640	-.194	.005	.125	-.018
Allows for the co-creation of the message	.710	-.139	.029	.120	-.136
Allows for availability of tools to hear the opinions of consumers and response mechanisms	.699	-.232	-.179	.058	.167
Generates brand experiences through platforms that are distinct from the traditional methods	.722	-.325	.018	.103	.018
Permits the use of influencers to generate increased engagement between the brand and the consumer	.702	-.072	-.211	-.051	.209
Allows for multi-device communication design strategies (web, social networks, smartphone, e-mail...)	.650	-.395	.124	.109	.001
Permits hybridization of the brand messages with other content and generation of less advertising content	.701	-.095	-.083	.163	.074
Generate synergies with traditional communication techniques	.627	-.120	-.084	.109	-.145
Communication professionals are trained and prepared in these new communication techniques	.482	.288	-.040	.070	-.326
We establish the objectives based on the same guidelines as in traditional advertising campaigns	.355	.540	-.026	.209	-.191
The objectives are established by specific specialists in each of the fields or formats	.536	.453	-.222	-.313	.055
Communication actions are planned taking into account the synergy between each of the formats and actions	.605	.244	-.158	-.346	-.251
Before establishing the objectives, we tend to conduct some sort of research (quantitative or qualitative)	.499	.380	-.034	-.437	.029
Failures in these campaigns force us to change the work team within the company, seeking out more qualified professionals	.304	.666	-.177	.123	.116
The planning of these actions takes into account the corporate management of the companies	.583	.284	-.255	-.303	-.182
We do not use much of these new communication techniques due to a lack of prior experience.	-.041	.444	-.001	.317	.269

In order to carry out these campaigns, we tend to seek out specialists in new communication trends or new technologies	.556	.318	-.161	-.001	.023
In order for the Internet communication to be effective, it is necessary to have synergy between all of the actions carried out on the network	.427	.022	.480	-.158	.243
The communications actions carried out on the network should have similar messages to the other offline communications	.140	.245	.598	.194	-.194
There is a great deal of interaction between the offline campaigns that subsequently acquire relevance in the networks and go on to become viral	.414	.234	.446	-.206	-.058
The development and evolution of viral communication is distinct between the online and offline environment	.450	.046	.441	-.253	.321
When we carry out campaigns in mobile devices, we tend to adapt them from others carried out on the Internet	.246	-.038	.546	-.116	-.348
The new communication techniques do not allow us to measure the results in a precise and exact manner	.254	.501	.074	.365	.178
When it comes to measuring the results of these techniques, we use the same parameters as in traditional advertising	.265	.519	.078	.410	-.113
The level of requirement in the measurement of these communication techniques is much greater than in the conventional media	.490	.123	.192	-.050	.456

Extraction method: Analysis of main components.

Source: own elaboration

Conclusions

Although integrated marketing communications have been widely studied, the online context opens up new possibilities for analysing their management and the use of new formats and media within the communication strategies of advertisers. As we have seen in this study, the use of IMC programs offers a competitive advantage for organizations, helping them to improve their client relations, increase their *brand equity* and achieve better financial results. Thus, the four fundamental pillars of the IMC are the interested party or *stakeholder*, the content, the channels and the results which reveal a transversal common denominator: the relationship with the client and their needs (Kliatchko, 2008). Of these pillars, this work focuses on the channels, and specifically, the digital channels or media in the marketing planning carried out by the advertisers.

In fact, the current direction, based on the new technologies and the interactive media used by companies, is so important that it is generating new names that are associated with the original concept of integrated marketing communication, such as “interactive integrated marketing communication” or “online integrated marketing communication”.

But the use of these new digital formats in communicative planning is very much influenced by the attitude of the marketing or communications manager in the face of communication technologies (Gronstedt, 1996) as well as the need of the brand to connect with a new consumer; this consumer is used to digital technology and connects in a distinct way with brand information and messages (acquiring distinct interchanging roles such as consumer, producer, creator, *prosumer*, citizen, prescriber, etc.).

In general, there is a very positive attitude between the Spanish advertisers that were surveyed and how the new technologies help companies to relate to their audiences and how this communication generates synergies with the traditional communication techniques (68.8% of the sample). Advertisers understand that the communication actions carried out in the network should have similar messages as the offline communications carried out and corporate values should be considered prior to planning the communication.

However, although IMC appears to be important for Spanish companies, when it comes to planning their communication strategies, 41.5% of the advertisers continue to rely on the same guidelines as those followed in the traditional advertising campaigns for the new digital communication forms. And 46.8% believe that campaign objectives should be established by specific specialists from each of the disciplines, with a lack of coordination existing in many companies in terms of communication where the integration level remains at a very tactical level.

What is in fact observed is an integration existing within the digital communication itself, with 77% of the advertisers believing that multi-device communication campaigns and synergies should be carried out between all of the web actions. And despite the fact that some authors believe that the company type affects the level of communication integration, it has been seen that, in the case of our advertisers, there is a generalized attitude towards integration, regardless of the company size or sector to which it belongs.

Digital communication allows for new ways of connecting with audiences and helps to personalize and adapt the messages. Thus, a wide range of possibilities are offered for this connection to the consumer and to strengthen participation and dialogue with the brand, that is, the sought after *engagement* between the brand and its audiences which leads advertisers to place the consumer in the center of their communication strategies.

Some advertiser attitudes towards technology were related to the criteria of the appearance of new forms or contact points with audiences and generating *engagement*, and others were more focused on the concern for correctly planning these campaigns and the use of experts from each of the disciplines. Also, attitudes were found regarding the maximum integration of actions carried out in the online environment, and advertisers applying continuity criteria with traditional marketing communication, which hinders synergies between on and offline communication, finding a greater integration within digital communication itself.

Therefore, digital communication is creating a profound change in how companies plan and integrate their communication strategies, combining the on and offline environments. In consequence, the changes that are taking place not only are found in the consumer, but also in the new channels and opportunities offered by the technology. While the companies declare that the investment in digital marketing shall increase over the coming years, it is necessary to ensure an increased professionalism in the sector, and thus, both advertisers and agencies should be more

and more trained and prepared in digital competencies in order to understand and use these new communication technologies.

Regarding this, over the coming years, Universities and training centres shall have a new responsibility: to impart knowledge that, although possibly unknown today, may be useful in tomorrow's world; and to update knowledge that may change from year to year.

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