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Communication-in-use: customer-integrated marketing communication

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Abstract

Purpose – This conceptual paper aims at developing a customer-centric marketing communications approach that takes the starting point in the customer ecosystem.

Design/methodology/approach – After a critical analysis of existing marketing communications and integrated marketing communication (IMC) approaches, a customer-driven view of marketing communications is developed using recent developments in relationship communication, customer-dominant logic and the notion of customer value formation as value-in-use.

Findings – A customer-integrated marketing communication (CIMC) approach centred on a communication-in-use concept is conceptually developed and introduced. The analysis results in a CIMC model, where a customer in his or her individual ecosystem, based on integration of a set of messages from different sources, makes sense of the many messages he or she is exposed to.

Research limitations/implications – The paper presents a customer-driven perspective on marketing communication and IMC. The analysis is conceptual and should trigger future empirical grounding. It indicates the need for a change in mindset in research.

Practical implications – CIMC requires a turnaround in the mindset that steers how companies and their marketers communicate with customers. The CIMC model provides guidelines for planning marketing communication.

Originality/value – The customer-driven communication-in-use concept and the CIMC model challenge traditional inside-out approaches to planning and implementing marketing communication.

Keywords Customer-dominant logic, Value-in-use, CIMC, Communication-in-use, Customer-integrated marketing communication, Relationship communication

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

The introduction of integrated marketing communication (IMC) with its concept of helping senders to speak with one voice was a step forward in the development of marketing communication. However, what remained unclear was whether the receiver, such as a current or potential customer, recognized what was communicated as one voice, or recognized it as different voices, or recognized it at all. For this reason, in an earlier article (Finne and Grönroos, 2009), we suggested a *relationship communication model*, where the focus on how the voice of a sender is perceived is shifted from the sender to the receiver. In the present article, we take this a step further by introducing the *communication-in-use* concept, which is based on the value that emerges for a customer of messages sent by a communicator. We define communication-in-use as:



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[...] the customer's integration and sense making of all messages from any source, company-driven or stemming from other sources, the customer perceives as communication, forming value-in-use for him/her for a specific purpose.

Based on this, IMC is developed into outside-in-oriented *customer-integrated marketing communication* (CIMC).

Indeed, there has been a call for a more customer-oriented view of IMC (Schultz and Barnes, 1999; Schultz, 2003, 2006; Kitchen *et al.*, 2004a, 2004b; Shimp, 2007; Finne and Grönroos, 2009). Schultz (1996) was among the first to argue in favour of this. Subsequent attempts to implement such a view included Finne and Grönroos' (2009) relationship communication model. This model addresses the changing view of customer activity in the contemporary world, which is considered one reason for this call for a change in emphasis (Finne and Strandvik, 2012). Lately, changes in the range of channels, use of media and technical development have been rapid, with customers using several devices online regularly. The customer has access to multiple forms of media and can interact with several of these simultaneously, choosing or rejecting sources, receiving and sending messages and being simultaneously active in some media and passive in others. In addition, the customer is influenced by several forms of social media and, as demonstrated by relationship communication, by a host of other sources (Duncan and Moriarty, 1997) and factors, such as situational ones that are internal and external to the customer (Mick and Buhl, 1992) and temporal ones that relate to past, ongoing and/or envisioned future relationships (Edvardsson and Strandvik, 2000). This change in customer practices has become more pronounced in recent years. Parallel to this change in customers' communication activity and behaviour, companies have access to a growing amount of data (big data) through technical devices and online gadgets or collected through other means, which can be used for more customer-focused planning of marketing communication. In combination with another trend in marketing, neuromarketing (Braeutigam, 2005; Lee *et al.*, 2007; Hammou *et al.*, 2013), this change may challenge future marketing research and practice. However, in spite of these developments of customer activity, the media structure and marketers' access to more customer-specific data, the development of theoretical concepts and models of marketing communication have not kept pace.

On the other hand, new thoughts regarding the customer's role in marketing and marketing communication today can be found in the literature on customer-dominant logic (CDL) (Heinonen *et al.*, 2010; Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015; Rindell *et al.*, 2010). Because this logic is based on a customer focus grounded in the customer's own ecosystem, customer value is a central concept in CDL. Following Grönroos (2008, p. 303), we define customer value in the following manner:

Value for customers means that after they have been assisted by a self-service process (cooking a meal or withdrawing cash from an ATM [and also being exposed to an ad; authors' comment]) or a full-service process (eating out at a restaurant or withdrawing cash over the counter in a bank [and also being involved in sales negotiations; authors' comment]), they are or feel better off than before.

Lately, customer value has extensively been emphasized by several researchers as value-in-use. This value concept (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2011; Grönroos, 2006, 2011; Vargo and Lusch, 2008) differs from the traditional transactional value-in-exchange concept, as it focuses not on money paid for a product or service but also on perceived customer value emerging from the use of a product or a service. In this discussion, customer activity is well addressed, but this stream of literature does not discuss marketing communication in any greater depth. Thus, in this paper, we argue that the focus on the customer ecosystem of CDL and the notion of value-in-use will contribute to a more customer-centric and outside-in view

of marketing communication. A similar attempt to combine value-in-use with an existing marketing concept can be found in branding literature, where Rindell (Rindell, 2013; Rindell and Iglesias, 2014) discusses image-in-use as a branding concept with a strong customer focus. For the development of a customer-centric approach to marketing communication, we consider these insights useful.

One problem has been that definitions of marketing communications are rather limited in scope – e.g. defining who is doing what and through which channels, and listing instruments of communication. The focus has been merely on getting messages out and, when doing so, making effective decisions. Such definitions lead to a focus on marketing communications management from a company perspective rather than focusing on the customer's value process triggered by communication, whoever the sender might be. For example, De Pelsmacker *et al.* (2013, pp. 3-4) define marketing communications in the following manner:

All the instruments [e.g. advertising SP, sponsorship PR, direct marketing, e-communications] by means of which the company communicates with its target groups and stakeholders to provide its products or the company as a whole.

This definition represents a traditional inside-out company-oriented view (i.e. what the company does to influence a customer). Even though researchers or practicing organizations sometimes may take the outside-in view into account as well, at the end of the day, it probably remains a marginal attempt.

It is understandable that IMC at the time was developed in this way. IMC was a development of earlier marketing communications approaches from a managerial perspective based on the fact that customers were increasingly exposed to multichannel messages. However, the managerial approach and the problem at the time to gather specific data about customers disguised the outside-in idea of IMC. Changing realities have now turned these definitions into relics from times when customer-specific data were difficult to gather and customer-focused communications solutions were equally difficult to implement.

Our approach is also managerial and intended for management use, and not primarily a consumer behaviour view. However, we aim to develop it such that the outside-in aspect is not distorted. It differs from earlier IMC in that we believe that only the customer can define the instruments that influence him or her in the communication process – i.e. define the real instruments in use in his or her case. Thus, we consider marketing communications from the customer's perspective in terms of the following aspects:

Marketing communication is a process where a customer perceives an offering, product, service, company or person. It can be deliberated or embedded in context, visible or merely in the head of the customer. It can include experience, processes, activities triggering value-in-use for the customer, and can consist of several simultaneous senders. On the other hand, a sender has not to be involved at all, and parts of the perception may be sourced in the past, present or future, and the process is constructed on the customer's logic.

Therefore, we propose a perspective that deepens the understanding of the customer process and the customer's logic, which is intended to support a company's marketing communication management (Finne and Strandvik, 2012).

The *purpose* of the article is to develop a customer-centric marketing communications approach, based on customers' real use of communication messages in their own ecosystem for various information-gathering and decision-making reasons (communication-in-use). To this end, it imports insights into marketing communication from CDL, particularly from its view of the customer ecosystem, and the contemporary notion of value-in-use, to develop a customer-driven view of communication. Rather than undertake an in-depth elaboration of marketing communication or IMC literature, this paper focuses on the customer and

value-in-use. The article will introduce a conceptual construct (*communication-in-use*) and the CIMC model inspired by integrated communication from a CDL perspective.

The remainder of this article is structured in the following manner. A short overview of marketing communication is followed by insights from the above-mentioned discussion on value and value-in-use and CDL, concluding with a conceptual discussion of communication-in-use and the development of the CIMC model.

2. Structuring previous marketing communication research

The use of sources in the communication process can be mapped by use of a two-dimensional figure (Figure 1). The traditional perspective on communication normally focuses on one message at a time, with a clearly defined sender (company) sending the message and a receiver (customer) receiving it (for such a communication model, see Schramm, 1971); in these terms, the message does something for the customer. Most textbooks on marketing communications (Duncan, 2005; Pickton and Broderick, 2005; Shimp, 2007; Fill, 2013; De Pelsmacker *et al.*, 2013) still build on that concept, dealing with marketing mix and media strategies in which roles and instruments are clearly defined. In this view of the communication process, the company is the subject (active sender) and the customer is an object (passive receiver) (Finne and Grönroos, 2009). Noise, miscommunication (Mortensen, 1997) or distortion (Russo *et al.*, 1996, 1998) can occur and interfere in the process, but the communication process is still company-driven, from sender to receiver. Figure 1 (lower left) describes this as a company-driven process built on a single source. The process is linear, beginning with one message at a time that is to be transported to a potential customer. One typical example of this situation would be the planning and execution of a marketing communication campaign.

Moving from single-source communication to communication using several sources (Figure 1; upper left) leads to what can be labelled traditional IMC, which has its roots in internal planning methodology. In IMC, the central idea is that communication does not occur in a vacuum but in a broader context, including both traditional media and other means of communication, as well as product and service encounters, some of which may be more difficult to control from a company perspective (Duncan and Moriarty, 1997; Lindberg-Repo and Grönroos, 1999).

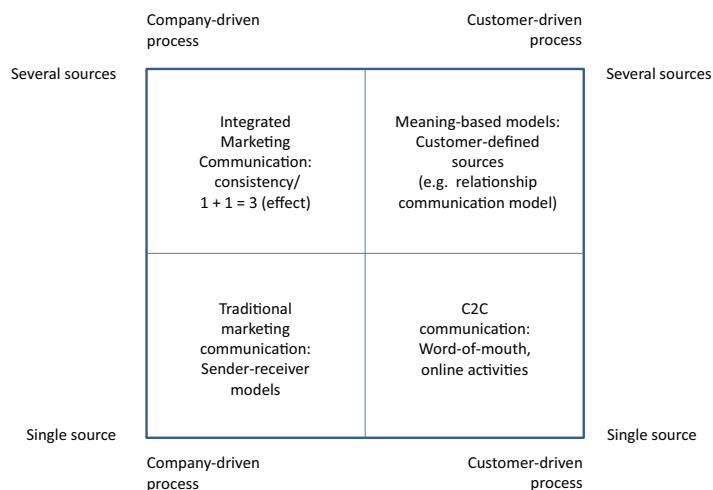


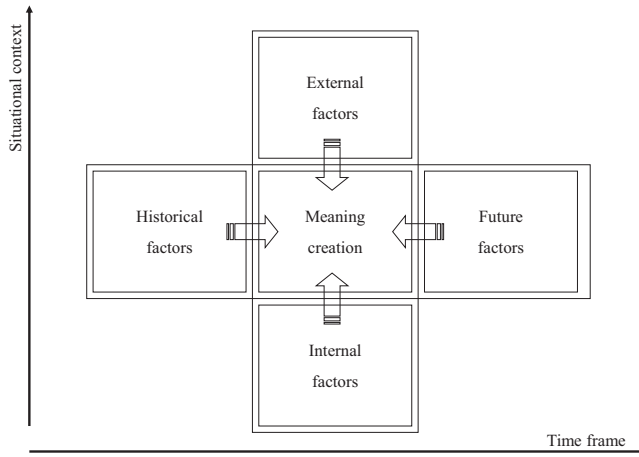
Figure 1.
Categorizing
marketing
communication based
on sources and process

In the traditional IMC approach, the goal is synergy ($1 + 1 = 3$), as the company attempts to integrate all outgoing messages into one voice. However, this still represents a rather instrument-driven view where the company creates the instruments. Typically, the IMC literature is outcome-focused, emphasizing attentiveness, consistency and effectiveness. Most of this stream of literature still relates to a company (sender) inside-out perspective, in which the company drives integration and a consistent message is conveyed to the consumer (Schultz, 1996). This can be characterized as *company-integrated marketing communication*. Based on Pitt *et al.* (2006), the sources of messages included here were labelled *closed sources* by Rindell and Strandvik (2010). Despite the call for customer-oriented views, there have been few studies on sources that are not necessarily determined by the sender, or *open sources*. Pitt *et al.* (2006) argue that the closed-source view represents the conventional organizational standpoint, where the power and control of the corporate brand in all its aspects are in the hands of the organization. Open-source brands represent the counterpoint, where the consumer's role as an active creator of the constructed corporate brand image from multiple sources is recognized. Accordingly, the organization loses control and the consumer becomes empowered (Pitt *et al.*, 2006; Rindell and Strandvik, 2010).

The lower-right quadrant in Figure 1 refers to C2C communication. Customers receive a lot of input in their daily lives from sources other than conventional marketing communications (Rindell and Strandvik, 2010), and the importance of word-of-mouth is well represented in the marketing literature (Arndt, 1967; Richins, 1983; Trusov *et al.*, 2009). In this context, many companies monitor social media on a daily basis, and some offer an arena for their customers to meet online and share and discuss ideas. It is also possible that the company does not participate in this communication process, as it may be outside the company's line of visibility (Heinonen *et al.*, 2013), beyond planned messages. For example, a customer who needs a camera might ask around or just happen to hear about an interesting offer and go to a store to buy it. Here, online activities on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or similar media offer a good platform for communication. It may also be that the perception of a particular camera brand is built on earlier experience (Finne and Grönroos, 2009; Rindell and Iglesias, 2014), perhaps from a borrowed item that felt good in use. In such cases, the communication process does not include a company source.

Over the years, the scope of IMC has broadened to take account of what is to be integrated and who is doing the integration (Kitchen *et al.*, 2008; Kitchen and Schultz, 2009). The traditional school of communication has long been criticized for its passive view of the customer (Buttle, 1995; Schultz, 2006). Although researchers now pay greater attention to customer integration, the set of what to integrate is still very company-oriented, building on traditional lists of communication instruments (De Pelsmacker *et al.*, 2013). Today, a company is required to listen to customers, find touchpoints where they actually meet their customers and understand them, thereby recognizing customer contexts and transforming messages to address customer meaning and value. Today, a customer can sit passively watching TV on a commercial channel while at the same time actively searching Google or Wikipedia and sending messages via Facebook and chat rooms. Meaning-based models of communication (McCracken, 1986, 1987; Mick and Buhl, 1992) are one way to place an active customer at the centre of the process. On this basis, Finne and Grönroos (2009) developed the relationship communication model (Figure 2).

This model integrates factors from the customer's ecosystem into a customer-driven communication process and includes both temporal and situational dimensions (Finne and Grönroos, 2009). The temporal dimension encompasses a continuum from past to envisioned future experiences; the situational dimension includes a wide range of elements, from individual motivations and abilities (internal factors) to trends and family and competitor activities (external



Source: Finne and Grönroos (2009)

Figure 2.
The relationship
communication model

factors). Meaning-based models are described as a customer-driven process based on several sources (Figure 1, upper right). Based on Pitt *et al.* (2006), Rindell and Strandvik (2010) described these as open sources as opposed to company-driven closed sources (i.e. list of traditional instruments). However, it can be challenging for a company to clarify what constitutes messages and sources – i.e. to identify touchpoints (called *messages* in the traditional school of communication) – as some of these may be hidden (Finne and Strandvik, 2012; Heinonen *et al.*, 2013). An example of a hidden message can be a brand used in criminal contexts by gang members, thus influencing other customers' image of the brand (Anker *et al.*, 2015). In a customer-driven process, the customer subjectively and independently decides what is to be defined as a message, what a message contains and which sources are in use. In such a process, some, sometimes most or all of the touchpoints may be, and most probably are, out of the company's reach (Finne and Strandvik, 2012). This customer-driven process can be described as *CIMC*.

3. Value of communication

In the context of the emerging service perspective on marketing (Grönroos, 2006, 2011; Vargo and Lusch, 2008), the notion of value-in-use has been discussed extensively in service marketing literature. According to this perspective, products, services and information are considered distributors of service (Edvardsson *et al.* 2011) that render value-in-use (Gummesson, 1995; Vargo and Lusch, 2008). Following this logic, from the customers' point of view, it appears natural to treat marketing communication like a service. In communication terms, all message sources – either from traditional communication instruments or beyond the range of these instruments, such as product messages, service messages and unplanned messages (Duncan and Moriarty, 1997; Lindberg-Repo and Grönroos, 1999; Finne and Strandvik, 2012) – serve customers' needs for knowledge and understanding relating to a product, service or any phenomenon that renders value-in-use for their needs (e.g. in making purchasing decisions or consumption situations). Further, marketing communication, as products and services, is or should be of value to customers and facilitate their value formation. A message which is not considered useful by a customer is of no or limited value. On the other hand, a message that a customer can act upon (e.g. find

a solution, make a purchasing decision) has value (-in-use) for that customer. By switching the focus from sources and messages to value and value-in-use in consumer processes, the mental model and mindset of communication is expanded. Value-in-use is about customers' experience of value, not the marketer's intended value of a message. Therefore, it is beyond what can be created by the marketer (Heinonen *et al.*, 2013). As compared to the traditional, company-oriented view, this represents a broader and rather different view of communication instruments and resources. A communication message carries only potential value, which in the best case transforms to realized value (as value-in-use) in the mind of a customer.

Consequently, value is neither exchanged nor delivered but emerges as value-in-use in a value creation or formation process (Grönroos, 2006, Gummesson, 1995) that extends beyond the company's line of visibility (Finne and Strandvik, 2012; Heinonen *et al.*, 2013). This process need not be deliberate or active but can emerge as embedded in customers' mental processes. According to Zaltman (2000, 2003), the greater part of the communication process occurs in the customer's head. It follows that the starting point for understanding that process should be the customer's reality, network and ecosystem (Heinonen *et al.*, 2010, 2013). In addition to marketers, other actors and activities are included in the customer's value-creation process (Heinonen *et al.*, 2010; Rindell and Strandvik, 2010), where value is formed "in the experiential context of living, often outside the direct interaction or control zone of the provider" (Heinonen *et al.*, 2013, p. 109). According to Rindell, value-in-use is the customer's present construction of value, based on a temporal dimension (Rindell, 2013; Rindell and Iglesias, 2014); this is termed the customer's image heritage, including all contexts and sources relevant to the customer. The scope of value-in-use is extended to a longitudinal experience perspective of the customer's dynamic and multifaceted reality (Heinonen *et al.*, 2013, p. 110). Grönroos and Gummerus (2014) emphasize that value-in-use evolves over time. Heinonen *et al.* (2013, p. 112) give the following example:

The customer experience and the interpretations made before, during and after it are coloured by affective, social, economical, cognitive, physical, psychological and biological dimensions, forming the "potential value landscape". For example, on vacation with family, customers live their life and vacation also through the eyes of their children and other family members interpreting their value experiences. The reality of family members is part of their own reality and the value formation is embedded in the multi-subjective experience comprising the multiple internal and external contexts of the customer and her family members. The individual is not at focus but the whole customer ecosystem is relevant, referring to a network of actors, activities and practices that shape and are shaped by experiences.

Connecting value and communication is not new, but it remains rather rare. Ducoffe (1995) has argued that certain factors might generate value in advertising, and Heinonen and Strandvik (2005) have drawn similar conclusions regarding communication as an element in service value. What is new here is the elaboration of a process view beyond one that is focused merely on outcome to include both the outcome *and* the process view, in the manner explained by Heinonen *et al.* (2013) above (Rindell, 2013). Instead of defining roles and communication instruments from a company perspective, the view put forward here emphasizes that the customer defines the instruments of communication used. The essential aspect here is not just to include more things to integrate to arrive at a more complete list, but to present a new way of understanding marketing communication that is based on customer-driven activity.

The company has never had the power to limit the world of the customer (Schultz, 2006); the only limitations that were created were those imposed by narrow theoretical models. Communication instruments and processes must be useful to customers to create value-in-use. At best, they facilitate the customer through valuable and useful processes and

outcomes (Table I). This is a long way from traditional approaches that involve observation rates, or from discussions of messages that fulfil requirements for entertainment, information or helpfulness in content marketing. What is essential is that the customer not only integrate messages but also form value (value-in-use) based on multiple communication sources (Heinonen *et al.*, 2013). For this reason, customer logic becomes a necessary part of the development of a customer-centric communication model. In CDL, customer logic is defined as “[...] customers’ idiosyncratic reasoning and their sense-making about appropriate ways for achieving their goals and conducting their tasks” (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015, p. 478). This logic steers customers’ behaviour and is both cognitive and affective as well as – to a certain extent – explicit. Therefore, it influences how they choose among what they are offered, such as the many communication messages that they are exposed to (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015).

4. Customer-dominant logic

As we have pointed out in previous sections, the concept of CDL offers a new perspective on marketing communication. CDL differs from other perspectives like service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2008) in that it explicitly takes the customer and his or her ecosystem as the starting point. CDL is a marketing and business perspective with a management approach that is dominated by customer-related aspects rather than products, services, systems, costs or growth (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015). Rather than focusing on what companies are doing to create something that will be favoured by customers, CDL suggests that the focus should be on what customers are doing with that something to accomplish their own goals, and what management conclusions can be drawn from this (Heinonen *et al.*, 2010). This perspective particularly addresses the customer activity referred to at the beginning of this article.

The issue of who is the subject (trad. sender) and who is the object (trad. receiver) can be found in discussions of value-in-use as well. Grönroos and Ravald (2011) adopted the view that value-in-use is not only assessed by customers but is also created by them. According to Grönroos (Grönroos, 2011; Grönroos and Ravald, 2011; Grönroos and Voima, 2013), advocating for a service logic (SL) as a management-oriented alternative to SDL (Grönroos and Gummerus, 2014), the roles of firms and customers in value creation and co-creation need to be defined. According to SL, customers are value creators and firms are *value facilitators* that provide customers with resources that enable value creation: “Fundamentally, the customer always is a value creator” (Grönroos, 2011, p. 293). If marketing communication provides messages that do not enable a customer’s value creation well, his or her ability to use them for decision-making is not facilitated well either. In such a case, although a customer may have been exposed to communication, no, or low, value-in-use is created out of the messages. If direct interactions between the two parties occur, such as in dyadic dialogue, a platform for co-creation is established (Grönroos and Gummerus, 2014). In this manner,

Product-based	Service-based
A well-designed product (e.g. an Apple laptop) that is easy to use, reliable and good-looking, gives a lot of value-in-use	A critical negative service incident (e.g. at a restaurant), where the staff does not react or does it very slowly
Can be categorized as embedded messages in the usage process of a company that cares about its customers’ everyday life	Can be categorized as an embedded message regarding a restaurant that does not care about customers (Calonius, 1989)
A strong positive message	A strong negative message

Table I.
Examples of messages based on value-in-use

according to Grönroos (2006, 2011), customers are ascribed an active role in the process as drivers of value creation, and the company can attempt to engage with their value creation as co-creators. According to Heinonen *et al.* (2013), value-in-use is actually not created, it emerges for the customer or is formed for him or her. This represents a base for a customer-oriented view, instead of a company-dominant approach providing customers with messages through clearly defined channels. This helps professionals and researchers to focus on what customers are doing in the communication process as a starting point for marketing communication decisions, instead of a dominating focus revolving around what a company can do.

Finne and Strandvik (2012) expanded the discussion on who is active and who is passive in the communication process. Based on customer logic, some messages will be selected and some not. They included both deliberate and embedded messages in the list of communication instruments. According to Finne and Grönroos (2009), it is the customer who determines what is in fact communicated: perhaps messages from the company, or from competitors, or memories of earlier experiences, or word-of-mouth, or discussions on social media, to mention just a few. As mentioned before, in Finne and Grönroos's (2009) relationship communication model, the influence of factors and activities in the customer's network is structured along two dimensions: time and situation. The level of integration of messages with time and situational factors may vary between individuals (Finne and Grönroos, 2009). The customer's time frame can be broader than the company's time frame (Heinonen *et al.*, 2010). Heinonen *et al.* (2010) conclude that value is experienced before, during and after a service is experienced. For example, in the case of a holiday trip, customer value can emerge before the trip when reading about a destination, be created during the trip when experiencing the many aspects of the destination and also after the holiday in terms of memories of such experiences (Heinonen *et al.*, 2010, p. 539). Following the viewpoints of CDL and relationship communication, to facilitate customers' value creation during this whole process, marketers should look for types of messages and channels that have the potential to facilitate value creation throughout this process. This points to the need for a broad understanding of communication instruments and sources of messages, warranted by both temporal and situational dimensions. When analysing customers' need for communication messages, all this should be taken into account by the marketer. In communication terms, the receiver is fully in charge of his or her forming of value-in-use, based on whatever sources, if any, he or she chooses to use. The marketer's role is using today's technologies for getting customer insight and implementing communication to build upon this and plan communication activities and channels accordingly.

Further, customer value formation can vary between individuals. This variation can be described by what Mickelsson calls activityscapes (Mickelsson, 2014), as "a customer engages in different activities in order to have experiences of value" (Mickelsson, 2014, p. 40). The process of value-in-use formation is subjective. Some customers form value on the basis of several sources whose relative impact might vary, while others form value based on fewer sources whose impact may be more consistent.

5. Communication-in-use

The notion that value emerges for the customer in the form of value-in-use switches the emphasis from a message-driven, instrument-based view of communication towards a customer-oriented focus, where the customer's value perception of communication messages and processes is the natural starting point. Instead of focusing on available instruments or the outcome of messages merely from one particular sender – as, for example, in a typical communication campaign – the focus switches towards customers' value formation, and

towards how, and based on what messages, value of communication emerges for customers. Building on meaning-based communication (Mick and Buhl, 1992) rather than on a list of communication issues, and including contextual and temporal sources influencing the interpretation of messages (Finne and Grönroos, 2009; Rindell, 2013; Rindell and Iglesias, 2014), value-in-use of communication becomes the focal communication instrument. This switch from message to value of messages in the context of the customer's reality and the influence of several types of sources and messages provides actionable customer insights into marketing communication. This is the foundation of customer-driven communication that builds on several sources of value-in-use of communication (Figure 1, upper right).

This analysis paves the way for the concept of *communication-in-use*. Building on several aspects, from both the communication literature and the notion of value as value-in-use and CDL literature (Table II), communication-in-use manifests a customer-oriented approach towards marketing communication, based on active customers using whatever sources they choose.

We define communication-in-use as *a customer's integration and sense-making of all messages from any source, company-driven or stemming from other sources the customer perceives as communication, forming value-in-use for him or her for a specific purpose*. In addition to traditional communication instruments, this definition encompasses all types of open sources. It can include perceptions of an offering, a product, service, company or person, and it can be deliberated or embedded in context, visible or solely in the head of the customer. Communication-in-use can include experience, processes and activities and can involve several senders considered simultaneously by the customer. Furthermore, no specific sender needs be involved, and parts may be sourced in the past, present or future. This means, for example, that a competitor's deliberate price reduction campaign can change or distort the focal message regarding a product, service, brand or company. In the context of our holiday trip example, the introduction of budget airline companies such as Norwegian, Ryanair or Air Berlin on the one hand, and the uncertainty with increasing bankruptcy of travel agencies on the other, forms a context of several contradictory messages. The list of messages and sources of messages used can be long or short and may include company-initiated communication. It may also include absence of messages (Calonius, 1989), which is communication as just an explicit message. Furthermore, only a few messages – just as much as numerous messages – may influence the formation of value-in-use and, thus, be the foundation of communication-in-use.

From a communication-in-use perspective, sources are contextual and vary dynamically across individuals (Mickelsson, 2014) as well as among different situations for the same individual. Further, sources may relate to the three temporal dimensions of past, present and future (Rindell, 2013; Rindell and Iglesias, 2014). Some sources from the present may be more deliberate, while past and future sources may be more embedded. Occasionally, all temporal

Concept	Authors
Meaning-based communication	Mick and Buhl (1992)
Relationship communication model	Finne and Grönroos (2009)
Invisible sources/hidden messages	Finne and Strandvik (2012);
Value-in-use	Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2008), Edvardsson <i>et al.</i> (2011), Grönroos (2006, 2008, 2011)
CDL/value-in-use	Heinonen <i>et al.</i> (2010), Heinonen <i>et al.</i> (2013, 2015), Rindell and Strandvik (2010)
Temporal dimension/value-in-use	Rindell (2013), Rindell and Iglesias (2014)

Table II.
Key aspects of
communication-in-use

dimensions may have an impact, or occasionally only one or two may have an impact. Sometimes sources from the past may have a significant impact, while other situations may be future-oriented or, as in traditional marketing communications literature, typically in the present. This implies, for example, that strong memories or former experiences can form sources, but so can future-oriented goals, wishes or expectations as well.

6. Conclusion

Refocusing marketing communication towards CIMC requires a new mental model, a change from an inside-out mode to an outside-in mode. This article combines insights from CDL and the notion of value-in-use with IMC to create a customer-driven view of marketing communication, thereby making IMC customer-centric. It introduces the concept of communication-in-use, which adopts a 360° view by including the dimensions of time and situation. As the sources of communication messages are open (Rindell and Strandvik, 2010), the list of instruments and sources can be complex and diverse, or can be simple and straightforward. Consequently, these dimensions are essential for identifying the sources influencing a customer's communication-in-use and corresponding value-in-use. Critical sources from the total time span of past memories and experiences to future-oriented goals and expectations, influenced by sources both internal and external to the customer, form part of the customer-driven communications process. This process may also encompass individual abilities and motivations, the customer's everyday life and ecosystem and how major trends in society influence him or her. Moreover, the fast growth of social media lifts word-of-mouth to an unprecedented level as a source of communication.

Figure 3 summarizes the CIMC model. As the management of marketing communication according to this customer-driven approach must begin by locating the touchpoints, and by gaining an understanding of how customers react to communication messages and utilize them, the model should be interpreted beginning from the two innermost circles that are highlighted in Figure 4. This part of the model depicts how customers process messages that they are exposed to and register them. The two outer circles represent the customer ecosystem, which is the context of this processing, and the origin of messages, respectively.

First, customers *integrate and make sense* of a few or numerous messages from one or several sources. The origin of such messages can be any or all of the type of senders in the outermost circle in the model (company, competitor, societal, customer-to-customer), where messages from different sources and senders influence each other and merge in this integration process. The outcome of this message integration and sense-making process is *communication-in-use*, which in turn influences what *value of communication* (as value-in-use) is formed by the customer. Communication-in-use is what a customer makes out of the various messages which he or she is exposed to, i.e. according to his or her mind, what is in reality communicated. The communication-in-use, not all messages sent, determines the *value of communication* for the customer. The value of communication is the importance to the customer of what he or she perceives as communication (communication-in-use). It influences the customer's impression of, for example, products, services or companies, and occasionally also his or her decision-making.

Second, how many messages the customer registers, and how such messages influence each other to create communication-in-use, depends, first of all, on what *temporal* factors (past, present, future) – e.g. past experiences, current needs and expectations of a company's future development – the customer takes into account. Furthermore, *situational* factors (internal and external to the individual) – such as the customer's attitudes and needs (internal), and weather forecasts and competitors' actions (external) – also have an impact on the



Figure 3.
The CIMC model

sense-making and message integration process. For instance, the example of differences in time frames between travellers and travel agencies demonstrates such factors.

This core of the CIMC process discussed above is illustrated in Figure 4.

Third, how temporal and situational aspects impact the customer's integration and sense-making process depends on influences of his or her ecosystem (the customer's ecosystem in the model). As demonstrated by CDL (Heinonen *et al.*, 2013), the customer ecosystem includes communities – comprising friends and family members and various social media contacts – other customers with whom the customer may interact and various types of physical and virtual structures. To use the travel example, it would include, for instance, people the customer meets during the trip, and real and imagined impressions of servicescapes at the destination. In addition, a host of other factors of any kind may of course also be considered by the customer.

Fourth, the customer may be exposed to many types of messages from several types of senders (*origin of messages* in the model, see Figure 3). Following Duncan and Moriarty (1997), communication messages can be divided into four groups:

- (1) *planned messages* through communication media, such as advertising, direct mail and digital communication (e.g. the travel agency's or tour operator's webpage or media travel advertising);

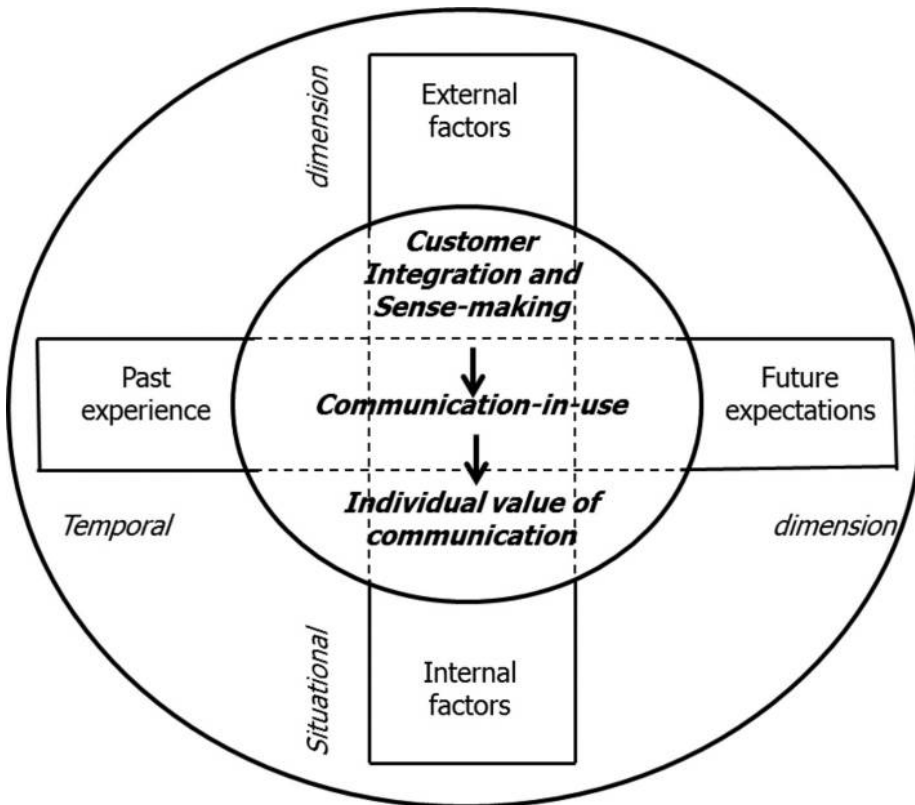


Figure 4.
The core of the CIMC
model

- (2) *product messages*, such as how a product is designed and how it functions and can be disposed of (e.g. standard of airplanes and hotels);
- (3) *service messages*, such as the smoothness of service processes, queuing times, attentiveness of employees (e.g. how hotel transfers function and reception personnel's attitudes) and ways of handling service recovery situations; and
- (4) *unplanned messages*, such as how the misbehaviour of employees and product or service failures distort other types of messages (e.g. reviews on TripAdvisor and unexpected bad weather).

Finally, following Calonius (1989), unplanned messages can be extended to include *absence of messages*– e.g. when airline passengers are not adequately informed of delays and expected waiting times, or customers are not adequately informed of possible hazards of misusing products.

Fifth, the various types of communication messages that influence a customer are not only sent by a focal company (*company communication*) but also by competitors (*competitor communication*). Furthermore, through *regulations* that must be followed and *norms* that guide behaviour, various institutions in the society send messages (*societal communication*). Finally, traditional face-to-face *word-of-mouth communication* is as important a source of messages as ever. However, due to the development of various social media, such as

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and others, *customer-to-customer communication* has increased to levels never experienced before.

In conclusion, the *communication-in-use* concept and the CIMC model are a major development of traditional IMC. They turn marketing communication and IMC from an inside-out concept to an outside-in concept and require rethinking of how to understand, study and manage marketing communication. Communication-in-use and the CIMC model offer the customer-driven approach to IMC called for by Kitchen *et al.* (2004b).

6.1 Theoretical implications and further research

Given the development of the media structure and individually oriented media, the growth of social media and of the power of customers, and in addition, the development of digitalization and new ways of using big data and gaining individualized customer insight, the turnaround of IMC developed and discussed in the present article is natural and also possible to achieve in practice. This switch of communication management from an aggregate, company-driven level towards an individual customer-driven level is demanding for marketing communications managers, and for researchers. A mental turnaround may be needed. We need to develop a better understanding of how customers through an integration and sense-making process form communication-in-use and how this transforms into value of communication.

Further research on traditional marketing communication instruments from a value of communication perspective is also a key focus of future research. This calls for different approaches to understanding communication. There is a need for a shift in focus from how companies as senders of messages involve customers in their processes to how customers engage with the company, in the context of their ecosystem and messages generated by other sources than the company (compare Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015). Hence, from the company's perspective, it is a question of *how customers engage with the company's messages*, and how messages from other sources change, reinforce or distort this. Moving from closed sources to open sources calls for a deeper understanding of what can be considered potential sources of communication-in-use. Instead of focusing on providing messages, research should focus on embedded messages, the types of messages customers are exposed to, how they perceive the many types of messages they are exposed to and how they integrate them and make sense of them. Consequently, further research is needed on customer ecosystems and customers' everyday life as well as on how the customer ecosystem influences communication-in-use. Specific characteristics of customer ecosystems should be further examined, including terms of unit, time frame, roles and activities, and how providers might influence the system (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015). Marketing communications research must accept that the receiver has become an active part in the communication process – in relative terms, although not in absolute terms –, the role of one sender has decreased considerably and the marketing communication process does not function as it used to.

6.2 Implications for marketers

The managerial implications of the concept and model advocated here are profound. Although the concept of communication-in-use is not complicated, it requires a turnaround of the dominating mindset. Moreover, admittedly, adopting and implementing the CIMC model is a complex task. Although the combination of open sources and the situationally and temporally based customer perceptions makes the subjective world of customer perceptions complex, the communication-in-use concept simplifies the complexity for both practitioners and researchers. It is not about changing the task of communicating (and costs related to that), but about how to relate to customers and to their ecosystems. The company must be

able to make customers and potential customers engage with its messages. Thus, a company might need less communication efforts and more insight into the customers' communication processing, and knowledge about how to effectively and efficiently send messages that customers want to relate to and make part of their communication-in-use.

By turning the customer ecosystem into an advantage and integrating it into the communication strategy, the company may achieve substantial cost reductions. Messages can be directed more accurately and unnecessary communication efforts can be avoided. This does not imply that planning marketing communication would be simple. However, CIMC demonstrates how marketing communication viewed from the customer's perspective works, and provides guidelines for the planning process – where to start, what to look for and what to take into account.

Perhaps the most complex issue is the open mindset required to abandon company-focused lists of instruments and sources that companies can easily control, influence and identify, and planning procedures based on them, and to redirect attention to customer activity and logic and the ecosystem that influences the customer's behaviour. Communication-in-use emancipates companies from these limited lists of instruments, and from communication models that constrain their communication planning. However, a thorough understanding of customer logic, the customer ecosystem and the customer's individual message integration and sense-making process is needed to gain from this new approach. It is essential that marketers learn how to support customers' sense-making and integration of messages, and realize that without adequate insight into the customers' logic and ecosystem, they cannot through their communication make customers engage with the firm and its products, services and brands. On the contrary, through their communication efforts, marketers must attempt to engage with the customers' life, and in that way, convince them about the meaningfulness for them of the company's products, services and brands.

Communication-in-use shifts the focus from a company's communication to the customer's multicontextual communication process – perhaps, but not necessarily – involving the company and its messages. This perspective goes beyond the visibility line for the company (Finne and Strandvik, 2012; Heinonen *et al.*, 2013) to include sources from the customer ecosystem, thereby suggesting that everything can communicate or act as a source: a brand or a company, an ad or a product, an image, family members and friends, other customers, discussion partners on social media and so on. Communication-in-use can also be embedded in hobbies, everyday life or future expectations or goals (Mick and Buhl, 1992) – e.g. in mundane everyday or exclusive processes, such as cooking, sailing or studying. Today, several technical items are connected to the person's body, collecting a lot of data. A combination of big data and neuromarketing can push customer insight towards new knowledge about customer-integrated communication.

Rather than sending messages, companies should focus on how to facilitate the formation of customer value from their individual communication-in-use and, if possible, through interactive dialogue with customers, engage directly with their communication value formation, thereby directly influencing their communication-in-use and the subsequent value of communication. Companies should find ways to facilitate customers' perceptions and sense-making in the best possible manner. Thus, communication-in-use is much broader than traditional message-based communication, as it can include whatever the customer wants to include, while perhaps excluding what the company is attempting to send or do. This conception is compatible with current customer practices (Schultz, 2006).

The CIMC model based on the communication-in-use concept put forward in the present article requires a turnaround of the mental model that guides traditional marketing communication and even conventional IMC. Achieving this change in the mental model from an

inside-out mode into an outside-in mode may be difficult for marketers and marketing communication managers. The CIMC model demands that marketers gain deeper and more individual-based insight in the customers' life, ecosystems and logics. However, the already existing sources of individual retailing data, new technologies for gaining individual behaviour measures, such as apps measuring customer activity and rest, and possibilities to use big data in general, provide such individualized data to a growing extent (Saarijärvi *et al.*, 2014).

Without a change in the prevailing mental model, implementing this customer-centric outside-in marketing communication model will be difficult. However, if a mental model turnaround is ensured, marketing communication planning and implementation will become as straightforward a process as traditional IMC. It is only different, has a different starting point, is based on more individualized customer data and requires different activities or requires that traditional activities be conducted in a different way.

Kitchen *et al.* (2004b) questioned whether agencies ever get IMC. Here, we have offered a concept of "getting closer to the customer" to understand and utilize the power of IMC. Communication-in-use is heavily consumer-driven and beyond the influence of company control. This is new for so-called brand builders. Contrary to the contemporary jargon and dominating views on branding, a brand cannot be instrumentally built; it is formed in the customer's mind. Indeed, if anyone builds a brand, it is the customer (Grönroos, 2015). Following the consumer logic, the company is only one part of the value-formation process: from controlling the communication process, the company role becomes provisional or optional. Consequently, the consumer selects where inputs (the messages and sources) come from and what to process on the basis of individual and situational contexts, taking into account historical and envisioned future issues. Brand managers and advertising and media agencies that adopt the customer logic that is advocated in this article can get closer to an active customer's practices. Instead of building brands, marketers facilitate the customers' brand formation processes. By understanding the logic of open sources (Rindell and Strandvik, 2010), companies can switch their mental models from controlling messages to potentially supporting their customers' perception of messages, communication-in-use and formation of value-in-use of what they consider is being communicated.

As the communication integration and sense-making processes are individual and the value of communication that emerges is individual, the segmentation of customers for communication purposes has to be taken several steps further – in principle, towards segments-of-one. Depending on the type of messages, customers and contexts, going this far is sometimes possible and sometimes impossible; even if it were possible, it may be too expensive, but at least the direction is clear. However, if marketing communication is to become meaningful as a means of competition, this development is inevitable and totally in line with current trends in marketing. In many situations where data about individual customers are difficult or unnecessarily expensive to gather, customer archetypes and characteristics of such groups of customers may be easier to develop. Such data may be enough for the development of CIMC strategies.

In conclusion, based on communication-in-use, how value of communication is formed for an individual customer and through which processes communication-in-use and the resulting value of communication are formed for him or her are the key issues to be studied. Identifying which instrument can be used and how this instrument can be used effectively to trigger a wanted value of communication is an important but, relatively speaking, secondary issue. The view adopted here is both outcome- and process-based. Communication-in-use is not grounded in company-planned IMC processes but in consumer contexts, in the same manner as image-in-use, which determines how a person's current view of, for example, a company is grounded in past experiences and steers this person's considerations of his or her

future behaviour (Rindell, 2013). We argue that the concept of communication-in-use offers an understanding of customer-driven communication, combining insights from marketing communication and customer logic and integrating them into a new, holistic concept of customer-driven communication. This will help communication researchers and practitioners to develop a more appropriate understanding of marketing communication in the contemporary world and create customer-focused marketing communication models and more effective communication strategies.

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Further reading

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