



## Practice and challenges of integrated marketing communications: in the case of Ethiopian Airlines

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Today, integrated marketing communications is becoming a necessary condition for the existence of an organization. Many organizations in the world make out its great value, which is why they have been practicing their marketing communication purposes. The purpose of this research is to explore the IMC practice and challenges in Ethiopian Airlines. Mixed research methods were adopted to achieve the stated objectives of the study. Questionnaires, in-depth interview, document analysis and observation were used as the main data collection tools. Purposive sampling was used for in-depth interview and questionnaires respondents. The results of this study show that employees have a positive attitude towards the implementation of Ethiopian Airlines integrated marketing communications; they agree that IMC has many benefits in terms of saving resources, establishing a working relationship relaxed and building integrity with various stakeholders. On the other hand according to marketing communication instruments utilization the research finding shows, Ethiopian Airlines uses these marketing communication instruments depending on the company's communication contexts like time and other related issues. Some marketing communication tools are used frequently, while others are also used occasionally. According to the research results, digital marketing is the most widespread and used marketing communication tool by Ethiopian Airlines. Customers are in high demand for the use of social media, they are actively using it and have achieved an amazing development in the use of Ethiopian Airlines. Regarding obstacles to the practice of IMC, bluntly mentioned lack of a marketing communication plan and delivery cycle, the existence of technical terminology, and the lack of technical training. Finally, the study suggested that all integrated marketing communication activities should be carried out on the basis of a comprehensive plan and to improve structural defects. In addition, the customer's marketing communication activities need to be evaluated frequently. Moreover, the researcher*

*suggest more research on the effectiveness of marketing communication tools and integrated marketing communication for employee Should be conducted.*

**Key Words:** *Communication, Marketing, Integrated, Instruments, Framework,*

## **Introduction**

### **1.1. Background of the study**

Integrated marketing communications (IMC) emerged during the late twentieth century and its importance has been growing ever since (Cornelissen, 2001). Thanks to the impact of knowledge technology, changes materialized within the domains of promotion and marketing communications which led to the emergence of IMC (Kitchen et al., 2004; Duncan and Everett, 1993). The multiplication of media, demystification of consumer markets, and therefore the value of the web in today's society are just three of the areas within which technological innovation has impacted. These successively left marketers during a challenging and competitive environment, trying to fulfill customers wants and wishes while also developing long-term relationships with them.

IMC can help in creating coordinated and consistent messages across various channels of communication. Furthermore, the concept is particularly valuable therein it places great emphasis on the importance of all stakeholder groups and, specifically, on customer loyalty, which may only be created through strategic relationship building (Cornelissen, 2004; Integrated marketing communications (IMC) is an approach employed by organizations to brand and coordinate their communication efforts. The American Association of Advertising Agencies defines IMC as “a comprehensive plan that evaluates the strategic roles of a spread of communication disciplines and combines these disciplines to produce clarity, consistency, and maximum communication impact.” The first idea behind an IMC strategy is to make a seamless experience for consumers across different aspects of the marketing mix. The brand’s core image and messaging are reinforced as each marketing communication works together as parts of a unified whole instead of in isolation.

As we know, Ethiopian Airlines is striving tremendously to increase quality services, profit, and customer satisfaction as a result of various forces like tremendous desire from the government, global aviation computation, and the increase in multiple demand from the customers. These and other factors in the business environment causes a need for paying attention to the implementation of integrated marketing communications than ever before. Thus, with all these understandings, the researcher views that it would seem to be the right time to explore the

integrated marketing communications practice in Ethiopian Airlines so as to analyze the gaps and provide scientific directions from the perspective of integrated marketing communications philosophies. Moreover, it is also necessary to investigate what the transformation in marketing communication has brought in Ethiopian airlines as well as the employee reflections towards the implementation.

Hence, this study fill the gap and add knowledge by dealing with the practice of IMC from a scientific framework which shows how marketing communication tools should be utilized and integrated to convey a clear and consistent message. As far as the researcher's knowledge and experience is concerned, there is no earlier study regarding the practice of IMC in Ethiopian Airlines particularly in executing each marketing communication tools as well as its implementation from scientific frameworks particularly from stages of the IMC framework. Therefore, this study would explore the current practice of integrated marketing communications in Ethiopian airlines.

## **1.2. Objectives of the study**

### **1.2.1. General Objective**

To explore the practice and challenges of integrated marketing communications in Ethiopian Airlines.

### **1.2.2. Specific Objectives**

To achieve the overall objective stated above, the specific objectives of the study have been;

- ✓ To explore how the marketing communication instruments are utilized in Ethiopian Airlines.
- ✓ To investigate the level of the practice of integrated marketing communications in Ethiopian Airlines based on the four stages of the IMC framework.
- ✓ To analyze the perception of communication division staff towards the implementation of integrated marketing communications.
- ✓ To investigate the challenges of implementing integrated marketing communications in Ethiopian Airlines.

## **2. Research Methodology**

As it is indicted earlier, the research focuses on investigating integrated marketing communications practice in Ethiopian Airlines. Therefore, based on the research questions, the research employed both quantitative and qualitative research method as it is best suited to answer research questions. In mixed research, the overall strength of the study is greater than either

qualitative or quantitative methods. In regard to data collection instruments, Questionnaires and In-depth interview was conducted with purposively selected informants. Moreover, company's profile document was intensively reviewed as well as observation was held by the researcher.

In data analysis part the quantitative data were presented in descriptive statistics and the qualitative data were presented in narrations. The researcher was use descriptive statics and narrations to illustrate the feedback of the respondents. On the other hand the presentation of the data was also structured in a narrative form adding pertinent quotations to illustrate and support the main findings. Specific individual's practices as well as the setting and other uncontested facts have described objectively.

### **3. Result and Discussion**

As integrated marketing communications is the newly introduced practice in Ethiopian Airlines. The researcher intends to analyze the understanding and perceptions of professionals, specialists, team leaders and managers in IMC directorate because the vast majority of MC activities are being done by these aforementioned staffs. Accordingly, the experience of interviewees and respondents towards the current practice of IMC in Ethiopian Airlines is thematically analyzed as follows.

#### **3.1 Employees understanding about Integrated Marketing Communications**

According to psychologists understanding is a psychological process related to an abstract or physical object, such as a person, situation, or message whereby one is able to use concepts to model that object. Understanding is a relation between the knower and an object of understanding. Understanding implies abilities and dispositions with respect to an object of knowledge that are sufficient to support intelligent behavior.

On this research the questionnaire respondents and interviewees explained that IMC Directorate employees understand the immense benefit of IMC implementation on Ethiopian Airlines. They confirmed that IMC directorate employees has enough understanding about IMC importance in integrating many disintegrated activities and it creates easier work relations among staffs, helps for job clarity, and it also provides effectiveness in work place.

#### **3.2 Employees perception in IMC implementation in terms of work conduct**

As stated on chapter two IMC is another way of maintaining a good working relationship within the organization. The company employees will get the message clearly, as well as the goals, and

work towards achieving them. When the organization syncs all the parties within the company, it will create an impactful campaign.

The interviewees and questionnaire respondents respond that IMC has immense benefit in providing consistent messages for audiences and it enhances operational efficiency and integration as well. They also confirmed described IMC has an importance in integrating many disintegrated activities and it creates easier work relations among staffs, helps for job clarity, and it also provides effectiveness in work place. Moreover, IMC also integrates the entire marketing communication activities in a profound manner.

### **3.3 Employees perception in IMC implementation in terms of resource saving**

According to scholars IMC can create competitive advantages, boost sales and profits, while saving money, time, and recourses. IMC wraps communications around customers and helps them move through the various stages of the buying process.

The research result shows there is a positive insight on the implementation of IMC with regarding to saving resources. According to them, the implementation of IMC in Ethiopian Airlines has a merit in averting unnecessary dissipation of human resource. Moreover, they explained that IMC saves money, and unwanted waste of material resources. From the experience of interviewees, we can understand that they the practice of IMC in Ethiopian Airlines has an importance in relation to saving material, human and financial resources. Therefore, recognizing the merit of IMC from these and other dimensions, Ethiopian Airlines should keep on doing much in the head of the time.

### **3.4 Utilization of Marketing Communication Instruments**

According to results of the study, Ethiopian Airlines is utilizing marketing communication instruments and these marketing communication instruments includes advertising, digital marketing, sales promotion, personal selling, public relations, exhibitions and trade shows, direct marketing, sponsorship and packaging.

The utilization of these marketing communication instruments varies depending on the company's communication contexts like time and other related issues. Some of the marketing communication instruments are utilized frequently and the others are employed occasionally as well.

Digital Marketing is being most widely and frequently exploited marketing communication instrument in Ethiopian airlines. There is a massive demand from customers in using social

media and it is being aggressively utilized and marvelous developments have been noted in its utilization in Ethiopian Airlines.

In relation to the implementation of digital marketing in Ethiopian Airlines, Interviewee one expressed as:

*Digital marketing the most busy marketing communication tool and every marketing activity are now being transmitted profoundly via social media more than ever before. We deliver different messages and communicate with many of our customers through social Medias.*

The rapid growth of the Internet and more recently, social media is changing the nature of how companies do business and the ways they communicate and interact with consumers. Every day more consumers around the world are gaining access to the Internet's World Wide Web (WWW) of information available to users (Belch & Belch, 2018). As the researcher noticed, the utilization of digital marketing in Ethiopian Airlines should be boosted than ever before because it is unquestionable that every marketing activity is becoming internet or digital oriented. Moreover, Ethiopian Airlines should consider digital marketing as enormous opportunity for its marketing communication in the future because many new developments in communication technology are being introduced across the world. But with some limitations, according to the above data, we can understand that there is an enormous advancement in the utilization of digital marketing in Ethiopian Airlines.

### **3.5 Implementation of stages of IMC Framework in Ethiopian Airlines**

The four stages of IMC framework states the over-all patterns to the implementation of integrated marketing communication that an organization appear to go through the phases to vividly understand the magnitude of integration. Stage one state about the tactical coordination of marketing communications followed by stage two which talks about redefining the scope of marketing communications. Stage three is about the application of information technology in the marketing communication followed by the final Stage that discusses about financial and strategic integration (Schultz & Schultz, 2004). The practice of IMC of Ethiopian Airlines with reference to the four stages of IMC framework is discussed as follows.

#### **Stage One: Tactical Coordination of Marketing Communication**

Based on the findings of this study, the manifestations in stage one of IMC framework are implemented almost in a full-fledged manner in Ethiopian Airlines because tools are fully integrated. The integration of marketing communication instruments in delivering consistent message is attained in complete manner. However, after the introduction of integrated marketing

communications in Ethiopian Airlines, there are some limitations in delivering consistent and uniform message to audiences by utilizing the most common marketing communication tools, but now a day's things are changed.

The interviewees and questionnaire respondents have a positive insight on the implementation of IMC with regarding to tactical coordination of marketing communication. According to them, the structure of the organizational Ethiopian Airlines particularly marketing communications in was in a problem. Before the introduction of IMC and marketing communication concerned tasks were not merged in relevant and compatible departments and sections. But now a day as stated on the above IMC directorate is an integrated result of different managers/unites.

### **Stage Two: Redefining the Scope of marketing communications**

Based on the findings of this study, Ethiopian Airlines is currently good moving in achieving scenarios of the second stage of IMC framework which talks that the entire marketing communication must follow customer-centric approach. In the stage, customers must be emphasized and frequent assessments on customers in relation to the practice of marketing communication activities should be conducted (Shultz & Shultz, 1998). No matter how customer centered marketing communication assessment is very important, its concern in Ethiopian Airlines is fine. According to interviewee tow data there is a regular assessment conducted on customer in regard to the entire integrated marketing communication activities of Ethiopian Airlines. The result shows there is a practice in Ethiopian Airlines with regard to redefining the scope of marketing communication and customer satisfaction assessment.

In time of Pre- message delivery and post -message delivery, customer's feelings should be assessed frequently to delivery sound and coherent message; after the implementation of IMC such trends are common in Ethiopian Airlines. Informant one said,

*“After the implementation of IMC there is formal assessment, quarterly and after every new campaign there is an effort of assessing customer insight towards marketing communication by taking data from comments and suggestions given by our customers on our official social media pages like Facebook, E-mail, twitter and other channels. In doing so, the collected data were analyzed and based on the results, actions are taken.”*

To sum up, Ethiopian Airlines effort in conducting marketing communication activities from the spot of customers' needs to be improved. In doing so, regular assessments on the entire marketing communication activities should be conducted.

### **Stage Three: Application of Information Technology**

In this stage of information technology is utilized to support the integrated marketing communication development (Shultz & Shultz, 1998). The findings show that there is some betterment on the exploitation information technology for marketing communication activities in Ethiopian Airlines IMC Directorate. As stated on the above in IMC directorate there is the digital marketing manager and in different managers there are IT support, designing, and graphics and web application teams. These teams facilitate the application of information technology in Ethiopian Airlines IMC directorate.

Regarding the betterment of using ICT for marketing communication purposes interviewee two explained that ICT is primarily connected with Ethiopian Airlines because it provides ICT service. Accordingly, there is digital communication section which manages social media tools and it is found at manager level. Thus, utilization of information communication technology in general and our digital communication in particular seems somehow encouraging.

Apparently, informant three also expressed as:

*Because of the development in science and technology, we are now obliged to give emphasis for digital marketing and we are striving accordingly. Regarding to utilizing ICT for MC in Ethiopian Airlines, there are considerable efforts. For example, customers were paying tickets fee in front, but now there are digital platforms of payment like mobile banking. Digital technologies like social media tools, and bulk SMS are moderately implemented for MC activities, but they are much restricted to domestic customers because of ICT infrastructure in the country and Awareness problem. But international customers mostly used these digital platforms.*

In general, no matter how different opinions forwarded from interviewees, Ethiopian Airlines should move on in better utilization of ICT for marketing communication activities so long as everything is becoming digital than ever before.

### **Stage Four: Financial and Strategic Integration**

At this stage, company is said as having the appropriate ways in measuring returns on investment made on customers and examines results of its marketing communication and aspires to measure marketing investments in comparison with profits that are gained by marketing and the company's marketing communication is integrated not only with externally but also internally between different actors and functions such as sales, research and development, and finance



(Shultz & Shultz, 1998). As to the findings of the study, Ethiopian Airlines still have to do with many things until it will reach the fourth stage of IMC framework.

According to the interviewee the IMC directorate structure is a recent phenomenon and still there are MC instruments are good structured and this in fact makes difficult to measure MC return on customers and to make whole business operation is a coherent and synergetic. As we see on the above different managers are under IMC directorate. This shows that, Ethiopian Airlines has somewhat good reached at this stage.

Moreover, as the researcher found in his observation, managers and teams which are under IMC directorate are not in the same building. Some are found in other area even though they are doing the same thing and they are under IMC directorate. For example, on Ethiopian airports enterprise building IMC directorate, Ancillary and business development manager, digital sales and marketing manager and direct sales application manager are found others like advertizing and sales promotion manager and PR and corporate communication manager are found on the main building of Ethiopian Airlines. The distance between the two buildings is so far this in fact affects the integrated marketing practice of Ethiopian Airlines. Accordingly, dispersed departments and sections should be in the same building.

Generally speaking, based on the findings from an questionnaires, in-depth interview, observation and document analysis on the stages of IMC frameworks developed by Schultz & Schultz's (2004), Ethiopian Airlines seems to fulfill some attributions of all stages. In stage one, Ethiopian Airlines utilizes almost all marketing communication tools, but regarding to integration for delivering consistent and coherent message to customers much is expected to be done. Similarly, scenarios of stage two of IMC frameworks need to be focused and Ethiopian Airlines has to move on in exerting much effort. Making regular assessments on customers about the marketing communication activities as well as measuring returns on customers is somewhat not being conducted vigorously. Some scenarios of stage three of IMC framework are moderately implemented. Because essentially Ethiopian Airlines (Airlines Business) is a technological oriented company or business, it is moving better no matter how limitations in inclusiveness of all customers are still happening. However, the Hence, the entire integrated marketing communications practice in Ethiopian Airlines from the perspective of stages of IMC framework is good moving and but much strive is expected.

### **3.6 . Challenges of Integrated Marketing Communications Practice**

In designing integrated marketing communication (IMC) programs, marketers face many challenges as a result of the fact that consumers, brands, and the media are fundamentally changing in profound ways. According to Court et al. (2009) with the explosion of new media, consumers are dramatically shifting both their media usage patterns and how they utilize different media sources to get the information they seek, which thus influences when, where, and how they choose brands. Perhaps more than ever, their attention is divided, often due to multitasking, and they are seemingly in a perpetual state of partial attention.

No matter how integrated marketing communications has an immense benefit for an organization in its various activities, there are challenges in the application process. As to Ethiopian Airlines, the researcher has found out the following impediments of practicing integrated marketing communications. The respondents and interviewees forwarded their reflections regarding to the challenges of integrated marketing communications practice in Ethiopian Airlines as follows.

Regarding the challenge towards IMC practice in Ethiopian Airlines, the respondents and interviewees listed that there is no professional freedom and workers are not encourage to be creative and also there is no trust from high level officials. In addition to that, there is no technical trainings and experience sharing given for integrated marketing communication directorate workers. And also Interviewee two added *“as we know the concept of IMC is new for our country so lack or shortage of experienced man power with regard to IMC is one challenge.”*

On the other hand, interviewee one and some respondents said, *“As a country level we are challenged by COVID -19 like other companies faced. Especially for Airlines business the COVID-19 crisis is very high.”* So, the pandemic disease corona virus affects the practice of integrated marketing communication of Ethiopian Airlines. . On the top of that, because of the company’s government owned, sometimes the presence of conservative processual or procedures are an impediment while practicing integrated marketing communications.

## **4. Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **4.1 Conclusion**

As the findings indicate, with regard to the perception of staffs towards the practice of integrated marketing communications, the findings reveal that IMC strategy has benefits in creating easier

work relations, providing consistent message, job clarity, saving material, and financial resources. More over staffs perceive that IMC practice in Ethiopian Airlines has a merit in harmonizing relationships with internal and external stakeholders. Thus, staffs have good perception towards the implementation of IMC in Ethiopian Airlines.

On the other hand, there are improvements in utilization of marketing communication instruments like digital or electronic marketing, sales promotion, and packaging. However, the utilization of marketing communication instruments like public relations and trade shows are not exploited well. As a peculiar finding, there is a remarkable growth in the utilization of digital marketing than ever before.

In regard to the level of practice of integrated marketing communications in Ethiopian Airlines from the perspective of stages of IMC framework, much effort is expected to be done. Accordingly, most of the practice most scenarios in each stage are still slow but some improvements are there at all stage.

As to stage one of the frame work, Ethiopian Airlines has shown improvements in delivering consistent and coherent message for its customers compared to the previous times. However, the integration of marketing communication instruments is still lethargic and this in fact refrains Ethiopian Airlines from achieving circumstances of stage one in a full-fledged manner.

In regard to stage two of IMC framework, Ethiopian Airlines is somewhat slow moving. The scenario says every act of the marketing communication should be customer oriented that there must be regular assessments. In doing so, conducting regular assessments on customers particularly on the activities of marketing communications has not that much attained even though some customer feedbacks are taken from social media platforms and analysis is being done.

In relation to stage four of IMC, some things have been done other than progresses of fraternity among divisions, departments and sections. There is no measuring return in the activities of marketing communications but financial integrity has somewhat attained in Ethiopian Airlines IMC directorate.

Regarding the challenges of IMC practice in Ethiopian Airlines, the findings of the study show that the absence of professional freedom, absence of technical trainings given for integrated marketing communication staffs and the presence of conservative processual or procedures and

the current pandemic disease COVID -19 are an impediments while practicing integrated marketing communications in Ethiopian Airlines.

Generally speaking, the finding suggests that there are tangible efforts in the implementation of IMC in Ethiopian Airlines no matter how its practice is slow moving particularly in bringing full integration of synergy. The achievements in IMC practice should be reinforced and much effort is expected in the head of the time so as to prevail remarkable development in the entire business activities.

## **4.2 Recommendations**

The findings of this study show that there are some stimulations on the integrated marketing communications practices in Ethiopian Airlines however, still an enormous amount of effort should be done in the future for attaining better synergy and integration. In connection with this, almost all of the questionnaire respondents and interviewees have good perception towards IMC so that Ethiopian Airlines should move on in practicing integrated marketing communications thinking in to considerations its mission, vision and values as well.

Accordingly, based on the findings of the study, below are recommendations suggested by the researcher.

- Technical trainings in integrated marketing communication activities shall be given especially for integrated marketing communication directorate workers to escalate their creativity and competency.
- There should be professional freedom for workers to let them to be creative and competent as well.
- Frequent assessments on customers about the practice of integrated marketing communications shall be conducted. Customer's feelings and desires towards the services offered by Ethiopian Airlines shall be frequently assessed.
- The marketing communication division shall reinforce to work together with other divisions knowing the fact that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

## **4.3 Research Implications**

In relation to this study, the researcher has explored the practice of integrated marketing communications in Ethiopian Airlines from the company's perspective only. Accordingly, the findings of the research show that integrated marketing communication has a tremendous benefit from multi-dimensional perspectives. Most of the respondents and interviewees explained that

IMC has an importance in saving resources, creating solidarity with various stakeholders as well as in harmonizing working environment. Thus, further research on the effectiveness of marketing communication instruments, effectiveness of the entire marketing communication practices, and integrated marketing communication for employee motivation shall be conducted in Ethiopian Airlines.

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