

Redefining the nature and format of the marketing communications mix

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The promotional mix has been used for many years by a vast number of teachers and authors in order to help explain the promotional activities undertaken by organisations. Considered to be one of the 4Ps of the marketing mix, promotion has remained a central element in the way this part of the marketing syllabus is taught. Drawing on the literature and developments in professional practice, this paper explores developments in marketing theory, examines some of the changes in the ways audiences and organisations communicate and considers the impact these have had on the promotional mix. In order to assess these changes two underpinning concepts, relational theory and the resource based view of the firm, are utilised. The paper argues that the promotional mix is no longer a viable interpretation and teaching tool. A new marketing communications mix, MCM², based on two key elements, is presented. The first considers message content and refers primarily to the presentation of the message. The second concerns the media mix, one that incorporates a revised classification of direct and indirect media. It is argued that the new mix is a more accurate reflection of contemporary practice, and more suitable for teaching and educational purposes.

Keywords Promotional mix, Marketing communications, Media, Messages, Relational exchange.

Introduction

The promotional mix element of the 4Ps marketing mix has become established as the conventional method to express the way organisations promote their products and services. Commonly agreed to consist of advertising, sales promotion, public relations, personal selling and more recently, direct marketing, each tool possesses different properties and capabilities. As a result, the promotional mix can be assembled in a variety of ways to achieve different outcomes, both cognitive and behavioural.

However, ideas that organisations should promote and hence persuade customers to think and behave in particular ways have changed. Persuasion is now regarded as just one of a number of tasks that an organisation needs to accomplish through its communication activities. For example, providing

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information, listening, informing and reminding customers are just some of the complexities associated with contemporary interpretations and usage of marketing communications. The emphasis has shifted from a 'promoting to' to a 'communicating with' focus. While the origins of the promotional mix may have provided a basis for firms and their representatives, to have organised their operations, today's complex communications environment suggests that consumers and other stakeholders care little as to what terms are used to describe the forms through which they receive communications. What is also interesting is that media were regarded as an element of advertising and subservient to all the tools. For many teaching this subject, the use of the 4Ps approach has been a central element, but now the promotional mix may no longer be suitable, as organisations now communicate in different ways.

One such example concerns the well established Advertising Effectiveness Awards programme, which is run by the profession's own trade body, the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA). The word 'advertising' has recently been removed from the title of these awards. Putting aside any political aspirations, this change represents a move to embrace other communication activities and to encourage case study submissions from a wider range of applicants other than those dominated by the use of large budget television based campaigns. This also illustrates how clients and agencies are now utilising a wider range of communications methods and developing media neutral strategies. Yet, despite these changes, the promotional, or communications mix appears relatively unchanged, as witnessed in various publications (Fill 2006; Pelsmacker, Guens and van den Bergh 2005; Smith and Taylor 2005; Belch and Belch 2004; Brassington and Pettitt 2003).

Objectives

Whilst the promotional mix approach does not reflect current industry practice neither does it complement contemporary marketing theory. It is accepted that there has been debate about the efficacy of the mix as a concept (Copely 2004) but the emphasis of this paper is on the exploration of the validity of the promotional mix as a model for explaining how modern marketing communications are operationalised. It considers some of the practical and theoretical issues associated with this convention, and it reviews the way in which the tools and media are used as a focus for understanding the ways in which organisations communicate. Finally, a new framework is presented which, it is hoped, will stimulate discussion and further research in order to better represent both marketing theory and marketing communications practise.

Rationale for change

In order to examine the changes that prompt reconsideration of the promotional mix, two key underpinning concepts, relational theory and the resource based view of the firm, are utilised. These offer interesting yet contradictory perspectives and may well reflect some of the core issues

underlying the marketing communications industry and the way the subject is taught.

Relational theory perspectives

Relational theory is derived from Macneil's (1983) ideas about norms of behaviour within relational contracting activities (Brodie 2002). Relational theory is often articulated as relationship marketing, one which only involves collaborative exchanges. This perspective is mistaken as Macneil recognised that there is a spectrum, ranging from transactional through to collaborative exchanges. Consequently, transactional exchanges are an integral and fundamental part of relationship marketing ideas. This is reinforced by the range of relationships that organisations hold with their various networks of stakeholders.

The promotional mix developed at a time when transactional marketing and the linear approach to communications theory were dominant concepts. The marketing emphasis is now upon developing relationships and retaining customers whereas the transactional approach emphasised products and prices as a part of customer acquisition. The movement toward relationship marketing is reflected not only in the actions of clients but also in some of the strategic changes made by many large independent agencies. Bartle, Bogle and Hegarty's (BBH) success in winning large accounts, including the British Airways and Unilever's soap brands business, reported to be valued at £200 million, has been accredited to the agency's emphasis on its 'strategic creative ability.....to deliver thinking and ideas that that will genuinely unify customers around the world' (Marriner 2005). Further, Nigel Bogle, BBH's chief executive, believes that the next big thing in advertising is 'the age of engagement'. This is based on the premise that consumers are no longer prepared to have their television entertainment interrupted by advertising. Companies must create 'branded content to reach consumers. In order to achieve this, BBH have established an 'engagement planning division' to create advertiser-funded programming. Andrews (2006) reports on the need for advertisers to rethink spending as a result of falling tv viewing and the rise of the internet. He quotes Dominic Procter, CEO of media buying firm, MindShare Worldwide, 'To start with, it is important to first tap into the needs of today's consumer. The advertising we have known in the past couple of decades has been about interruption. Adverts in the future need to be more about engagement.'

Perhaps more importantly, ideas about communication have also moved forward. Mass media based promotional communications are an interpretation of the linear or bullet theory of communication (Schramm 1955). This approach held that promotional communications were targeted, largely, at mass (media) audiences characterised by their passivity and who could be persuaded to think or behave in particular ways. Communication theory has progressed and is now understood to be concerned with listening and considering, about providing information, reassuring, reminding and differentiating organisations, products and services (Fill 2006). Communication is not something that is just done *to* audiences, it is also about relating to and communicating *with* audiences (Ballantyne 2004).

Communication theory has moved from a persuasion/information base to one that is essentially a transformational interpretation (Duncan and Moriarty 1998). This approach recognises the importance of listening, interacting and being relationship orientated. However, as some audiences prefer to engage in transactional exchanges there is still an important role for mass media based communications. The evidence for this can be observed by the continuing strength of the UK's offline advertising revenues. That said, although the role may still be significant and the expenditure levels large, there are signs here that changes are taking place. Milmo (2006) reports on the publication of the IPA's most recent quarterly Bellweather report. This records that money spent on TV and posters has suffered its biggest fall since 2000. Budgets, including those for advertising, direct marketing and PR, have fallen at their fastest rate in the last two and half years. The report concludes that advertising will continue to transfer to the Internet and direct marketing, and away from traditional media.

There has also been a philosophical change that has moved marketing communications away from a persuasion only perspective. Whereas customers were the sole target for promotional mix activities, marketing communications now embrace a wider range of stakeholders. Although public relations always sought to influence a range of publics, their activities have invariably been annexed from mainstream marketing communications. The customer focus has now shifted to one that includes all stakeholders, if only in recognition of the relationships and networks of organisations and individuals which are necessary for organisations to achieve their performance targets. The move towards corporate branding is further evidence of this development (Balmer and Gray 2003). Marketing communications is concerned with a range of audiences, not just customers and the relational dimension persists through both exchange and communication theory.

Resource based perspectives

The Resource Based View of the Firm (RBV) holds that a firm can develop a sustainable competitive advantage based on the superior value it generates by managing its key resources more effectively than its competitors (Fhay and Smithee 1999). Some researchers believe that such advantage is driven primarily through intangible rather than tangible resources but there appears to be consensus that these key resources are characterised by the value they generate, the difficulty others have duplicating them and their suitability to the industry. As resources cannot represent equal weight and opportunity, management's role is crucial as they must select and deploy of their scarce resources appropriately. Essentially, the RBV is concerned with using the right resources in order to generate long-term value for stakeholders.

An example of the resource perspective can be seen in the development of digital technologies. Although a contributor to the demise of the promotional/persuasion platform, technology is merely an enabler and it is management's task to select, invest and develop different digital resources. Undoubtedly digital technologies have impacted upon each of the promotional tools and have served to lower costs, extend reach and improve communication effectiveness. However, it has been the opportunity

to manage vast amounts of customer data that has facilitated the delivery of customised communications. Organisations such as Tesco and Amazon have demonstrated astute management of their digital resources, and have been rewarded with market leadership positions.

In addition, digital technology now enables not just two-way communications but interaction and dialogue with a range of audiences. Previously, apart from the use of face-to-face selling, true dialogue was virtually impossible to achieve. Organisations now have an increased number of opportunities to interact with their target audiences and to adopt a customer focus. This centre of attention is also demonstrated through the increased use of multichannel strategies and the finer media choice that this represents. This is also observed through changes in message content, especially those delivered through web sites. In addition, the increased opportunities for audience interaction reflect the expectations that some audiences now expect from the messages with which they choose to engage. Audiences value the empowerment that interactive communications provide, a key feature of the resource based perspective.

The response of organisations to use their limited resources to seek out new ways of reaching smaller, more discrete audiences, has impacted on the promotional mix. In the search to cut through the noise and clutter of competing communications and to break through the increasing audience apathy towards mass-media communications, organisations have invented new ways of reaching their audiences. To a large extent this was achieved by innovating around each of the promotional tools. Product placement (out of advertising), programme sponsorship (out of public relations and advertising), field marketing (out of sales promotion), events and hospitality (out of public relations), key account management (out of personal selling) and an increasing variety of direct marketing initiatives (out of advertising) represent just some of the ways in which the promotional mix has been splintered. Many sports and arts based sponsorships identify with the full range of traditional promotional tools, advertising, public relations, selling and sales promotions. For many brands television has been the mainstay of their communications portfolio. However, some brands have withdrawn completely from television, for example Heineken, who now use print, poster and Champions League football sponsorship (Benady 2005).

Online communications have gathered enormous pace with online advertising the fastest growing advertising medium in the UK (Advertising Association 2005). Indeed, web sites have contributed significantly to not only the nature of the information provided but also to the interaction and the rise of consumers as they search for the relevant content.

The decline of the traditional promotional mix can also be demonstrated through agency responses to changing client expectations. Driven to reduce their cost structures and to improve communication effectiveness, client organisations have made their managers accountable for their communication budgets. Clients desire integrated marketing communications and agencies have tried to respond. Some large agency groups have brought together, either directly (as owned) or indirectly (as loose networks), a variety of communication facilities in the name of integrated marketing communications or one-stop shopping agencies. Others have tried to reposition themselves as communication rather than just advertising agencies, whilst the rise in

number of both small creative and media orientated agencies is testimony to the changing reconfiguration of the promotional services industry.

For the larger firms, there has been a shift toward the use of the services provided by holding groups to organise their communications centrally rather than through a series of individual agencies specialising in different elements of the mix. WPP, Omnicom and Interpublic are examples of such groups now dominating the communications industry. Benady (2004) describes the work WPP undertakes on behalf of clients such as Samsung, Ford and HSBC. However, there is a suggestion that any move towards this form of centralisation is motivated by the search for cost efficiencies and using resources more astutely, rather than an attempt to fulfil promises of increased communications effectiveness through integration.

The surge of interest in integrated marketing communications has perhaps reflected a strategic need for improved communication efficiency and changes in the related environment. Interestingly, development in what is referred to as media neutral planning has passed by, relatively unnoticed. However, there have been significant changes in the role media plays in marketing communications. The new central role that media occupies represents a significant change of emphasis. Formerly, the structural orientation of the promotional mix was on the five tools. Now the media are central, with the tools representing a secondary, not primary force in the communication agenda of both clients and agencies.

The tensions apparent in the marketing communications industry are reflected in the contradictions between the relational and RBV interpretations. However, all of these issues and developments represent a force for reviewing the nature and composition of the promotional mix. If marketing communications is to be taught in such a way that it truly represents client and agency practice then a new mix is required.

Towards a new marketing communications mix

As a starting point it is proposed that the phrase marketing communications mix be adopted as it overcomes the restrictions imposed by the promotion/persuasion platform and allows for the accommodation of a wide array of communication methods and audience experiences. The marketing communications mix (MCM) needs to reflect the role of marketing communications, namely that it is an audience centred activity that seeks to engage target audiences (Fill 2006). This approach is compatible with relational exchange theory and accommodates the wide range of relationships, including transactional exchanges, which organisations develop with their stakeholders. It is proposed that the marketing communications mix be considered from an audience perspective and from this a two-tier approach be adopted. The first is a macro and the second a micro perspective.

From a macro viewpoint it is possible to appreciate the broad spectrum that constitutes marketing communications. Gronroos (2004) provides a useful framework for this when he refers to both planned and unplanned marketing communications and to product and service messages. These are presented in Figure 1. Planned marketing communications for example, takes the form of advertising, sales calls, sampling and internet banners,

whereas unplanned marketing communications refer to word-of-mouth communication, news stories and general gossip. Examples of product experience based messages concern the design and durability of a product, whereas service messages refer to customer service encounters prior to, during and after consumption.

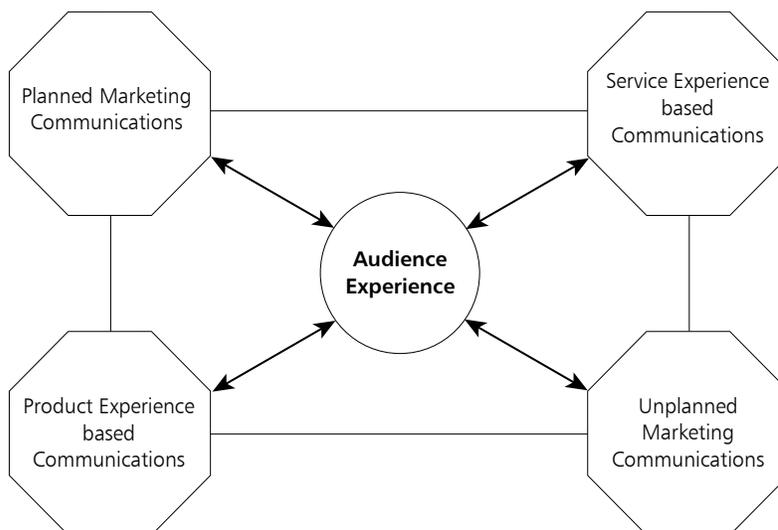
This approach enables not just the breadth but also the complexity of managing marketing communications to be observed. However, it fails to provide any detailed understanding, particularly of the planned marketing communications element, which it is argued, has the capability to influence the communications concerning both the product and service experience. The role of the micro perspective is to articulate these elements.

Any new (micro) mix needs to take account of two key points. First, in order to determine the nature of any engagement through marketing communications, it is necessary to understand the nature of the information the target audience is likely to require and to then design the message content to meet these needs. The second point concerns the manner in which the audience prefers to access the information they require, namely their media usage and preferences. It is proposed that these two elements, message and media, should lie at the heart of any new marketing communication mix.

Message content mix

It is apparent that the rise of digital technologies has encouraged organisations to reconsider the content of the messages they convey through their marketing communications activities. One example of this concerns the design and research associated with web sites. Having to think through the processes visitors undertake when visiting a site has encouraged thought about the content and the messages conveyed.

Figure 1 A macro interpretation of the marketing communications



(Adapted from Gronroos 2004)

It is clear that people make various judgements about the messages they receive and work by Lutz, MacKensie and Belch (1983) led to the 'attitude-toward-the-ad' concept. This has had a significant impact on the marketing communications literature and has been supported by subsequent researchers. There is evidence that messages that promote a positive emotional response are positively related to subsequent brand attitudes and purchase intentions (Goldsmith and Lafferty 2002). Similar findings have been found in the business-to-business context (Gilliland and Johnston 1997), in new media and ecommerce (Chen and Wells 1999), web site design and the 'attitude-toward-the-site' concept (Kumar and Bruner 2000). Even in personal selling the idea that a favourable attitude-towards-the-salesperson requirement has been established, albeit anecdotally, for a very long time.

What is clear is that attitudes-towards-the-message, and it is argued associated delivery mechanisms, influence not just brand disposition but also purchase intentions. Message design in its broadest sense, is therefore an integral part of marketing communications, and should be a part of any new mix. Audiences who prefer transactional exchanges favour messages that inform them about product attributes and services and the value they will derive from entering into an exchange. Audiences that favour a relational exchange seek information that not only enables them to learn more about the topic of 'conversation' or relationship specific knowledge as Ballantyne (2004) suggests, but that it also invites, encourages or makes accessible further messages and opportunities for interaction. This indicates that the other party is actually interested or at least willing to share information, if it is required.

Media channel mix

The practitioner evidence indicates that the second element of the new configuration should concern the media. Organisations seek to deliver their messages through an increasing variety of media to the extent that use of the promotional tools appears to reflect preferred media routes to target audiences. The media are normally considered to consist of paid for delivery mechanisms through which messages are conveyed to target audiences. Traditionally this has focused on so-called above the line advertising media – tv, radio, cinema, posters and print. However, this is a narrow interpretation as media do not always have to be paid for, in a direct sense. Television and cinema advertising are prime examples of paid-for-media where clients pay to use the channels. However, there are other media that do not attract a third party usage fee. For example, letterheads, websites, delivery vehicles, buildings and work-wear clothing represent opportunities to convey messages without having to pay to use the facility. There are one off set up charges but there no usage fees. The examples offered so far relate mainly to advertising media. However, this demarcation can also be used to understand the delivery of public relations messages. No media fee is incurred with press releases but there is with sponsorship. Sponsors such as Samsung are paying Chelsea football club a record £55million over 5 years (O'Connor 2005), mainly for shirt endorsement and perimeter board exposure opportunities, whilst Emirates Airlines paid a similar amount to have the exclusive naming rights to Arsenal's new stadium.

An organisation's sales force provides a media channel to reach target audiences and each message does not incur a fee. Similarly, database and associated CRM and direct marketing activities that use electronic channels do not incur usage fees whereas direct mail and telemarketing activities incur charges per item/call by the Royal Mail and the telephone company respectively. In the same way, sales promotion and packaging do not attract third party charges. In addition to the regular use of street furniture to drive local traffic, various supermarkets use in-store radio, posters, promotions, merchandising and various ambient media opportunities to influence shoppers. Some supermarkets have experimented with plasma televisions in the aisles, not just to promote their own products and services but as a media opportunity for brand manufacturers and local businesses.

The characteristics of transactional exchanges suggest that participants prefer to engage through mass media based communications. This is because communication is one-way, and engagement occurs on a platform where there is no expectation, or indeed opportunity, of a direct response. The communication is essentially a monologue, impersonal, unidirectional, an imbalance that suggests that the relationship is asymmetric. At the other extreme, audiences involved in relational exchanges prefer personal communications and to engage with sales people, account managers, digital media and associated technologies simply because there are opportunities for both parties to interact, explore and to share information. So, although interaction and dialogue are emerging concepts and critical to relationship marketing (Gronroos 2004), media management should recognise the important role that traditional mass media communication still has with transactional exchange based audiences.

As if to demonstrate these points, the Omnicom agency, BBDO, has also been developing strategic concepts that challenge the traditional ways in which communications work. Silverman (2006) reports on the work BBDO undertook for ebay. This centred on a range of communications using different media aimed at promoting the online auction business. The creative basis was the use of the word 'it' – starting with the use of posters, followed by a website. The 'it' message then appeared in a series of 'teaser' TV advertisements. 'It' relates to the difficulties in explaining what ebay is about. BBDO propose that the use of such powerful, simple ideas can work in any medium including word-of-mouth campaigns and package design.

The choice of media, whether it be paid for or not, should reflect the exchange preference of the audience. For example, in order to move from an acquisition to a customer retention strategy, media choice becomes critical. Media should become more personal and capable of customisation, enable interaction and be discrete.

It is proposed that the new marketing communications mix needs to reflect the use of direct and indirect media. Direct media do not involve third parties either as usage fees or in terms of message delivery. They are characteristically owned and managed by the client organisation. Indirect media are owned by third parties, consequently usage fees, as rental of their service, are necessary. Some possible media allocations based on the direct and indirect criteria are presented in Figure 2 (see page 54). The task for marketing management is to consider the appropriate balance of direct and indirect media, in the light of the intended messages, financial resources and the target audience.

Figure 2 Examples of direct and indirect media channels

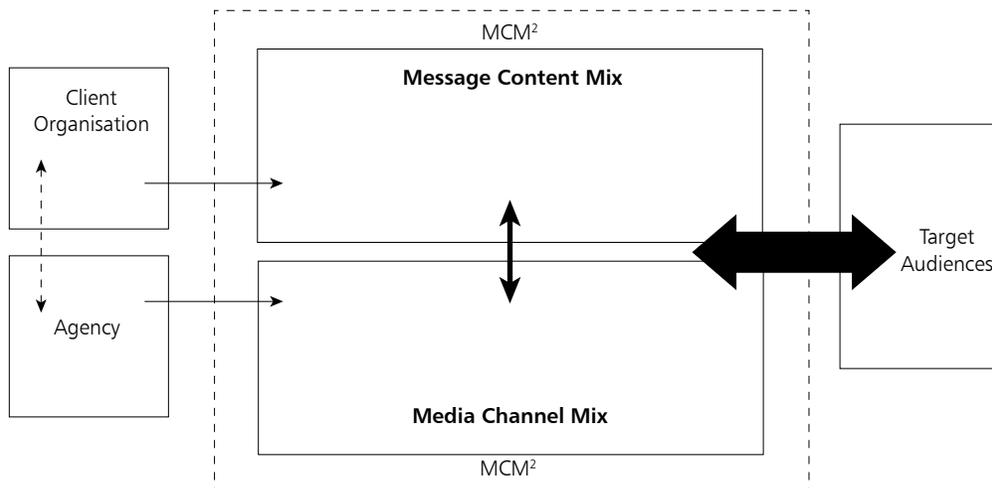
Direct Media Channels	Indirect Media Channels
Email / Blogs / Communities	Outdoor and Transport
Instore / Retail / Location	Print
Sales Promotion - premiums, competitions, coupons, deals	Broadcast
Personal Selling / KAM / GAM	Sponsorship - sports, programme and the arts
Public Relations - media, lobbying, events	Direct Mail / Inserts
Public Affairs and Crisis Communications	Ambient
Web Site - intranets, extranets, portals, eCommerce	Cinema
Packaging	Affiliates
CRM	Telemarketing
Letterhead / Livery / Workwear	Field Marketing - roadshows, merchandising, sampling
Customer / Staff Interaction	Product Placement

A new marketing communications mix

It is proposed therefore, that a new marketing communications mix should combine both the message and media elements explored earlier, as represented in Figure 3.

This new mix introduces two new terms, namely, Message Content Mix and Media Channel Mix. The Message Content Mix refers primarily to the presentation of the message and involves the informational/emotional balance, the design and style, depth, volume, direction and frequency that the content is presented. The Media Channel Mix refers to the balance of indirect and direct media used to convey messages to target audiences. Media, in its broadest sense, has become management’s key to reaching

Figure 3 The marketing communications mix or MCM²



target audiences, and when combined with relevant and likeable content, enhanced audience engagement can be observed.

In keeping with conventional marketing practice, both terms can be identified by their initials, and it is suggested that the new mix be referred to as MCM², if only to prompt recall. The level of detail that can be represented in the MCM² mix should be varied according to the level of the audience's knowledge and experience.

This configuration overcomes many of the problems associated with the traditional promotional mix and incorporates many of the key issues identified in this paper. It is accepted that this interpretative configuration has limitations concerning the scope and the lack of any empirical data necessary to substantiate it. However, as it is derived from an audience perspective and is underpinned by relational theory, it is argued that this is more compatible with prevailing marketing thought than the prevailing promotional mix. MCM² is offered as a starting, not finishing line, and as such is intended to stimulate further research, discussion and consideration.

Conclusions

Examining the promotional (communications) mix using relational and RBV theories is useful because it reveals some of the contradictory developments in marketing theory and organisational practice. It also reflects some of the core issues underlying the marketing communications industry and the way the subject is taught. The exchange context provides what Macneil refers to as the atmosphere in which exchanges occur and frames the nature of the interaction. Marketing communications has a crucial role to play in the development of the requisite atmosphere.

The promotional mix is no longer a realistic interpretation of the way organisations communicate with key audiences and neither does it represent the way in which atmosphere is created and sustained. Both theory and practice have moved forward and the new marketing communications mix presented here is intended to reflect some of the key changes. At the core of the MCM² are two elements, what is to be said and how the message is to be delivered and these are embedded in the Message Content Mix and Media Channel Mix elements of the proposed new framework. It is through these that audiences perceive, interpret, assign meaning and in doing so develop appropriate attitudes-to-the-message, a key factor in brand management. Although there remains a question about the appropriateness of the term 'mix' in the marketing vocabulary, its practise and teaching, the MCM² provides a more accurate, helpful and detailed teaching framework for explaining how marketing communications work, from both a theoretical and practitioner perspective.

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