



Research Article

Application of Integrated Marketing Communication Principles in a Baccalaureate Degree Nursing Program

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Citation: McFadden TG, Sun R, Puskar KR (2019) Application of Integrated Marketing Communication Principles in a Baccalaureate Degree Nursing Program. Ad Nurs Sci Resear: ANSR-108.

Received Date: 30 March, 2019; **Accepted Date:** 08 April, 2019; **Published Date:** 18 April, 2019

Abstract

In today's complex environment of higher education, schools compete for student enrollment. With increases in college tuition, parents and students seek top value for collegiate education. Many factors determine a student's preference for a school. Because of the competition of schools for a value-added education, integrated marketing offers communication perspectives that highlights the uniqueness of the school and its academic program. The purpose of this article is to 1) define integrated marketing communication (IMC), 2) describe the three IMC principles, and 3) apply the three IMC principles in a collegiate Bachelor Nursing Program at an academic health center.

Keywords: Marketing/organization & administration; Nursing; Communication

Introduction

The nursing shortage in the United States has long been recognized and is expected to increase due to the aging workforce and the needs for healthcare [1]. Nursing schools across the country are struggling to raise enrollment to meet the rising demand for health services given that the aging population will require more care [2]. It is essential, therefore, to market nursing as a career and advertise the value of a nursing program. Social media have greatly changed the marketing channels, making information communication technology a regular part of daily life. Online information enables people to access content and to enhance information sharing. Nursing school administrators need to discuss innovative marketing strategies to recruit retain nursing students in the new digital age.

Definition of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC)

Changes in the marketplace, media, and communications have led to the natural evolution. Specifically, advances in information technology contributed to a shift from the product-centered marketing of the 1950s and 1960s to the consumer-centric, interactive approaches of IMC [3]. Since the late 1980s, IMC has been a powerful tool in the marketing discipline. Various researchers provide different definitions of IMC. Kotler and Armstrong define IMC as a concept in which a "company carefully

integrates and coordinates its many communication channels—mass media advertising, personal selling, sales promotion, public relations, direct marketing, packaging, and others—to deliver a clear, consistent, and compelling message about the organization and its products" [4]. According to Duncan and Caywood, IMC is "the process of managing all sources of information about a product/service to which a customer is exposed to behaviorally move the customer toward the sale and maintain customer loyalty" [5]. This later definition reflects the heart of IMC, which focused on the consumer; IMC views the whole marketing communication process through the perspective of the consumer [6]. Later, Duncan and Caywood expanded their definition to build and maintain a long-term relationship, not only with consumers but also stakeholders, including employers and the community [5]. Schultz and Schultz (1998) [7] emphasize the importance of such a long-term association when they write "IMC is a strategic business process used to plan, develop, execute, and evaluate coordinated, measurable, persuasive brand communication programs over time with consumers, customers, prospects, and other targeted, relevant external and internal audiences" [7]. This definition not only highlights a communication strategy related to a corporation's mission, values, and needs, but also relates equally to the brand's mission, values, and needs [8]. IMC has given the traditional marketing mix a new strategic, synergistic, and dynamic paradigm that focuses on using multiple tools of marketing communication to effectively impact the target consumers [9].

Three IMC Principles

From the various definitions of IMC, Kliatcho has identified three principles [6]. The first principle is audience-focused which emphasizes that the target audience is the key element in IMC in terms of media planning and message delivery. Multiple channels, the second principle, integrate the coordination of communication venues. The goal is to connect with target audiences through multiple channels in a coordinated approach. The third principle, a results-driven one, highlights the outcomes and values of the entire marketing effort over time [7].

Application of three IMC principles in a BSN nursing program

The three principles of IMC—audience-focused, multiple channels, and results-driven—can be applied to a bachelor’s degree nursing program. Table 1 lists examples of marketing strategies for each of the three principles in a collegiate Bachelor of Nursing program.

IMC Principle	Marketing Strategies
Audience-focused	Nursing as a career (compensation, mobility, and specialization)
	Innovation of the education program
	Student-centered approach
Multiple channels	Newsletters
	School events
	Websites
	Social media
	Infographics
Results-driven	Ranking
	Research contribution
	Public awards
	Alumni Awards

Table 1: Application IMC Principles in marketing Baccalaureate Nursing Program.

Audience-Focused

First, because nursing students are the targeted audience, IMC must appeal to the needs of their audience. Nurse educators must understand student needs and build a positive image of the institution to improve student satisfaction [10]. To increase audience focus in nursing programs, schools can market their BSN program and stress the importance of nursing as a career choice. Schools may target marketing strategies to selected groups such as ethnic and racial minorities (e.g. Asians, Hispanics, African America) and men, and schools should emphasize that nursing is a profession with multiple clinical specializations, such as oncology, pediatrics, obstetrics, mental health, orthopedics, and trauma. Nursing remains an attractive major because of its guaranteed cost-of-living compensation, its flexible working hours, and its mobility of different job locations [11]. Marketing innovations that appeal to students in a BSN nursing program may include opportunities for enrolling in honors courses or taking

exciting electives (such as Health Care Delivery Switzerland, Health Care Delivery China, Applied Adult CP Critical Care, Global Health Care, and Fundamentals of Disaster/Mass Casualty Care). Another value-added component is the experience of nursing students interacting with students of other health-related disciplines, including bioengineering and law. A student-centered approach creates timely communication channels between faculty and the student body. Orientation leaders, the Dean’s Advisory Board, and yearly student surveys give student the opportunity to share their ideas on their program’s strengths and weaknesses. The audience-focused marketing strategy steers away from the one size fits all model to targeting the relevant audience with the most effective messages.

Multiple Channels

Marketing needs to be facilitated through multiple communication channels. Traditional communication strategies often include email, campus visits with peer volunteers, printed newsletters, and school events. A quarterly student newsletter is disseminated from student services to share announcements, student awards, and “what’s new” topics. Traditional marketing strategies need to be adapted to meet the needs of the new media era. Social media, such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat, deliver messages more broadly and efficiently to a wider variety of audiences no matter their geographical location [12]. For example, student in a bachelor’s collegiate program expressed their desire to learn about campus social activities, clubs, organizations, and volunteer community service opportunities. Students prefer video clips, YouTubes videos, snapshots, and other social medial rather than verbose texts on a website describing the strengths of a program. Social media platforms are also appropriate for posting photos of various collegiate events and student stories to showcase the nursing program. Using short videos to tell stories and highlight how graduates make a difference in the world appeals to prospective students. Visual graphics and infographics display content of a program in a short and pleasing manner to promote the nursing career. Virtual campus tours are also integrated as a tool to market a program by increasing the visibility of nursing programs. Schools can enhance digital marketing tools to further engage students in a life cycle approach from prospective student to active students to graduate to alumni. The application of appropriate channels raises the possibility to target the right message to the right person at the right time and maximizes visibility and involvement with the school [13].

Results-Driven

Nursing schools should consider using outcome-driven approaches such as rankings to demonstrate what happens in their program. Prestige is essential in influencing a student to choose nursing as a career [14]. Rankings of schools are determined by a variety of indicators to reflect a composite score. Indicators considered include graduation and retention rates, social mobility, scholarships, undergraduate academic reputation, student selectivity, financial resources, and average alumni giving rate. On websites, schools may insert rankings, nursing

license pass rates, personalized academic advising, use of effective teaching methods, and quality clinical experiences. Pitching faculty expertise and research contribution through digital resources, publications, and professional recognition is helpful to establish and promote the positive image of nursing programs. A profile of the ideal student applicant is created by emphasizing high school class rank, SAT scores, advanced placement courses, honors, and awards. Schools may also consider producing magazines or newsletters to highlight awards and honors that potential student may receive. Alumni, by recognizing the achievements and contributions of graduates, inspire the students who will follow. School awards and alumni awards offer chances to showcase the institution and strengthen student/alumni connections. Showcasing these key outcomes creates more effective marketing strategies for nursing programs.

Conclusion

IMC offers marketing implications for academic health centers that include health science schools such as medicine, nursing, dental, pharmacy, and health and rehabilitation. The use of IMC marketing applied to one example of a top-rated school of nursing facilitates and enhances recruitment of students within the complex academic and healthcare environment. The three principles of IMC provide integrated marketing approaches, including audience-focused, multiple channels, and results-driven outcomes. The IMC incorporates a value-added approach in marketing the example of a collegiate nursing program within an academic health center. Schools of health sciences can utilize and apply IMC principles as a way of organizing marketing strategies for academic programs.

Conflict of Interest: We have no conflict of interest to declare.

Disclosure Statement: We have nothing to disclose.

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