

# Lessons Learned from Integrated Marketing Communications: An Integrated Relationship Marketing Approach

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## Abstract

In the 1990s, the then increasingly differentiated “classic” marketing instrument of “promotion” led to the idea of so-called “integrated marketing communications,” in which special methods of a re-integration of the individual instruments are intended to increase the overall effect of marketing communications or make it efficient. In this article, this approach is transferred to relationship marketing, which is differentiated in a very similar way today. By having a look at the usefulness of this initial idea on a macro level, it is shown that, in addition to formal and content-related aspects of integration, technical and organizational aspects are also of particular importance. Similar to communication and all its variety of instruments, we assume that such a re-integration is necessary for an efficient and successful relationship marketing

**Keywords:** relationship marketing; CRM; integration; integrated marketing communications; integrated relationship marketing

## 1. Introduction, Objectives, and Research Question

In the 1990s, the “traditional” marketing instrument “promotion” (McCarthy 1960) faced particular challenges (see e.g., Bruhn 2013, 88ff.). On the part of the providers, **more and more communication forms, channels, and instruments** had additionally emerged in the years before or were becoming more and more differentiated (for example, in the form of media advertising, sponsoring, direct marketing, PR, event marketing, multimedia marketing, etc.), and this was for products and services that were also increasingly becoming step-by-step more differentiated (Bruhn 2013, 89). At the same time, from the 1990s onwards, consumers were experiencing **overstimulation** and, in some cases, **increasing reactance** to marketing and communication instruments (see e.g., Christopher/Payne/Ballantyne 2002). In addition, environmental uncertainties, market turbulence, competitive pressure, and increasing media diversity characterized this period (Bruhn 2013, 89).

Based on these considerations, in the 1990s, more and more marketing scientists and practitioners drew the conclusion that a **re-integration** of the communication instruments was necessary in order to realize an effect and to make communication – by optimizing effects of synergy – more efficient (Bruhn 2013, 89). Against this background, concepts of “**integrated marketing communications**” emerged and gained great importance in science and practice, partly in the USA (see especially Caywood/Schultz/Wang 1991; Bruhn 2013, 94), but also and especially in German-speaking countries (see especially Bruhn 1992; Bruhn 2013, 95).

Today another marketing approach faces challenges, similar to those that marketing communications had been confronted with, too: **relationship marketing**. This approach was developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s by the so-called “Nordic School” with representatives such as Grönroos (1994) and Gummesson (1987; 1994) (see e.g., Bejou 1997; Sheth/Parvatiyar 1995b, 2002; Berry 2002). The core idea was and is that – especially for services and industrial goods – the establishment and maintenance of long-term relationships of a company with its customers is particularly value-adding and thus, profitable (Reichheld/Sasser 1990).

Over the next thirty years, **various expansions** followed, and thus corresponding **differentiations** of relationship marketing as well, similar to decades earlier with regard to communications.

In addition to the recruitment and retention of long-term customer relationships, **recovery** (see e.g., Johnston/Michel 2008) and **rejection** (see e.g., Bruhn 2016, 12) expanded relevant (marketing) tasks.

A large number of existing theories and instruments – especially in the area of service marketing – have been adapted or further developed for relationship marketing issues, or have been created completely from scratch. These include, for example, **quality management** (Christopher/Payne/Ballantyne 2002), the field of satisfaction tools including national and international **customer satisfaction models** (see e.g., Anderson/Fornell/Lehmann 1994; Anderson/Fornell 2000), **customer lifecycle management** (see e.g., Siems 2010; Bruhn 2016, 60), **complaint management** (Volkov 2004), **word-of-mouth management** (see e.g., Buttle 1998), **customer experience management** (Pine II/Gilmore 1998; see also e.g., Zablah et al.

2017), **customer journey management** (see e.g., Rawson/Duncan/Jones 2013), or **customer education management** (see e.g., Antonios 2011; Suh et al. 2015), etc.

In addition, it was recognized that relationship marketing can (and should) include other stakeholders besides customers, especially **employees**, but also suppliers, the public, and even competitors (Bruhn 2016, 13). Against this background, so-called **internal marketing** has also gained importance (see e.g., Ahmed/Rafiq 2003), again with a variety of its own sub-areas such as the management of employees with corresponding interfaces to HR (see e.g., Rafiq/Ahmed 1993), employer branding (see e.g., Biswas/Suar 2016), or the idea of internal service (see e.g., Huang 2019).

Moreover, disciplines outside of business administration, such as computer science, took up the topic of “CRM” early on and intensively, especially in the form of **CRM software solutions** (see e.g., Siems et al. 2012). Finally, later developments in computer science clearly relate to the topic of relationship marketing; for example, today, **Big Data approaches and predictive analytics** are often associated with CRM, or are increasingly shaping it (see e.g., Langston/Loreto 2017).

Furthermore, relationship marketing has received attention far beyond its original core areas in services and business-to-business (B2B) interactions, specifically in **consumer goods** (see e.g., Sheth/Parvatiyar 1995a; O’Malley/Tynan 2000) as well as in not-for-profit organizations (see e.g., MacMillan et al. 2005; Bryce 2007; Knox/Gruar 2007; Siems et al. 2012, 4).

Consequently, relationship marketing has comprehensively expanded existing marketing and, **with a variety of instruments and forms**, is now an important part of it (Christopher/Payne/Ballantyne 2002; Ballantyne/Christopher/Payne 2003).

Particularly in view of the extreme differentiation of the field and the almost immense number of individual instruments, the question arises as to whether the same applies to relationship marketing as it did to marketing communications in the 1990s: the **need for re-integration** in order to make the individual instruments efficient or effective at all. First approaches confirm this idea, while they are focussing on an integration of internal and external marketing (Bruhn 2002; Bruhn/Hadwich/Georgi 2007) or relationship communication aspects (Hutton 1996).

Summarizing this, the central research question of the paper is the extent to which the strands of thought highlighted, holding at the macro level, form a beneficial approach. Accordingly, this first idea is to be shown in order to elicit the relevance and linkage potentials for further in-depth studies. The authors will show: The solutions established thirty years ago for a suitable integration of individual instruments with the analogous problem at that time in the area of marketing communications could be a good template for this.

## 2. Method

This paper is a conceptual paper presenting an initial idea with the main objective to forward an actual problem: How can the plethora of instruments in relationship marketing be managed more efficiently by a re-integration, which was used in a similar context thirty years ago?

As already shown, relationship marketing has increasingly expanded within the last years – not at least due to the plethora of instruments developed. Staying at the macro level as well as following the previous explanations and the sources mentioned there, **relationship marketing**

is understood as all approaches which, in accordance with the basic idea of the subject, include the management of long-term relationships of a company with its stakeholders (see similarly Gummesson 1996; Christopher/Payne/Ballantyne 2002; Palmatier 2008, 2; Bruhn 2016, 60). Accordingly, relationship marketing includes topics such as recovery management, customer satisfaction, customer lifecycle management, complaint management, customer loyalty programs, word-of-mouth management, customer experience management, customer journey management, customer education management, and so on. From all these just exemplary shown topics instruments can be derived by means of which analyses, decision paths, implementations etc. can be carried out and derived.

To show how theories of **integrated communications** can be used for a re-integration of these relationship marketing instruments, the authors use a special approach of integrated communication, developed by Manfred Bruhn (1992; 2013). In Europe and especially in German-speaking countries this approach is very common ([Citations Bruhn], o. D.) and thus well established. Therefore, this was used as a basis for the further analysis for orientation, structuring and argumentation. In order to make a first step in the direction of integrated relationship marketing, the division into formal, temporal and content integration (Bruhn 2013, 99ff.) is taken up.

### 3. Findings and Discussion

In integrated communication, Bruhn (2013, 99ff.) distinguishes between formal, temporal, and content-related integration. **Formal integration** means achieving a high recognition value of the communication object (especially the brand) through uniform formal design, but also something like a uniqueness of the communication itself (“UCP,” Unique Communication Proposition, Bruhn 2013, 26 and 121).

In this regard, for relationship marketing it can be stated that it seems to make sense to use **formal uniformity in integrated relationship marketing** as well, in order to promote a uniform perception through the same symbols/colors . . . here as well. It is to be assumed that, particularly in larger enterprises and organizations – and similarly to integrated communications by appropriate regulations regarding a corporate design – important bases are already present in practice. Nevertheless, this aspect may not be underestimated, especially when new instruments come in additionally in the context of relationship marketing that so far had not been the subject of marketing or even entrepreneurial management at all. If, for example, the customer is supposed to participate in an enterprise’s service delivery with individual production means in the context of an experience management, these production means, possibly, will not correspond initially, or only limitedly to the corporate design standards (and, possibly, also not, or only limitedly, to the quality standards) of the enterprise. For this reason, it could be **advantageous** for a company to make these production means available to the customer in a formally and qualitatively suitable manner (even if this contradicts cost savings that appear possible in the short term).

The next two forms of integration are even more complex. Following Bruhn’s (2013, 99ff.) approach of integrated marketing communications, all different instrumentes must also be coordinated in terms of **content and timing** in such a way that a consistent overall picture is created for the customer – in the course of time (matching the different objectives of the various instruments) (today this could be expressed as “matching the customer journey”). For this purpose, on the one hand, it makes sense to define an overriding main objective of all instruments with, if necessary, further sub-objectives (Bruhn 2013, 120). On the other hand, a

**differentiation of the instruments** into so-called **(1) leading instruments, (2) integration instruments, (3) crystallization instruments, and (4) follow-up instruments** can be made with regard to the contribution to the success of this objective's hierarchy, and, if applicable, mutual dependencies among each other, which then indicates whether an instrument influences others and/or is influenced by others (Bruhn 2013, 124). These considerations can be excellently transferred to relationship marketing:

(1) In relationship marketing, there are instruments that are central to other instruments and make a significant contribution to the strategy of the instruments' overall set (that must be formulated in the same way as for communications) ("guiding instruments," Bruhn 2013, 122). Bruhn (2013, 123) assumes that in many industries' communications, media advertising takes on such a role as **leading instruments**. In relationship marketing, it could be the customer journey, for example, that performs this role in relation to integrated relationship marketing in many industries today.

(2) **Crystallization instruments** that are characterized by the fact that they themselves are subject to the strong influence of other instruments, but at the same time also provide a strong feedback to them, are to be distinguished from the leading instruments (Bruhn 2013, 124). Bruhn sees this role in communications especially in public relations (Bruhn 2013, 124). In integrated relationship marketing, for example, complaints management could play this role (which is undoubtedly very important there by analogy).

(3) **Integration instruments** are instruments that are characterized primarily by a strong connecting character of other individual instruments; for example, they have little influence on other instruments, but themselves are also little influenced by other instruments, in communications, such as trade shows (Bruhn 2013, 124). In integrated relationship marketing, this role could be played by internal marketing, for example.

(4) **Follow-up instruments** are instruments directed at others and themselves have little effect on others, such as in direct marketing communication (Bruhn 2013, 124). In an integrated relationship marketing, for example, a customer loyalty program could play this role.

As shown, the basic principle of integrated communications described above, thus, can be excellently transferred to integrated relationship marketing. At the same time, the question arises as to whether the above-mentioned division into formal, temporal, and content-related is sufficient for integrated relationship marketing. The following aspects should be considered.

Since, as shown, relationship marketing still crosses significantly more (specialist) boundaries than communications, it seems sensible to extend the integration levels (formal, temporal, content-related, see above) by an **organizational** one. For example, one particular challenge of integrated relationship marketing will be to bring the areas of responsibility of marketing and HR – which are classically functionally separate in most companies – to common strategies and action plans based on them, as required, among other things, by internal marketing. The fact that this is likely to be quite a challenge underlines once again the necessity of such an integration idea.

The **need for organizational integration** also arises from a second point. In the area of relationship marketing in particular, more and more subtasks have been outsourced. If CRM is a software (from an external IT service provider), and experience management is handled by an agency, this will hardly be a successful implementation of relationship marketing. Of course,

this also applies to specialist departments within a company to a certain extent. In any case, a coordinator is needed, similar to the product manager in the past – for example, a customer (group) manager must take over this task if available or the company should consider the introduction of such a position. In addition to the operational level, the head of marketing and its team also have the task of keeping an eye on integration when awarding contracts to external parties as well as in-house and also during implementation.

With regard to the idea and the emergence of integrated marketing communications, there is another difference for a possible “integrated relationship marketing” today. We live in a different time than in the 1990s. Against the backdrop of the megatrend of **digitalization** that is being intensified in many areas by the Covid-19 pandemic, it seems sensible to consider a **technical level of integration** as well. As previously mentioned, a successful integration of IT solutions into the actual concepts of relationship marketing is more important today than ever before. IT solutions should always be seen and used as a helpful option for solving the content-related issues, but not as a substitute for them. Many mistakes were made here in the early days of CRM (see e.g., Siems et al. 2010), which the authors explicitly warn against repeating in view of the renewed increase in technical relevance.

#### 4. Conclusions, Limitations, Outlook, and Implications

This paper attempts to show that – in order to use an efficient overall set of instruments – today it makes sense to think about **re-integrating** the different instruments in **relationship marketing**, which is now firmly established and differentiated in research as well as practice and covers many subject areas and instruments. According to the authors’ assessment, this basic idea and a corresponding awareness of it at the management level can already provide valuable insights.

A first suggestion for concretization was also listed. It can be very helpful for such an integration to use proven considerations in the concept of integrated marketing communications and to concretely consider different **levels of integration**. It would be risky, for example, analogous to communications, to carry out integration only formally (which is undoubtedly the easiest way), but to neglect the actual central content-related (and temporal) integration of the individual instruments that is central for a consistent use of instruments. An instrument mix that aims at trust, such as relationship marketing, must especially pay particular attention to consistent and, thus, credible action.

At the same time, it was shown that additional organizational and technical integration aspects must be taken into account.

Of course, all considerations are only initial ideas and hypotheses from a rather broad macro level perspective. For example, the classification of instruments into so called leading- and following instruments would have to be verified empirically. Differences, for example, depending on the country and also as well as the industry, as well as, presumably, changes over time, are to be expected analogously to corresponding studies earlier on integrated marketing communications (Bruhn 2013, 124).

**Empirical studies** also lend themselves to the further considerations on the levels of integration that have been pointed out. In addition, as mentioned above, the considerations are restricted to a limited small part of the theories on the topic of “integrated marketing communications,” so

that a **further theoretical foundation** is not only possible here, but is certainly also sensible, if necessary also with focusing on partial integration areas (for example, by considering only two or three selected relationship marketing instruments at the same time) including, correspondingly, more focused literature research than is possible here.

Overall, for the open-minded practitioner and the interested researcher, there is a **great potential** of new ways to make relationship marketing even more efficient by specifically improving the integration of the different instruments as “Integrated Relationship Marketing.” The present paper concludes with the hope that it has provided an initial impetus in this respect.

	Communications		Relationship Marketing
<b>Emergence</b>	1950s	↔	1990s
<b>Maturity-Phase</b>	1990s	↔	2020s
<b>Branches</b>	Originally primarily consumer goods, now increasingly also services and non-profit organizations	↔	Originally primarily services and industrial goods, now increasingly also consumer goods and non-profit organizations
<b>Customer situation in maturity-phase</b>	Increasing reactance to communications	↔	Increasing reactance to relationship marketing
<b>Company situation in maturity-phase</b>	Variety of individual instruments (advertising, sponsoring, trade fairs, PR, multimedia communication, etc.)	↔	Variety of individual instruments (customer satisfaction tools, loyalty programs, word-of-mouth-management, customer experience management, customer-journey management, customer education management)
<b>Competitive situation in maturity-phase</b>	Intensive activities with similar instruments	↔	Intensive activities with similar instruments
<b>Environment situation in maturity-phase</b>	Market turbulences, dynamic	↔	Market turbulences, dynamic, disruptive
<b>Integration levels</b>	formal, content-related, temporal	↔	formal, content-related, temporal, organizational, technical



“Integrated Marketing Communication”



“Integrated Customer Relationship Management”

*Figure 1: Comparison of Integrated Marketing Communications and Integrated Customer Relationship Management*

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