IMC Portfolio Rationale

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Executive Summary

This portfolio was created to showcase some of the work I completed as a student in the UNCW IMC master's program from January 2023 through May 2024. It is a representation of the key elements of the program and projects that I found to be both challenging and beneficial for future pursuits in a marketing career. My portfolio exhibits eight carefully selected pieces that reflect the comprehensive and rigorous curriculum I completed. Each project was deliberately chosen for its relevance to my aspirations of moving into a role as a marketing/communications director. The work shown highlights key areas of my newly acquired expertise and skill sets necessary to secure higher level employment. Each project has been summarized in this written report and includes details regarding the rationale of a given item, the rhetorical context and application of IMC theory and implementation. The artifacts accompanying this portfolio rationale can be found on a professional website created for the completion of my studies with the COM 590 Capstone class. This digital portfolio provides further detail regarding the artifacts that include brand analysis, brand audit, digital storytelling, rebranding, diversity and inclusion as well as crisis communication. A link to the portfolio website that contains these artifacts is included (see *Appendix A*).

Introduction

Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) is a purposeful and strategic approach to brand messaging. Rather than using traditional methods that silo efforts for brand awareness, IMC encompasses a number of approaches concurrently. As an IMC practitioner, designing an integrated campaign can provide better results by disseminating a consistent, unified message on a variety of platforms that provide far greater reach, by targeting specific audiences and increasing engagement.

Integrated marketing is very data driven which takes the guess work out of wondering, assuming or injecting personal opinion into how customers feel about a brand. Being able to study consumer buying habits through research and audits and analysis are valuable tools to get a brand message seen and understood.

For a brand to have success with integrated campaigns, there must be agreement both internally and externally about brand identity. Internally it creates buy-in from employees who have a clear understanding of brand values, organizational culture, mission, and vision. Externally, it provides customers of the brand, comprehension of not only the goods and services the brand provides but its core values as well; combined this is integral to brand transparency.

After thoughtful consideration and review of the work I completed throughout the UNCW IMC master's program, there are a number of projects that envelope these concepts and fortify the key takeaways regarding integrated messaging. My proposed project includes a brand analysis of Starbucks, a brand audit of a marketing agency, a rebrand of the Girl Scouts of the USA, an in depth look at diversity, equity and inclusion and the need to be aware of these factors as an effective marketing practitioner, a digital storytelling campaign that proposes a brand subcategory, a white paper that looks at a current risk that can affect marketers and the need for a brand to have an effective crisis communications plan.

The goal of my portfolio project is two-fold. I want to formally present an encapsulation of my work to provide my comprehension of IMC theories into praxis. In addition, by creating a

website with samples of my work, I can show potential employers my skills and knowledge about IMC to secure higher level employment in marketing.

Brand Analysis: COM 532

Starbucks is a brand known for their high-quality, hand-crafted hot and cold coffee and tea brews and blends as well as refreshing seasonal drinks complemented with quick-service food.

Completing a brand analysis for Starbucks provided a deeper look into how the brand operates internally and externally to gauge the alignment of brand messaging and what possible changes could be made to improve strategy and overall brand value. When delving into Starbucks, the analysis provides an overview, detailed brand offerings, a look at the competitive landscape, key audience, positioning, messaging, communication, SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis, and recommendations for the brand.

The theoretical concept that relates to this brand is Burke's dramatism or dramaturgy; looking at how symbols are used in language (Littlejohn and Foss, 2009). In marketing**,** practitioners often rely on signs like logos, giving end-users quick recall about a brand through rhetoric that reinforces the brand, visually. But as Burke describes, language has symbolism that is used to engage consumers, providing recall about a brand. Starbucks, for example, utilized two-hundred trademarked names that have become second nature to users, like Frappuccino and Refreshers. A brand can increase its integrity and trust when it creates a language all its own making brand followers feel like they are part of an exclusive club where only the members are familiar with the vocabulary.

The brand analysis I completed for Starbucks exhibits my ability to professionally research a brand, discern theory and provide integrated marketing communications suggestions to improve the brand. The intended audience is a corporate leadership team examining my credentials to fill a position as Director of Marketing. The ability to analyze a brand and understand its place in the marketplace and how it can be improved is a critical skill improving a brand's positioning. As an IMC practitioner, it is important to not follow a set formula when assisting with a brand's messaging. Instead, the exercise of conducting a brand analysis for a client enforces integrity and customizes deliverables. Every brand has its own value; it is the responsibility of the IMC specialist to improve the message and make it more effective and engaging; that can be achieved by a thorough brand analysis.

Brand Audit: COM 533

I have worked as a public relations content specialist for three years with a national agency. The agency itself recently underwent a buy out from a private equity company and acquired an additional company to combine forces. For this project, the name of the company was redacted for privacy. I performed an audit on the company that was fictitiously called Multi Marketing. In the audit, my methodology included sampling various touchpoints of the brand. I examined all forms of internal and external communications to gain a better understanding of its brand identity and cultural alignment. I personally observed several remote client interaction meetings to identify the behavior and satisfaction of customers of Multi Marketing. This provided great external perspective of the brand. I also analyzed client testimonials available on the company website to determine the effectiveness of deliverability on brand promise. I

interviewed the Chief Content Officer and received extensive and valuable artifacts for the audit from the Chief Operating Officer. I was made privy to a 49-question survey distributed to employees that had just been conducted, which proved to be valuable information for the audit. I personally conducted anonymous interviews with some staff members. My audit included the company's organizational chart, the mission, vision and purpose statements, a town hall meeting, internal training, and diversity statements released by the company. I included internal company newsletters, the company website, internal email, several social media platforms including Facebook and LinkedIn.

The premise was to examine organizational culture and determine if the brand had clear and consistent messaging; if communication was effective and if there was open communication among all levels of staff. This exercise was a pivotal point for me in the program as I realized the importance of praxis. The brand audit involved understanding organizational culture, consistency, inclusiveness, effectiveness, and the manifestation of theory used in day-to-day application. Among the theories that I employed were Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2013) and Communication and Organizational Cultures Theory (O'Donnell-Trujillo and Pacanowsky, 1982). Having a comprehensive understanding of the internal workings of the organization and its external messaging, I was able to create suggestions for improving organizational culture during a time when the company was experiencing growing pains. Additionally, I was able to propose changes to external messaging to improve brand consistency. This was an eye-opening project for me because I understood the tremendous role organizational culture is for employee satisfaction, for organizational leadership and external messaging. Having the skill to conduct an audit for an organization to help improve its operation and culture is invaluable as a marketing professional because it showcases my diverse abilities to understand a brand.

Rebrand: COM 534

The Girl Scouts of the USA recently completed a rebrand designed to better reflect the mission and vision of the more than 100-year-old historic organization that boasts 2.5 million members. The purpose of the Girl Scouts was to create an organization that helped develop girls. As the world has evolved, so too has the organization. Therefore, changes have been made to adjust to the historical moments, aligning the Girl Scouts' mission and vision with their overall messaging. The rebrand creates a better sense of cohesion and unifies the 112 independent councils, located throughout the country, while allowing each of these councils to adapt to their specific community. The rebrand simplifies and gives clarity to the heart of the Girl Scout messaging. It provides a contemporary update to the Girl Scout mission, better reflecting the changing needs of young women in the modern world, while maintaining the integrity of its past. The rebrand was designed strategically to embrace the rich history of the organization, still utilizing the iconic and identifiable trefoil logo but with a 21st century reflection. Through their 100-year history, the Girl Scouts have promoted and protected the same goods, but have been able to successfully adapt those goods chronicled in the historical moments. Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair and Brian L. Ott's theory was that historical moments are based on memory (Fritz, McManus, and Kearney 2023, p.78).

Not only was the exercise of studying the intricacies of a rebrand compelling, but this was the first instance in the program when we looked at organizational culture and brand messaging through an ethical lens. Frankly, it was an enlightening experience to understand the

significance of someone's narrative and contextual perspective. Fritz, McManus and Kearney discussed Gadamer's theory that "bias is an inevitable part of life" (Fritz, McManus, and Kearney, 2023, p. 90). However, as IMC practitioners, it is essential to not only respect diversity but to invite differing viewpoints in order to gain brand engagement. The Girl Scouts rebrand, for example was a necessary refresh creating a more inclusive organization representative of all members. As an IMC practitioner ethics begins from team collaboration and extends to messaging. Giving a diverse team of people a seat at the table to express their point of view can only assist with representative messaging.

Utilizing this project in my portfolio professionally, exemplifies my ability to study and research a brand and while maintaining the integrity of the brand by promoting and protecting their goods, and refresh its messaging through a rebrand to better reflect the historical moment.

Diversity and Inclusion for the IMC Practitioner: COM 535
Breaking Down Gendered Ageism in the Workplace

When studying diversity and inclusion, I researched a topic that was personally important to me which is gendered ageism in the workplace. My presentation discussed the hurdles older women must overcome in the workplace. I utilized several theories that were especially intriguing to me. One was the term "intersectionality" derived from Professor Kimberle Crenshaw (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, and Tomlinson, 2013). The word captures the essence of identity markers and how they connect. We all identify with a number of these labels.

Perhaps the most thought-provoking theories were derived from Professor Anthony Cortese and his views on postmodernism. My takeaway from Cortese is that as marketers, we are trying to deliver brand messaging in a crowded marketplace. Advertisers default to eye-catching, provocative imagery and messages to be seen and win against competitors. "Advertising packages our emotions and sells them back to us" (Cortese, 2016, p.11). Cortese also shares Kilbourne's thoughts that, "Ads sell much more than products. They sell moral values and cultural images, such as concepts of success, love and sexuality" (Cortese, 2016, p.12). As responsible practitioners, we are tasked with being aware of negative images and messages that exploit or devalue people based on identity markers and instead, should use brand messages to empower.

Professionally, I am including this in my portfolio because I am pleased with the research and the final product. As someone wanting to grow in the field of marketing, this project shows my deep understanding of the need to be inclusive and representative of all consumers.

Digital Storytelling: COM 536

Perhaps the project that resonated with my interests the most was the digital storytelling campaign I did for a brand called Skyhawks Sports Academy. They are a national franchise that has provided skill-based sports camps, after-school programs, and classes to about two million children in 25 states for more than 40 years. Committed to combining fun, safety, and skill development, Skyhawks seeks to nurture a lifelong love of sports and fitness in children aged 2-14, as well as through their Super Tots program for younger children. Through this exercise, I was able to present what Aaker expresses as a "subcategory" or new concept deliverable which is a nutritional component to the offerings called "Eat Like a Champion." Using what Aaker describes as signature stories, I utilized various mediums to connect the new subcategory to

target audiences through IMC. The proposal included customer stories in a digital press release, a micro podcast, social media posts, a longform video, and a blog post. As Aaker says, "Stories are superior to facts in gaining exposure, activating social media, communicating information, being remembered, creating involvement, persuading, inspiring and more (Aaker, 2018, p 220). As a Public Relations specialist, I live Aaker's theories each day when I write blog posts, press releases and social media posts. No matter what brand I am working with, conveying a message using varied personalized stories captures the audience's attention far more often than mere facts. Not only that, but using real stories has an ethical implication that allows the IMC practitioner to convey truthful stories instead of what Cortese described in postmodernism which includes using provocative images to sell a brand. I much prefer the ethically sound signature stories that appeal to emotion and humanity and reflect accountability.

I am including this in my portfolio because it was a very successful project for me. I work closely with this brand, and I took a bold step and received permission to present my subcategory to the client, Skyhawks Sports Academy. They were impressed and it showcased my creativity and skills to my employer. Using it as an artifact on my website will show prospective employers my ability to suggest a subcategory and create an IMC campaign around it.

Crisis Communication: COM 537 (3 Elements)

Paracrisis

Always wanting to feel prepared for anything that comes my way by having a Plan B, studying crisis communication was very intriguing to me. It is inevitable that brands, no matter how careful they are, will have a misstep or paracrisis or be faced with a circumstance completely out of their control. However, having a team in place to effectively handle it can diffuse the dilemma or mitigate the effects of a disaster.

My first project researched a marketing paracrisis**.** In keeping with the parameters of what Coombs and Holladay describe as a paracrisis, my example of the Pretzel Crisps brand falls under the definition because it "...looks like a crisis and does require action from the organization. However, a paracrisis does not warrant convening the crisis team and operating in crisis mode" (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, para. 1). The paracrisis I explored involved an advertising campaign that included large print ads used for marketing a product called Pretzel Crisps owned by the brand Snack Factory. This was a paracrisis because the ads created negative media attention and consumer criticism. The ads were part of a focused marketing project concentrated in New York City and the controversial advertisements involved what many perceived as insensitivity toward people with eating disorders. The controversy surrounded the tagline of the ad. Characteristic of a paracrisis, the fall-out from the Pretzel Crisps ads played out on social media platforms, specifically Twitter with critics claiming that the company's advertisements were "…acting in an irresponsible or unethical manner" (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). It created a reputational threat to the brand.

From theory to praxis, I was able to identify the paracrisis and create a response that was intended to mitigate the bad press, apologize to those offended and use humor to diffuse the controversy. At the heart of dealing with crisis is ethics and transparency. When a brand is at risk, the ultimate concern should be responsibly helping the people affected.

I am using this artifact in my portfolio because it was an effective exercise in crisis communication and will serve me well as I proceed on this career path as a communications director.

Communication Theory and Social Science

As a former news journalist, I was fascinated with the Exemplification theory based on the role of media in a crisis as discussed by Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger. The impact of the media in a crisis can exacerbate a situation or its influence can help quell fears. This illustrates how semiotics, or signs can evoke an emotional response, for instance, when we see a weather alert come up on the television screen or we see a beware of dog sign (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2019). It can have a psychological effect on those viewing the information. In praxis this information can be lifesaving. As an IMC practitioner, the Exemplification theory reminds us about the power of semiotics and clear messaging. Simple, common visuals and instructions are best practice to convey information during a crisis.

As a marketing specialist, it is ethically important to be responsible when creating messaging especially when it involves danger or could result in injury or loss of life. It is a reminder to be concise yet thorough when conveying messages.

I am including this in my portfolio because it shows my understanding of creating appropriate messaging for a universal audience whether in a time of crisis or to mitigate risk.

White Paper

Crisis can come in many different forms. For example, I researched a white paper that looked at an anticipated problem related to IMC. The question posed discussed the need for IMC professionals to be well-versed in an array of mediums to participate in what research suggests is the future of marketing, personalized marketing strategies. The use of technology in the field of marketing is necessary to move forward and better serve consumers. Although discussed in COM 536, the theory that best equates to this concept is from Aaker who discusses the need to have loyal customers to drive success (Aaker, 2020). To gain those loyal consumers, you must reach them where they are, digitally, using personalized messaging that allows them to feel valued as a brand customer. From a praxis view, this illustrates “must haves” to be an exemplar brand and knowing how to properly reach the target audience using personalized messaging. “Digital technologies have made the pathway to game-changing subcategories wider, shorter and traveled more frequently by more brands and businesses” (Aaker, 2020, p. 595).

The ethical implications of personalized messaging include conveying truthful communications that reach a targeted audience but also having diverse representation in the messages and being inclusive when disseminating the ads.

I felt that this was an important project to include in my portfolio because I want to have a variety of mediums used and I believe having a white paper shows my range of skills and versatility.

Methodology

Constructing this portfolio, my purpose was to have a comprehensive website that contained pertinent work that illustrates my mastery of an extensive variety of IMC theories put

into practical application for future employment. The projects chosen were intentionally selected to demonstrate my versality regarding a wide range of IMC practices. I believe these artifacts were well produced and were recognized for excellence within my master's program. These artifacts are representative of my skill sets and competency as an IMC practitioner.

Conclusion

I am a storyteller. In my first career in television news, I delivered the stories of the day to an audience of viewers, in a personalized, condensed manner. Now, as an IMC practitioner, I tell brand stories. But through this IMC master's program, I have realized the necessity in my story telling to be ethical, inclusive, diverse, and thorough. Through my work as a Public Relations Specialist and my time working on my master's in IMC, my story telling skills have certainly evolved.

I am proud of the work I have done and that is why I have proposed these particular projects for my portfolio. The parallels I have experienced professionally and through my academic work have provided a body of work that showcases my expertise. However, my take-away includes a newfound confidence thanks to my growing competency in this field. As someone starting over with a new career, my strategy was to gain experience through my public relations job and gain a greater understanding of IMC by putting theory into praxis.

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Appendix A

Portfolio Webpage and link.

