Marketing communications in the digital age

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Contents

Introduction

In this course, you will explore marketing communications in the digital era. It's likely that whether on TV, magazine, radio or internet, you'll come across messages in different forms to convey meanings to you and influence your attitudes and behaviours. This course will introduce the role of marketing communications and explain the marketing communication processes and messages with theoretical models and real-life examples.

You will also look into a mix of tools for communicating messages with a focus on digital media. Finally, you will consider the ethical issues in marketing communication.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course B328 *Marketing in action*.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- recognise various models of marketing communication
- identify different digital marketing communication tools and understand media selection
- explain different types and characteristics of message sources and appeals
- evaluate how message appeal can be employed in different contexts
- critically reflect on ethical issues in online marketing communication.

Marketing communications in the digital age

1 The role of marketing communications

Despite the growing influence of digital media, the principal role and purpose of marketing communications has not changed drastically over time. The purpose of marketing communications is to engage with target audiences to achieve one (or more) of four functions, which is known as the DRIP model, shown in Figure 1 (Fill and Turnbull, 2019). Click 'View interactive version' then click on each of the four functions to read about it in more detail.

Interactive content is not available in this format.

Figure 1 The DRIP model

The most effective marketing communications will seek to serve more than one of the above roles, as you will explore in the next activity.

Activity 1 The DRIP model

🕐 *Allow around 20 minutes for this activity*

The functions described by the DRIP model are likely to be present in every piece of marketing communications to varying degrees. Watch the two adverts below and see if you can identify how they exemplify these functions. You can use the table below to make a note of your answers.

This video deals with subject matter that some people may find upsetting.

Video 1: Metro Trains Melbourne 'Dumb ways to die' advert (make sure to open this link in a new tab/window so you can easily return to this page).

Video content is not available in this format.
Video 2: Sasol 'Ama-Glug-Glug' advert

	Differentiate	Reinforce	Inform	Persuade
Metro Trains	*Provide your answer...*	*Provide your answer...*	*Provide your answer...*	*Provide your answer...*
Sasol	*Provide your answer...*	*Provide your answer...*	*Provide your answer...*	*Provide your answer...*

· ·

Feedback

Metro Trains

Public service broadcasts such as this are usually highly focused on changing behaviour. This popular Australian advert is trying to encourage safety amongst rail users and those near rail lines by **persuading** them of the dangers. This advert takes a very creative approach to a serious issue, **reinforcing** the idea of risk associated with rail lines whilst **differentiating** itself from more conventional public service broadcasts to create memorability and impact. It is **informing** the audience of the risks and the consequences.

Sasol

The Sasol 'Ama-Glug-Glug' campaign has been popular in South Africa since 1999. It focuses on the modernisation of the country and connects the development of the fuel with the nation's changing dynamics, helping support **differentiation**. Once the car has been fuelled, the engine's roar **informs** the audience of the qualities of the fuel. The response from the young girl when the man, presumably the father, turns the ignition **reinforces** the idea that the fuel equates to power, as she congratulates the father on a safe choice. This type of response awaits all who use this fuel, making it a **persuasive** appeal.

As you can see, both of these two adverts perform all four of the functions described by the DRIP model. This could be part of the reason they have been so effective.

2 The communication process

Effective marketing communications require an understanding of the purpose as well as the process of communications. You will learn the elements and management of the marketing communications process in the following section.

Figure 2 Trying to find patterns of meaning in lines of data

2.1 Macro-model of communication

The macro-model of communication encompasses 10 elements. It describes the movement of an idea (such as a marketing message) from the sender (marketer or a company acting on their behalf), through encoding (content creation), into a message transmitted through a communications channel (media), from where it is then decoded (heard, viewed or (mis)understood) by the receiver (potential customer). It also includes a feedback loop, as determined by the response of the receiver to the message. Noise refers to the disruptions generated from other senders or receivers during the transmission or interpretation processes. Click on each of the elements in Figure 3 to see how they fit into the model.

Interactive content is not available in this format.

Figure 3 Elements in the communications process

(Kotler *et al*., 2019, p. 634)

The macro-model of communications illustrates that communications should be a circular process and not a linear one. In the next activity, you will apply this model to a hypothetical campaign.

Activity 2 communications process model

⏱ *Allow around 10 minutes for this activity.*

For a hypothetical communications campaign for Rolex, the Swiss luxury watch-maker, match each element of the communications model in the table below with

the appropriate option from the list. You can drag the options from the list and drop them into their respective cells in the second column.

The brand team at Rolex

Advertising agency working on behalf of Rolex

Roger Federer, as brand ambassador, extols the brand identity

TV advertisement

The advert is seen and message interpreted

TV audiences

Purchase/not purchase, or recommend/not recommend

Competitors (e.g. Omega, TAG, Heuer, Hublot)

Is it worth the price and service?

Connection with audiences attitudes, interests and experiences

Match each of the items above to an item below.

Sender

Encoding

Message

Media

Decoding

Receiver

Response

Noise

Feedback

Field of experience

2.2 Managing the communications process

The overriding objective of the communications process is to minimise the difference between the meaning that is encoded into the message and the meaning that is decoded by the receiver. As such, a great deal of attention will be placed on those elements that can help or hinder the way the message is received and interpreted. These include:

- **The message itself** The sender needs to ensure that the content, structure, form, etc. can be understood and decoded by the receiver. For example, is the writing on a motorway billboard big enough to be seen? Does the story in the advert make sense?
- **The media** In the contemporary media landscape with so many channels, it is important that an appropriate medium is chosen. For example, younger consumers are more likely to be found consuming digital media rather than many of the mass media channels preferred by the older generation.
- **The sender** The source of the message needs to be aligned with the receiver through overlapping fields of experience. The more they have in common, the greater the likelihood that the message will be interpreted in the way it was intended.
- **Noise** This is one of the greatest barriers to effective marketing communications. The more the sender can accommodate or overcome noise, the greater the potential impact the message will have.

By considering all of these elements, the marketing communicator can try to minimise the possibilities for miscommunication, failed communications or the message simply going unnoticed.

2.3 Barriers to effective marketing communications

It would also be wrong to assume that the process set out in the macro-model always works in the way described. It is a model and, like all models, is a theoretical construct that works in theory but when it meets the world of practice, numerous barriers and challenges limit its applicability. Some of the most common barriers to effective marketing communications include:

- **Lack of understanding of the target audience by the sender** The message may be encoded using language or symbols that fail to transfer the intended meaning to the audience.
- **Inadequate definition of required feedback** The effectiveness of communication needs to be evaluated by the sender. Feedback may be defined in terms of actions, e.g. visiting a website or making a purchase. If no specific feedback is required, then research may be conducted to assess, for example, awareness of the message.
- **Poor choice of medium/media** Possibly because of resource constraints, or again because of lack of knowledge of the consumers' media habits, the incorrect medium or media may be chosen. Media may include impersonal sources such as television, newspapers, magazines, etc. and personal sources such as professional services, peer group members and family. An important issue here is 'source credibility', i.e. the extent to which a source is perceived as having knowledge, skill or experience relevant to a communications topic and can be trusted to give an unbiased opinion or present objective information on the issue (Belch and Belch, 2009).
- **Consistency of messages** Given the many potential sources of communication, it is vital that there is a consistency of message across the various channels.

3 Marketing communications messages

Beyond the choices about media class, vehicle and target audience, constructing a promotional message is key in the creative process. There are several crucial structural elements of the message that need to be considered. These are:

i. message source
ii. message balance
iii. message appeal.

In the following sections, you will explore each of these in turn.

3.1 Message source

In this section you will think about the source contained within the message itself and consider whose voice is present in the promotional message? What are they telling us about the brand? And from what position of authority?

Sometimes, through the use of a simple voice-over, the source remains an absent presence – heard but not seen. Although, even here, marketers might use a recognisable voice to create a connection to the audience. Well-known actors with distinctive voices are frequently employed in this capacity. Examples of actors whose distinctive voices have been used in voice-overs include Stephen Fry, Morgan Freeman and Joanna Lumley.

There are also several different **'personas'** that can be employed as the source of a message. Common personas include: 'the expert', 'the endorser' and 'the everyday persona'.

The expert

The 'expert' persona is a frequently employed source in which a designated expert (or spokesperson) communicates the use, value or function of a brand.

In early advertising, the 'white coat' was a common prop employed to establish the scientific legitimacy of the expert who was used to talk about everything from toothpaste to cleaning products.

The symbolic purpose of the expert persona is that they have assumed knowledge, experience and credibility to talk about a particular brand, frequently offering testimonials attesting to its value or functions.

A contemporary example would be a dentist's endorsement of the qualities of a particular toothpaste, as in the following advert for Sensodyne:

Video 3 Sensodyne 'Can Sensitive Teeth be Repaired?' advert (make sure to open this link in a new tab/window so you can easily return to this page).

The endorser

The endorser has been a popular persona since the beginnings of modern advertising in the nineteenth century. Queen Victoria, for example, was an early endorser for Cadbury's Cocoa.

Associating the brand with someone the target audience identifies with or aspires to be like can create an emotional connection between the brand and the audience. Today, endorsers are frequently drawn from the world of celebrity, which you will examine in more detail later in this section.

There can also be an element of overlap between experts and endorsers – these are not fixed categories. Usain Bolt could be an expert as well as an endorser when promoting particular brands of running shoes or sportswear, as in this campaign for Puma:

Video 4 Puma Ignite 'Usain Bolt's Shoe of Choice' advert (make sure to open this link in a new tab/window so you can easily return to this page).

The everyday persona

Partly as a backlash against the perceived overuse of celebrity endorsements, more and more brands today employ allegedly 'everyday' people to promote their brand.

These messages often take the form of 'on the street' interviews with 'real people' or similarly constructed scenarios. The idea here is that people are more likely to believe and connect with 'someone like us' than the aspirational figure of a celebrity.

Another common type of everyday persona is the use of employees to communicate the organisation's offerings. This has been a popular strategy in the personal finance sector, used by high-street banks such as The Co-operative Bank and Halifax. One of the most famous of these even launched the employee into a celebrity role – Howard Brown from Halifax:

Video 5 The original 'Howard of Halifax' advert (make sure to open this link in a new tab/window so you can easily return to this page).

Message source and credibility

The decision about which, if any, of these personas to employ largely depends on their credibility – is this a credible source to convey the brand message? The basis on which credibility can be established will vary depending on the brand, the purpose of the message, and the target audience. Credibility can be broken down into a set of sub-criteria, sometimes referred to as the TEARS model (Shimp, 2010), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 The TEARS model

Attribute	Description
Trustworthiness	Being perceived as honest, believable, dependable – as someone who can be trusted even if they are not necessarily an expert
Expertise	Having specific skills, knowledge, or abilities with respect to the endorsed brand
Attractiveness	Positively adhering to a group's concept of attractiveness, physical or otherwise
Respect	Being admired owing to one's personal qualities and accomplishments
Similarity	The extent to which a source matches an audience in terms of characteristics relevant to the endorsement

(Source: Shimp, 2010)

In the following activity, you will have the opportunity to test out the TEARS model in the context of a marketing communications campaign.

Activity 3 Source credibility

🕐 *Allow around 20 minutes for this activity*

Task 1

Identify a marketing communications campaign that features one of the personas you read above. If you cannot think of one, a quick web search will provide lots of examples.

Task 2

Once you have identified your endorser, make a note of how they meet each of the TEARS attributes. Which do you think they meet, and why?

| Attribute	Does the endorser meet the TEARS attribute?
Trustworthiness	*Provide your answer...*
Expertise	*Provide your answer...*
Attractiveness	*Provide your answer...*
Respect	*Provide your answer...*
Similarity	*Provide your answer...*

Feedback

How did you find that activity? What you probably found was that assessing the persona against the TEARS criteria involved making a number of judgements about them. How did you make these judgements? Did you try to find some evidence that linked the persona to the campaign? Or did you draw on your personal opinion?

In a short activity like this, you probably did the latter. However, in practice, marketers often spend huge amounts of time and money researching the 'right' endorser for their campaign. In order to do this, they will often start with the IMC strategy framework and consider the credibility of the persona in relation to the other aspects of the strategy: the objectives of the campaign, the media strategy and the positioning of the brand and, very importantly, the target audience. On other occasions, the whole campaign might be built around the endorser; this is common when a high-profile celebrity endorser is employed.

Despite the best efforts of marketers, any choice of endorser entails a degree of risk. This is never more the case than when employing celebrity endorsers, as you will explore in the next section.

Celebrity endorsement

One of the most common types of endorsement is from a celebrity: one in four US adverts and one in five UK adverts feature celebrities (De Pelsmacker *et al*., 2017). Celebrities often cut across the different types of persona (expert, endorser and everyday) and, due to their wider exposure in the celebrity zeitgeist, as a social group, they are often deemed to have more of the TEARS characteristics than any other group.
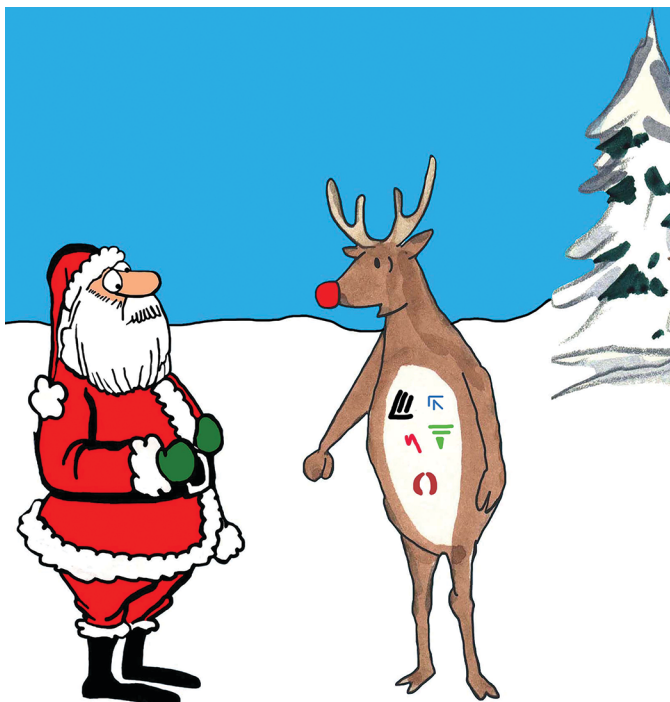
"It just kills you that I'm finally cashing in on product endorsements.

Figure 4 It can seem like everyone is out to secure an endorsement these days

So why are celebrities so widely used in marketing materials?

- First, we tend to notice or recognise celebrities more readily compared to other types of source, so are more likely to pay attention to those messages.
- Celebrity endorsements can often lead to more earned media coverage, especially when integrated with a social media campaign.
- Marketers hope that the social status or popularity of the celebrity will transfer on to the brand, creating an association between the two through the message. This is especially useful for aspirational products but is also used increasingly for everyday goods and services as part of wider lifestyle marketing approaches.

In the following activity, you will evaluate the benefits and risks of using a celebrity endorser when developing an IMC campaign.

Activity 4 Assessing the benefits and risks of celebrity endorsement

🕐 *Allow around 20 minutes for this activity*

When used successfully, celebrity endorsers can bring numerous benefits to the brand and the IMC campaign. However, the use of celebrities is not without its risks and challenges.

Use the table below to note down as many benefits and risks as you can think of when assessing whether to employ a celebrity endorser as part of an IMC campaign. Try to find examples to support each of your suggestions.

Benefits	Example
Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...

Risk	Example
Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...

Feedback

Here are some possible benefits and risks you may have identified. It is also possible you may have identified others. That is great, but try to make sure you have used examples to support your answer – it will make your answers more persuasive and using evidence to support your claims is good academic practice.

Benefits	Example
Celebrities bring **visibility and exposure** to the brand amongst their fans. This has become especially advantageous with the rise of social media, and many individuals have become very wealthy by sharing their endorsements with their followers.	Kylie Jenner can earn more than $1 million per sponsored Instagram post. Indeed, for many younger consumers, online 'influencers' are becoming a more trusted source than the celebrities of film, television and music.
Their high profile means that celebrities can improve **recall and recognition** levels, helping the message cut through clutter and noise.	Nike's use of celebrity athletes such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Michael Jordan and Rafael Nadal has helped the brand stay noticed and relevant in a highly competitive market.

As potential experts, celebrities can be very persuasive and **lend legitimacy** to a brand.	UNICEF is well known for employing a wide range of celebrity ambassadors to help communicate its message.
In an integrated campaign, celebrity endorsement **can be leveraged across different promotional tools**, including public relations and in-store promotions.	In 1997, Pepsi's use of the Spice Girls (a UK all-female music group) in an integrated campaign saw worldwide sales increase by 2 per cent.

Risks	Example
Does the celebrity **fit** with the brand identity? The use of a celebrity purely for its own sake will not necessarily improve the quality or impact of a campaign.	Whilst sprinter Usain Bolt is a fine endorser for running shoes, the decision to use him to promote Virgin Media is less obvious, with the only association being the notion of speed that is played on in the advert.
Celebrity endorsers can be extremely **expensive**. These costs need to be considered and the **opportunity cost** of using a celebrity evaluated.	The actor George Clooney's endorsement of Nespresso has cost the organisation over $60 million by 2020.
Some celebrities take on so many endorsements that they lose credibility amongst the target audience due to **overexposure.**	Former professional footballer David Beckham has been criticised for excessive endorsements, having endorsed everything from clothing to underwear to grooming products and fragrances as well as soft drinks, food, whiskey, and even Sainsbury's supermarket.

Celebrities are under constant media scrutiny and little of what they do goes unreported. A **scandal** (proven or otherwise), illegal activity or other wrongdoing can potentially damage a brand by association.	Suzuki dropped the UK TV presenter Ant McPartlin as an endorser following his arrest for drink driving in 2018.
Celebrities **being caught out** not using the brands they endorse is increasingly common.	Brazilian footballer Ronaldinho was released from his $1million Coca-Cola endorsement after appearing with a can of Pepsi during a press conference at Atletico Mineiro.

Having determined the source of the message, marketers next need to consider the balance of the message.

3.2 Message balance

Figure 5 Striking the right balance between information and emotion can be difficult

All messages need to strike a balance between providing enough information about the brand but doing so in such a way that engages and attracts the attention of the audience. In short, message balance is about **what you say** and **how you say it**.

One way of understanding this balance is to think about the involvement level that the brand necessitates. For example, a message intended to communicate a highly technical product such as a computer (a **high-involvement** decision) will need to adopt a different communication strategy to one that seeks to entice somebody to try a new brand of detergent (a **low involvement** decision):

'when dealing with high-involvement decisions[…] the emphasis of the message should be on the information content, in particular the key attributes and the associated benefits. This style is often factual and product-oriented. If a product evokes low-involvement decision-making, then the message should concentrate on the images that are created within the mind of the message recipient. This style seeks to elicit an emotional response from receivers. Obviously, there are many

situations where both rational and emotional messages are needed by buyers in order to make purchasing decisions'.

(Fill and Turnbull, 2019, p. 612)

The balance between the informational and the emotional content of the message will then inform the choice of message appeal that will be adopted.

3.3 Message appeal

Message appeal is important because it sets the tone, structure and content for the message. Broadly speaking, there are two main approaches to constructing the message appeal:

• **informational appeals** (sometimes referred to as a rational appeal)
• **emotional appeals** (sometimes referred to as a symbolic appeal).

Every message will seek to balance these competing appeals, with some swaying more toward the informational and others toward the emotional.

In the following sections, you will look at the most common forms of informational and emotional appeals.

4 Informational appeals

Informational appeals tend to be used when there is a need to communicate product or service information in a clear and often detailed way.

Informational messages are central to many non-profit, public sector and social marketing campaigns where there is a need to communicate important information about the campaign to the audience. This does not preclude an emotional element, but an emotional appeal without information detailing the cause or issue would not make for an effective campaign in these contexts.

There are four common informational appeals:

- factual
- slice of life
- demonstration
- comparative.

(Fill and Turnbull, 2019)

In the next section, you will look at an example of each.

4.1 Four types of informational appeal

Factual

Sometimes referred to as the 'hard sell' approach, factual appeals seek to provide detailed information about the product or service. It is commonly used for highly complex products or high-involvement purchases like insurance, a new car or in a business-to-business context.

For example, Xylem, a water technology provider, used a hard-hitting factual theme to convey the impact of global water consumption. It enhanced the creative execution of the advert through the endorsement of Manchester City Football Club:

Video 6: Xylem 'Manchester City' advert (make sure to open this link in a new tab/ window so you can easily return to this page).

Slice of life

'Slice of life' messaging displays the brand being used in an everyday setting. This kind of approach is common for food brands, often through a scenario of the family eating together, or, in the case of pre-prepared meals, the rushed and harried family utilising the time-saving benefits of convenience food. HelloFresh, and other home delivery recipe box services, play on this type of appeal very effectively:

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 7: HelloFresh 'Dinner is solved' advert
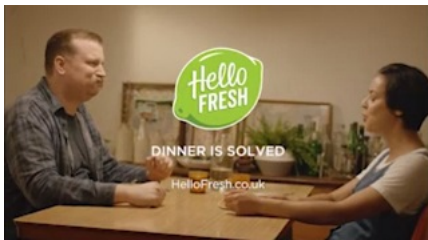
Demonstration

Demonstration messages often adopt a problem-solving approach in which the product or service is shown to be instrumental in resolving a problem. This type of approach is popular for promoting product categories such as over-the-counter medicines; an ailment is eased through the use of a particular medication.

These messages are equally common for promoting cleaning and household products. For example, Dyson promotes its cordless vacuum cleaners by demonstrating their ability to deal with a wide range of surfaces and debris:

Video 8: Dyson 'Official Dyson' advert (make sure to open this link in a new tab/window so you can easily return to this page).

Comparative

Comparative advertising is employed where the objective of the campaign is to positively position the offering against that of the competition. Financial services, utility providers and supermarkets often employ such an approach.

This kind of appeal is also popular in consumer electronics markets, where organisations will often situate the merits of their offerings against the perceived limitations of their competitors. A good example is Samsung's long-running campaign situating its range of Galaxy smartphones against the Apple iPhone:

Video 9: Samsung 'Upgrade to Galaxy' advert (make sure to open this link in a new tab/window so you can easily return to this page).

Activity 5 Analysing informational appeals in advertising

⏱ *Allow around 20 minutes for this activity*

Choose one of the factual appeals above, re-watch the associated advert, then answer the following questions.

i.   Why do you think the organisation chose that type of appeal?

> *Provide your answer...*

ii.   Do you think it is an effective advert?

> *Provide your answer...*

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iii.   Which of the other information-based appeals could have been chosen
       and why?

Provide your answer...

. . . .

Feedback

Exploring Samsung's comparative appeal, here's how you might answer the
questions:

i.   Why do you think the organisation chose that type of appeal?

The market for smartphones is highly competitive, and the Apple iPhone is widely
regarded as the market leader. However, as a piece of technology, the iPhone often
lacks features offered by the competition and yet, this does not seem to impact its
sales or popularity. Samsung's strategy of comparative advertising is a good one as
it allows it to show off its own product whilst also situating it against the market
leader in a way that draws attention to the latter's limitations. It also parodies the
popularity of Apple products, mocking those who are willing to wait in line for a new
Apple launch.

ii.   Do you think it is an effective advert?

This is a very effective advert because it achieves three objectives at once:

- it demonstrates the product
- it aims to represent the competition as an inferior offering
- it uses humour to playfully mock loyal Apple customers, playing into the wider
  rivalry between fans of the competing products.

iii.   Which of the other information-based appeals could have been chosen
       and why?

- Samsung could have used a slice of life approach, which it does touch on in
  this advert by showing how the product can be used in our everyday lives. It
  could do this very effectively without ever drawing attention to the competition.
  Indeed, this is more like Apple's own advertising approach.
- It could use a factual approach, but this tends to be used less and less by
  consumer technology brands. Customers are less interested in the technology
  and more interested in what it can do for them.
- A demonstration appeal could also be used. For example, by focusing on key
  features such as the camera or the software. Again, there are elements of this
  in the advert.

5 Emotional appeals

The use of emotional appeals in marketing communications speaks to the wider role and importance of symbolism in advertising. Marketers seek to utilise signs and symbols that appeal to the target audience and transfer those same meanings to their own products or services. After all, most products and services have no literal connection to the images used to market them – what do meerkats have to do with financial services (comparethemarket.com) or a cartoon tiger to processed cereals (Kellogg's Frosties)?

Consumers come to accept these associations because the most successful campaigns align their brands with these meanings so effectively that the artificial connection between them becomes real in our minds. The use of emotional appeals is a key component of this process. Figure 6 shows some of the most commonly used emotional appeals. You will explore each one in the following sections.
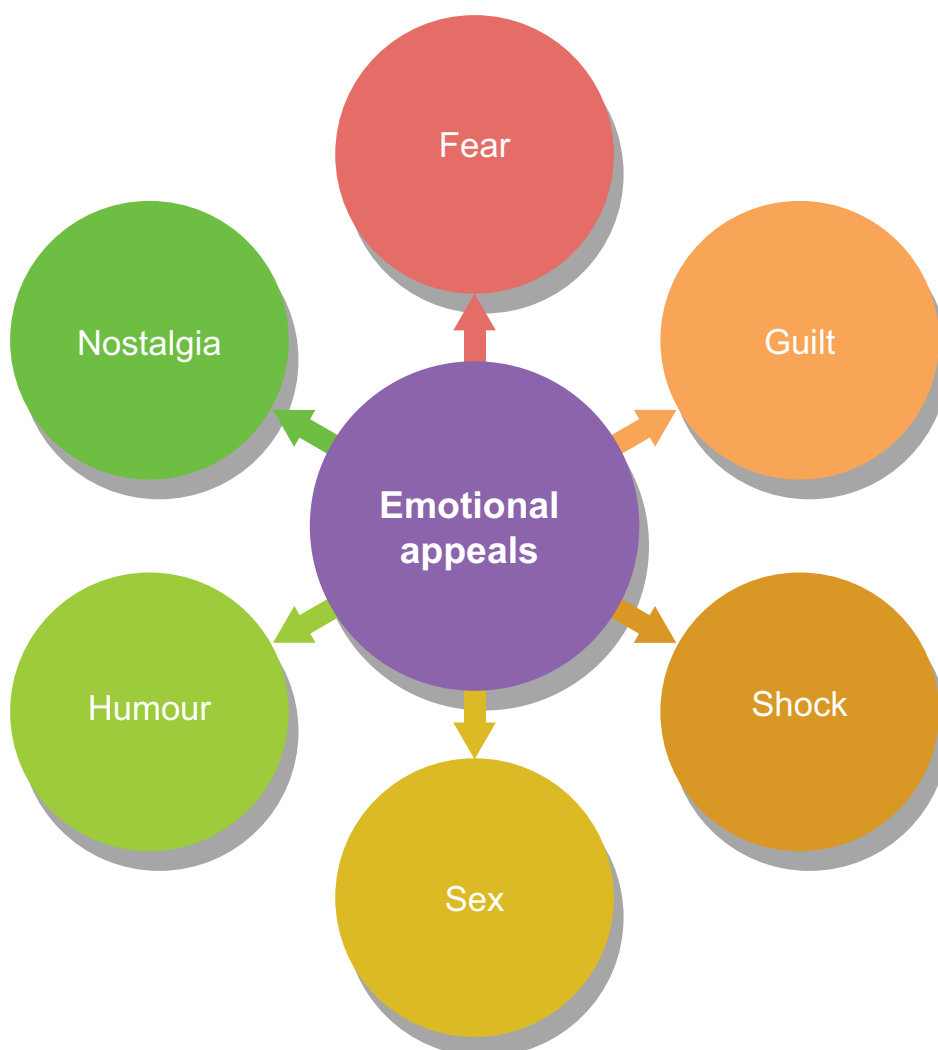
Figure 6 Types of emotional appeal

5.1 Fear and guilt

Fear and guilt can attract a significant amount of attention amongst target audiences and can be a powerful motivation to act. As such, they are frequently used in marketing communications campaigns (Witte and Allen, 2000).

Fear and guilt appeals tend to be employed in one of two ways:

i.   by playing on the negative consequences of not using a product or service; or conversely

ii.   by communicating the negative impact or danger associated with a behaviour or practice.

Fear, guilt and the psychology of risk

Fear and guilt appeals are often premised on notions of risk: that by communicating the risk involved in specific behaviours, the target audience will engage with the message (Eagle *et al*., 2020). Exploring this theme in more detail, Vos *et al*. (2017), in a study of gamblers in Australia, found that fear, in particular, evokes threats such as isolation and loss of self-esteem and identity, which can be powerful motivators to act.

One particular campaign that combined both fear and guilt was the UK NHS 'Second-hand smoke is a killer' campaign that not only drew attention to the risks of smoking to the smoker (fear appeal) but also the impact it might have on others, such as family members and friends (guilt appeal). Watch an advert from the campaign here:

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 10: NHS 'Second-hand smoke – the invisible killer' advert

De Pelsmacker *et al*. (2017) identified six types of risk that marketers employ, shown in Table 6.3.

Table 2 Types of risk

Risk	Description
Physical	The risk of bodily harm
Social	The risk of social ostracism
Time	The risk of wasted time
Product performance	The risk of purchasing a poor-quality alternative
Financial	The risk of losing money or making a poor investment
Opportunity loss	The risk of missing out by not acting

Adapted from De Pelsmacker *et al*. (2017, p. 219)

5.2 Shock

Whilst some messages play on people's fears, others intentionally shock the audience to get their attention. Here, it is the surprise caused by the message that creates the initial impact. The shock can be caused by a wide variety of stimuli: an upsetting image, a provocative message, an obscene slogan, a sexually explicit visual, a breach of a moral or social code, and so on.

Shock advertising can have a significant impact on the audience because the message violates social norms and expectations (Dahl *et al.*, 2003). The need to make sense of why the message is being transmitted leads to greater levels of cognitive engagement with it, which can, in turn, lead to higher levels of recall and recognition.

A famous example of shock advertising was Benetton's long-running 'United Colors of Benetton' campaign, in which print advertising employed images that sought to challenge consumer attitudes and values, such as religious leaders embracing, death row prisoners and graphic bodily images. Examples from the campaign can be [found here](#) **– please be advised that this link contains graphic images and images that some people might find upsetting or offensive**.

5.3 Sex

Sex appeals are one of the most widely used strategies in marketing communications. Use of sex in marketing communications can range from discussion of sexual or personal hygiene to innuendo storylines or nudity (subject to the regulatory environment in which they are shown).

The primary role of sex appeals is to act as an initial attention cue. In this way, they operate like shock appeals by achieving 'stopping power'. In other words, the use of erotic or sexualised images can lead to greater attention on the message, a reduced likelihood of consumers zapping past, and higher levels of message recall and recognition (Wirtz *et al.*, 2018).

The use of sexual content is based on the appropriateness and relevance of the images to the message (Paek and Nelson, 2007). Research by Reichert *et al.* (2012) found that sex appeals are most frequently used in low involvement product categories where they can be used as a means of getting through the noise and clutter of similar brands. They identified beauty, personal grooming and clothing as primary sectors that use sex appeals. Moreover, sex appeals tend to be more effective on men and younger people (Putrevu, 2008).

Are sex appeals acceptable?

Sex appeals are increasingly considered controversial, unnecessary or inappropriate. The negative impact of using sex and the connotations implied relating to gender, objectification, and inequality are causing more and more marketers to rethink this particular appeal. There are also attempts by both organisations and consumers to challenge and resist these messages. For example, Dove's 'Real Beauty' campaign was developed precisely as a response to the unachievable images used in the beauty industry. Instead, it employs an 'everyday persona' approach to celebrate 'real' women with various body shapes and sizes. The ethics of sexualised images in marketing communications are further discussed in Section 7.1.

5.4 Humour

Humour, like sex, is a very common message appeal. It shares many of the same perceived benefits but is seen as a lower risk option: it can still get through the clutter, has high impact potential, recall and recognition potential if done well, and tends to lead to higher levels of engagement as the target audience tries to make meaning from and interpret the message. Like shock advertising, humour appeals can also lead to a lot of earned media exposure if the campaign attracts the attention of the target audience.

Eagle *et al*. (2020) identified six types of humour commonly used in marketing communications, shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Humour types

Humour type	Definition
Pun	The use of a word or phrase that is subject to two or more interpretations
Understatement	Representing something as less than would normally be perceived to be the case
Joke	Speaking or acting without seriousness
Ludicrous	A portrayal to highlight the absurd or ridiculous
Satire	The use of sarcasm to expose vice or folly
Irony	Where actual message communicated is opposite to its literal content

Eagle *et al*. (2020)

Uses of humour in marketing communications

Barry and Graça (2018) found that humour is typically employed in low-involvement categories and is most frequently used for what they call 'little toys and treats' (snacks, drinks, small value items). It is used less frequently for 'big toys' (high-involvement purchases such as cars and luxury holidays – although Skoda's long-running 'It's a Skoda, honest' campaign played on the car's perceived poor social status to great comic effect).

Elsewhere, Cline and Kellaris (2007) found that humour is less effective at building brand awareness and is more effective when deployed by established brands where the focus is on the creativity of the message itself rather than the need to convey information.

Humour is also very subjective and what is funny to one person is not to another. As such, testing creative themes with the target audience is especially important in humour-based campaigns to ensure that the message resonates with audiences. Likewise, humour is also culturally specific, so a single-voice message in an international IMC campaign may not be as effective as it would be in more regional messaging. Finally, as with sex appeals, it might be the case that consumers remember the advert but not necessarily the brand.

In the following activity, you will analyse different adverts and evaluate their use of humour-based appeals.

Activity 6 Humour appeals in advertising

🕐 *Allow around 20 minutes for this activity*

Watch the following adverts and make a note of the ranking of the adverts from the most effective to the least effective use of humour. Then write a short comparison of these adverts.

Advert 1

[Video 11 Rocket Mortgage advert](#) (make sure to open this link in a new tab/window so you can easily return to this page).

Advert 2

[Video 12 Hyundai advert](#) (make sure to open this link in a new tab/window so you can easily return to this page).

Advert 3

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 13 Dark Gummies advert

Advert 4

[Video 14 Specsavers advert](#) (make sure to open this link in a new tab/window so you can easily return to this page).

Advert 5

[Video 15 Snickers advert](#) (make sure to open this link in a new tab/window so you can easily return to this page).

Click 'View interactive version' below to see results of ranking.

Interactive content is not available in this format.

🎧

What did the advert you ranked first do well that was lacking in the advert you ranked last?

....

Feedback

When ranking the adverts above, what method did you use? Did you apply a strategic approach to assess or try to measure the use of humour, or did you just go with what you thought was and was not funny? Thinking about the likely target

audience(s) for each of these adverts, to what extent do you think they are aimed at someone like you? What conclusions can you draw from this activity?

The notion of fields of experience Is important in creative execution; overlapping fields of experience can be an important part of a successful campaign. That is, the closer the creative team are to the target audience in terms of shared experience, the more likely their theme is to resonate. This is especially important when dealing with emotional appeals: fear, guilt, shock, sex, humour. Our personal thresholds and moral standing on these issues are not universal but subjective. If the creative team understands the field of experience of the target audience, the campaign's messages are more likely to have the desired effect.

Reflecting on this activity and your personal position in relation to them is an important skill that will help you not only as part of this course but also in your professional capacity, where the ability to reflect on and clearly articulate your position in relation to contentious or subjective issues is a fundamental skill.

5.5 Nostalgia

Figure 7 Attractions like Blist Hill Victorian Town offer a taste of the way things were

An increasingly common message appeal is the use of nostalgia, or what is sometimes referred to as 'yestermania' – a fondness for revivals, remakes and recreations (Brown *et al.*, 2003, p. 31).

Nostalgia, in the context of marketing, can be defined as

'A preference (general liking, positive attitude or favourable effect) towards experiences associated with objects (people, places or things) that were more common (popular, fashionable or widely circulated) when one was younger (in early adulthood, in adolescence, in childhood) or even before birth'.

(Holbrook and Schindler 2003, p. 108)

Stern (1992) distinguishes between two types of nostalgia in marketing:

i.   historical nostalgia: a desire for the way *things* were
ii. personal nostalgia: a desire for the way *I* was

Historical nostalgia

Historical nostalgia has become big business in recent years. It can be experienced through recreations of past periods in 'living museums' or other consumer attractions, such as York's Jorvik Viking Centre or Shropshire's Blist Hill Victorian Town, located near the home of the first iron bridge. The marketing communications materials for such attractions often play on the notion of being able to 'experience' these periods from history.

Many organisations also celebrate their histories through corporate museums and attractions, such as Cadbury World, Hershey's Chocolate World and World of Coca-Cola. Others, such as Harrods and Fortnum and Masons, retain archivists to catalogue and preserve their history, which is often celebrated in their marketing communications.

Personal nostalgia

Personal nostalgia has largely been addressed through what Brown (1999) calls retro-marketing: the relaunching, rebranding and reintroduction of products and services from the past, repackaged and resold to contemporary standards and specifications. For those born between the 1960s and 1980s in the UK, the reintroduction of foods and snacks such as Spam (processed meat), the Arctic Roll (a frozen dessert), and Wispa Gold chocolate bars may bring back memories of childhood (for good or ill).

Given the current enthusiasm for the past, marketing communications have also been keen to capitalise on this trend. A good example was Nintendo's *'Two brothers'* campaign that plays on the personal nostalgia of growing up and the feeling of drifting apart as we get older. In this advert, it is the Nintendo brand that united the brothers in their youth and ultimately is what draws them back together in adulthood:

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 16 Nintendo 'Two brothers' advert

Marketing communications in the digital age
6 Marketing communications mix in the digital era
12/12/22

6 Marketing communications mix in the digital era

This section introduces the key components in the marketing communication mix, digital marketing communications tools, different types of media, and how to select the correct media for your audience.

The marketing communication mix

At the core of marketing communications is a collection of tools and methods through which organisations communicate with their audiences. This is referred to as the marketing communications mix (MC mix).

The five main components of the MC mix are shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8 The marketing communications mix

Now you will be briefly introduced to each of these tools and their role in the MC mix.

Advertising

Advertising is far more than just a form of impersonal, paid-for communication. It draws from popular culture, but it also plays a significant role in shaping the cultural landscape. And, with the development of digital technology, its cultural influence is only expanding.

Advertising is highly effective as an initial tool used to create awareness about an organisation's offering. It also plays a part in creating consumer interest and desire.

Importantly, it is also a primary tool for helping reinforce a purchase after the event and can be used to positively affirm to consumers that they have made the right decision. Although traditional modes of advertising have a weak influence at the point of purchase, online and digital advertising is changing this. Display pop-ups that encourage an immediate purchase, often through a time-based window, are blurring the lines between advertising, direct mail and sales promotion, and in-app purchases use similar strategies.

Sales promotion

Sales promotions are short-term incentives that aim to stimulate sales and increase customer demand. Sales promotion is often used as a tool of immediacy in order to encourage customers to act in the moment, to make larger purchases, and/or to make repeat purchases. The main advantage of sales promotion is the short-term sales boost that can be achieved when customers take advantage of an offer.

Sales promotions are also an important aspect of non-commercial marketing communications campaigns. For example, public health campaigns on safe sex might include the distribution of free contraceptives, or anti-smoking campaigns might offer free nicotine replacement products.

One of the most common strategies in marketing communications is to combine sales promotion with advertising to stimulate interest and desire.

Public relations (PR)

PR involves communications released by the organisation that are designed to help improve and promote its image. It is about building good relations with the organisation's target audiences (not just customers) through obtaining favourable publicity, building and maintaining a positive corporate image, and handling or heading off unfavourable rumours, stories, and events.

PR activities are primarily used for creating awareness. PR is also an effective tool post-purchase, where it covers areas such as after-sales services and handling customer complaints.

In the internet age, PR has become a much more important element of the MC mix. The need to manage and control the flow of information about an organisation has become more critical in the light of social media and other sites that provide a platform for those that might seek to challenge, question or undermine the reputation of the organisation.

Sponsorship

There are two main types of sponsorship:

- **philanthropy**: the patronage or donation of funds or resources to a cause or organisation e.g. a charity, arts foundation, heritage site
- **commercial sponsorship**: paid-for sponsorship by organisations normally with the acknowledgement of that arrangement through the display of the sponsor's brand or logo.

Sponsorship can be seen to have several strategic uses in a marketing communications campaigns, including raising awareness, building positive brand image and perceptions, and creating positive media attention.

Direct marketing

Direct marketing (incorporating interactive and database marketing) is an approach that seeks to target individual customers with personalised messages and to build lasting relationships. Direct marketing can be directed at a named person who may have a personal interest in the products or services being offered. However, the effectiveness of direct mail is debatable as much of it ends up unopened or misdirected. Moreover, a lot of time and resources are required to manage and update direct mail databases.

Direct marketing is a primary tool used to build awareness and interest in an offering. It is a method that can target individual customers and convey significant amounts of information compared to advertising. As such, direct marketing is often a supplementary tool for communicating an organisation's offerings.

Personal selling

Personal selling involves interpersonal communication between the organisation and external parties. As such, personal selling is a two-way communications tool that provides the opportunity for customers to pose questions, make a comment, express an objection, or indicate their reactions through their body language and nonverbal responses such as gestures. Moreover, the salesperson has the advantage of receiving instant feedback through interaction with customers, which is not the case when using mass media.

Personal selling is the most effective tool during the purchase stage. This is understandable as the interaction with the customer, and the ability to modify and personalise the brand message, is much more achievable.

6.1 Digital marketing communications tools

The sections that follow will introduce some of the main digital marketing communications tools, including:

- digital adverts
- digital promotions using mobile
- online public relations
- direct marketing using email
- online word-of-mouth and viral marketing
- social media marketing.

Like with all marketing communications, you can deploy digital marketing communications for a range of different purposes (Hanlon, 2019). These purposes include:

- **Raising awareness**, i.e. making potential customers aware of an organisation, product or brand.
- **Achieving conversion**, i.e. encouraging potential customers whose awareness and interest has been raised to click through to an organisation's website and to make a purchase or carry out another desired action, such as leaving contact details.
- **Retention**, i.e. ensuring that customers who have bought from the organisation once come back for repeat purchases. Retention depends on customer satisfaction but also on repeat marketing communications to keep the organisation, its products and brands in the customer's mind.

Digital advertising

Figure 9 Interactive digital advertising allows consumers to engage and make purchases in an instant

A simple definition of digital advertising is:

A message of persuasion (regarding products, services, and ideas) that interacts with consumers through digital media

(Lee and Cho, 2020, p. 335)

One of the most common forms of digital advertising is called **display advertising**. This involves an advertiser paying for an advertising placement on third-party sites, such as other organisations' websites or social networks (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). For example, if you click on news sites, you will normally see several advertisements displayed.

Online display advertising aims to get target customers to act by clicking on the advert, which will then normally take them to the organisation's website (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). Popular types of display adverts include banner adverts that run like a banner across a website or a video (say on YouTube) and pop-up adverts, which appear while a user is looking at information contained on a webpage.

In many respects, online display advertising is similar to advertising in print newspapers or on television, and similar considerations go into developing such adverts.

Uses of digital advertising

Like other forms of advertising, online advertising can serve different purposes. These purposes are not mutually exclusive, and a well designed and placed advert can achieve several simultaneously (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019).

Delivering content

Digital adverts sometimes channel users to a destination site that gives more detailed information on an offering. Often, these links seek a direct response from the consumer (e.g. requesting a quote, signing a petition). For example, the John Lewis 2020 Christmas advert appeared in many John Lewis social media posts during the run-up to Christmas. If viewers clicked on the link, it took them to the John Lewis website, where more information on John Lewis products awaited.

Facilitating transactions

Click-throughs that lead to a merchant page, such as a travel site or an online bookshop, may directly lead to a sale. For example, if potential customers click on a booking.com advert, say, on YouTube, this will take them through to the booking.com website where they can make a booking.

Shaping attitudes

An advert may aim to build positive associations with a brand or a cause. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, many governments placed digital adverts in multiple media to encourage people to conform to social distancing and hygiene rules.

Soliciting response

An advert may seek to identify new leads or start two-way communication. An interactive advert may ask a user to type in an email address or other information. For example, if you clicked through to the website of the UK's National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) in late 2020, the first thing you would see was an invitation to enter your details to 'receive a letter from Santa' and make a donation.

Encouraging retention

Digital adverts can be placed as a reminder about the organisation and what it offers. For example, it could link through to on-site sales promotions, such as a prize draw.

Online sales promotions using mobile

Figure 10 Mobile promotions offer coupons or other promotional pitches to encourage unplanned or impulse buying

A useful definition for understanding mobile sales promotions is:

'Information that is delivered on a mobile device and offers an exchange of value, with the intent of driving a specific behavior in the short term.'

(Andrews *et al.*, 2016, p. 15)

'Mobile devices', for this purpose, include not just smartphones but also tablets, mini-tablets, phablets (phone tablets) and wearable technology such as smartwatches. Promotions on these technologies typically consist of digital coupons that offer consumers money off at particular shops within a particular time frame. Using data, including a mobile device's GPS signal, marketers can reach consumers at specific times and locations, making timely offers. Here, the underlying aim is to encourage unplanned or impulse purchasing, i.e. purchases that result from impulsive or last-minute decisions to buy an item that consumers had not previously planned to purchase (Rook, 1987). Various factors may prompt this impulse, from financial incentives (discounts, rebates), social influences (peers, family), or environmental conditions (atmospherics, display location). Importantly, from a digital marketing perspective, unplanned purchases often occur close to the point of sale, as consumers are more prone to making unplanned purchases and have less time to deliberate on them.

Using consumer mobile data such as GPS signals and social media responses (such as likes or other reactions), marketers can pick up on consumers' moods and locations and address them with timely promotions tailored to their current moods or needs. However, many organisations have raised ethical concerns about these practices and have challenged the way they target particular groups, as you will explore in Section 7.

Online public relations

Online public relations (PR) is about building an online system for identifying relevant news outlets, sharing content, identifying online influencers and trying to manage online messages (Hanlon, 2019). According to Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019, p. 420), online public relations involves:

[…] maximising favourable mentions of your company, brands, products or websites on third-party websites which are likely to be visited by your target audience. Online PR can extend reach and awareness of a brand within an audience.

In trying to maximise favourable mentions of an organisation, product or brand, online PR makes use of the network effect of digital technologies, i.e. it is aiming not only to place content in particular online outlets but to also have this content shared widely on a variety of digital media platforms. The more high-quality content about an organisation, its brands or its activities that is shared on reputable third-party sites (for example, in articles or blogs written by well-regarded journalists or experts in a field), and the more that content is shared by members of the public, the higher it is likely to appear in organic search results (i.e. those not being paid for).

Uses of online PR

Online PR can serve several different purposes (Hanlon, 2019):

- **raising awareness** of an activity, an organisation, its work or its customers
- **generating engagement** from potential customers, existing customers or wider stakeholder groups
- **monitoring** what is being said about the organisation, whether the sentiment is positive, negative, mixed or neutral.

Engaging with influencers

In order to achieve positive online PR, organisations often engage in deliberate **influencer** outreach activities, which refers to:

Identifying online influencers such as bloggers, media owners or individuals with a large online following in the social networks and then approaching them to partner together to communicate with their audience.

(Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019, p. 420)

Knowing who are the best influencers to use depends very much on the organisation, its products or activities, and what it is trying to achieve. Most influencer outreach involves some form of payment, and influencers with large followings can expect significant financial compensation for promoting a product or an organisation on their websites, blogs or social media. Where payment is involved, such a promotion might be better considered as a form of advertising rather than public relations. Influencers must comply with consumer protection law and make it clear in any promotional communication that they are being paid to advertise an organisation's product(s) by indication that it is an advertisement.

Digital direct marketing using email

Direct marketing using email is a popular digital marketing tool. Like all direct marketing, it does not require media buying and scheduling and offers a higher degree of personalisation than traditional forms of advertising, sales promotions or public relations (Jobber and Ellis-Chadwick, 2013). Unlike traditional direct marketing, which uses postal mail or phone contact, it can be time and cost efficient.

Uses of online direct marketing

Direct marketing using email can be used to:

- stay in touch with existing customers
- remind customers of the organisation and its purpose or products
- send special offers to selected customers
- deal with queries.

To be successful, this requires a good database, i.e. organisations need to have a list of relevant and up-to-date email addresses to send direct marketing messages to. In order to build legal databases, organisations must gain consent from all people whose email they wish to use for email marketing. Building a database is one reason why, when you sign a petition or make a one-off donation to a cause that is important to you,

organisations often ask you for your email address and permission for the organisation to send you updates and other emails.

People who are willing to receive updates may also be more receptive to an email encouraging them to make regular donations, become a member or support the organisation in some other way.

Online word-of-mouth and viral marketing

Word-of-mouth marketing, where consumers positively talk about organisations, products or brands to other consumers, is considered one of the most powerful forms of marketing communications. While other consumers may be considered less knowledgeable about products or brands than the organisations that sell them, they are also considered more trustworthy. If a friend recommends a brand to you, you are less likely to think they have ulterior motives and may therefore be more inclined to believe them.

Digital technologies have increased the potential reach of word-of-mouth marketing considerably. Whereas in the past, one consumer might talk to several others about an organisation, what it does and what services it offers, social media now allow that same consumer to speak to potentially hundreds (in some cases many thousands) of 'friends' or followers. These friends and followers may then share the message with *their* friends and followers. Thus, positive (and negative) messages about a brand or an organisation can be amplified exponentially.

Going viral

Online content about a brand or an organisation that is shared by millions of users via social media is known as viral content. So long as the tenor of such large-scale online attention is positive, content going viral is something that marketers prize highly, as you will explore in the next section.

Social media marketing

Figure 11 Social media are an attractive digital marketing platform

There are two ways in which organisations can use social media:

1. **Organic posts** Organic posts are the posts that an organisation places on its own social media account or page. **Organic reach** refers to the number of people who see an organic post's content. This number can be quite low, particularly for posts that are overtly sales-focused, which most social media algorithms regard as low-quality content. This means the social media platform, say Facebook, will only share these posts with a small percentage (about 10 per cent) of users who 'like' the page (Hanlon, 2019).

2. **Paid ads** Due to the low reach of organic posts, many organisations find that they have to pay for social media posts in order to be seen by a large number of users (Hanlon, 2019). The advantage of placing paid advertisements in social media over other types of paid digital advertising is that it allows pro-active targeting of people who fit a particular profile (say, women between 40 and 55 years old, in professional occupations, who are interested in travel and culture), based on their likes and the information they give about themselves. Of course, many people have misgivings

about their personal information being used for this purpose and try to minimise it through the privacy settings on their social media accounts.

Social media cuts across advertising, promotions, online PR and online word of mouth, and it can be used for all of these purposes. Consider the example given in the case study below of Fred Karanja, a trained wildlife guide and independent tour operator based in Nairobi, Kenya.

Social media marketing in action

Fred Karanja operates as a sole trader and provides bespoke wildlife tours for groups of up to eight visitors. Fred attracts his customers mostly by word of mouth from former visitors. He regularly posts pictures that he has taken during tours on social media, particularly Facebook and Instagram, with captions designed to remind viewers of their love of Africa and wildlife and perhaps to encourage a little nostalgia for a previous visit. In this way, he seems to be aiming mostly for customer retention, creating a desire to return from his existing customers and friends.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, when tourism to Kenya stopped almost completely, repeated postings became an important means of keeping the possibility of African safaris in his customers' minds and thus hopefully retain them as future customers and advocates once travel would become possible again. The picture below gives an example of the kind of posts that Fred creates.

Why is it you can never hope to describe the emotion Africa creates? You are lifted. Out of whatever pit, unbound from whatever tie, released from whatever fear. You are lifted and you see it all from above.
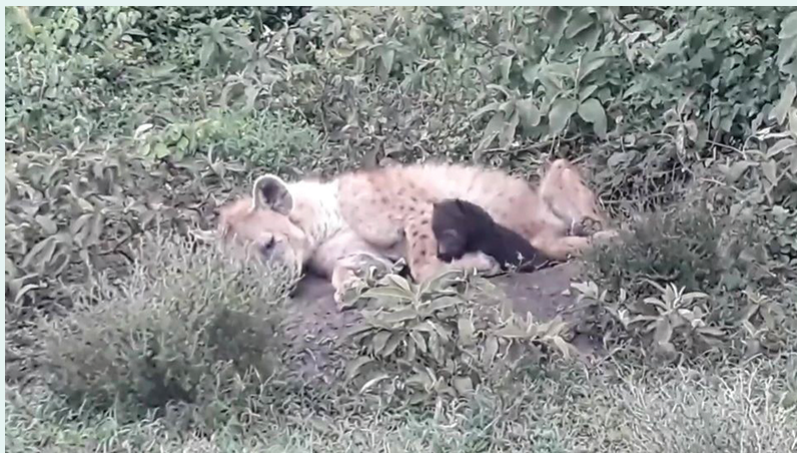

Figure 12 A hyena and her cub are spotted from a safari tour vehicle in Kenya

6.2 Media selection

Figure 13 It is important to select the right media for your audience

You have learned a variety of marketing communication tools in previous sections. The the next stage of creating a marketing communication campaign is to developing a media strategy. The purpose is to identify the specific media classes and media vehicles that your campaign will use based on your objectives. Broadly speaking, media falls into one of two categories:

i.   **linear**, which refers to one-way communication
ii. **interactive**, in which there is potential for two-way communication.

Sometimes you may see these categories referred to as *traditional* and *new* media or *offline* and *online* media, respectively. However, these categorisations refer more to the underlying technology rather than the medium itself. Here, you will use the linear vs interactive demarcation. Table 4 gives examples of media types, classes and vehicles within each category.

Table 4 Media Selection

Media Category	Media Type	Media Class	Media vehicles (in the UK)
Linear Media	Broadcast	Television	The X Factor, Coronation Street
		Radio	Capital FM, Heart FM
	Print	Newspaper	The Sunday Times, Daily Mail
		Magazine	Good Food, MacFormat
	Out-of-home (OOH)	Billboards	96-, 48-, 6-sheet posters
		Transit	Underground, buses
		Ambient	Litter bins, disposable cups
	Other	Cinema, exhibitions and events	Odeon, Cineworld, Ideal Home Show, Good Food Live
Interactive Media		Websites	Brand sites
		Social media	TikTok, Snapchat
		Apps	Mobile games
		Banner advertising	Pop-ups
		Email	Newsletters

| | Search engines | Google, DuckDuckGo |

(Adapted from Baines and Fill, 2017, p. 259)

7 Ethical issues in marketing communications

This section explores the key ethical issues in marketing communications. In particular, it discusses how ethics is related to the main marketing communications components, including advertising, sales promotion, direct marketing, personal selling and online marketing communications.

7.1 Ethics and advertising

Advertising is the most visible element of the marketing communication process. Hence debates about the ethics of marketing communications frequently focus on advertising.

Calfee and Ringold (1994) reported that six decades of survey data revealed time and again that about 70 per cent of consumers considered that advertising was frequently untruthful, tried to make people buy things they did not want and should be more rigorously regulated. It appears to be when advertising strives harder to persuade rather than inform that it runs into trouble. Two ethical concerns about advertising are deceptive/ misleading advertising and disrespectful advertising.

Deceptive or misleading advertising

Deceptive or misleading advertising is dishonest, thus contravening the social value of honesty and the duty to disclose. Forms of potentially deceptive or misleading advertising include:

- **untruthful advertising** (i.e. making claims about a product that are untrue)
- **puffery** (i.e. exaggerated claims about a product that are difficult to assess objectively)
- **artificial endorsements** (i.e. deception in the use of endorsers or of endorsers themselves).

Disrespectful advertising

The following forms of advertising may be considered disrespectful and potentially harmful:

- **negative advertising** (i.e. attempts to discredit competitors rather than positively promote an organisation's own offering. This is commonly seen in political marketing during election campaigns)
- **intrusive advertising** (i.e. many broadcast advertisements are considered intrusive, interrupting television and radio programming. Billboard advertisements may be seen as 'aesthetic pollution' (Murphy *et al*., 2005 p. 168)
- **blatant sex appeals**(i.e. objectifying women – and increasingly men – as a means to promote products or services).

Advertising and society

In addition to criticisms of the ways in which advertising is sometimes executed, advertising is also charged with causing a range of negative effects at a societal level. These include the promotion of materialism, '"having" rather than "being"' as an end unto itself, encouraging over-consumption and the neglect of real needs by consumers in developing countries (Foley and Pastore, 1997, p. 5).

Murphy *et al*. (2005, pp. 154–5) summarised criticisms of advertising as falling into the following four categories:

i.   advertising violates people's inherent rights
ii.   advertising encourages certain human addictions
iii.   advertising is motivated by the quest for money rather than truth, and
iv.   advertising often compromises human dignity.

It has been argued that advertising 'is a mirror that helps shape the reality it reflects, and sometimes it presents a distorted image of reality' (Foley and Pastore, 1997, p. 2). The ethical concern is that advertising can lead to 'misinformed perceptions' in people's minds, and there is a potential for misleading stereotypes to be promulgated (Borgerson and Schroeder, 2002, p. 571).

Borgerson and Schroeder (2002) cite the '*Death Row*' advertisements for United Colors of Benetton as an example of advertising that did little more than create negative racial stereotypes in some countries where alternative visual representations of black men were lacking, irrespective of the company's intentions. The Benetton campaign gathered awards and acclaim worldwide but, at the same time, aroused strong reactions (at times ferocious, at times simply curious). The images are no longer included in Benetton's past and present campaigns on their website (although they can still be viewed on other internet sites).

The issue of damaging stereotypes in advertising does not just apply to racial groups. Another example is the controversial use of ultra-thin female models in advertising as symbols of beauty and perfection and its detrimental effects on the self-esteem and body images of young girls and women.

In addition, the use of sexualised imagery raises broader issues. According to Borgerson and Schroeder (2005), visual images 'elude empirical verification' (p. 258). As such, they are not accountable in the same ways as written or spoken words. People can infer from the image but cannot claim it to be true or false in the same way that they might for a spoken or written product. This gives visual imagery a particular power and also means marketers can avoid being held accountable for making misleading or false claims. A campaign for weight-loss supplements, using the slogan 'Are you beach body ready?' and an image of a bikini-clad model was banned in the UK for the perceived message it was sending out. So, in this advertisement, pairing the model with the weight-loss supplement and the slogan is clearly meant to encourage consumers to reflect on their body image (fear and guilt appeals) and to use the product to achieve the desired result (sex appeal), but this is never explicitly stated. This poses a number of ethical concerns, as you will explore next.

The ethics of sexualised images in marketing communications

Images evoke fantasy, aspiration and desire but also rejection, shame and self-criticism. For Borgerson and Schroeder (2005), sexualised images in marketing materials perpetuate certain social and cultural norms that reinforce power relations and inequalities. They identify four conventions used in sexual and sexualised advertising that reinforce historical, cultural and social practices of inequality. Each of these is reviewed below.

Face-ism

Face-ism describes the way marketing messages systematically show men with more prominent faces than women. Men usually occupy the dominant position and women the subservient or submissive. Men are usually depicted as taller (relative size being an index

of power) or occupy the centre of the image. Women tend to be shown in a peripheral position (often caressing the man or being cradled by him). In other words, there is a 'ritualisation of subordination' (Goffman, 1976) of the female to the male and the feminine to the masculine in a lot of marketing materials.

Idealisation

Idealisation concerns the way marketing communications routinely depict ideal-type bodies in their messaging. Ideals that few people can ever achieve but can nonetheless be influenced by, often in a negative way. Of course, such images hide the long and often painful production processes involved in their creation: whether that be the body management practices used by the models to maintain their look (such as surgeries, restrictive diets and exercise regimes), the technologies employed to get the perfect image (such as airbrushing and image manipulation), or the industry practices used to transform these carefully constructed images to appear 'natural'.

Exoticisation

Exoticisation refers to the process of creating differences, otherness, or the exotic in ways that call attention to certain identity markers such as skin colour, dress or appearance. Through these practices, cultural stereotypes are perpetuated and reinforced. As Borgerson and Schroeder (2005, p. 269) argue: 'Much of the ideological power of the representations lies in their almost infinite repetition – similar images are presented over and over again'. This limits diversity and leads to limited and stereotyped understandings of cultural differences.

Exclusion

Exclusion refers to how certain types of people (the poor, marginalised or under-represented minorities) are typically left out of marketing communications, creating an idealised and aspirational world that fails to reflect the diversity of real life. There is still a predominance of white, Western bodies in mainstream marketing communications. Where diversity is present, it is often intentional, to draw attention to it (as in the Benetton campaign discussed earlier). In other words, diversity becomes an appeal rather than a reflection of society.

Borgerson and Schroeder's conclusion is that marketing communications are complicit in wider 'circuits of culture' that perpetuate certain inequalities, patriarchal society and the objectification of the body and whiteness.

In the following activity, you will test these ideas for yourself.

Activity 7 Reflecting on the ethics of sexualised images in marketing communications

🕐 *Allow around 30 minutes for this activity*

You may never have thought about sexualised advertising in the ways described by Borgerson and Schroeder above. In order to test their assertions, undertake an internet search to find **two** examples of sexualised advertising.

Use the table below to apply the four conventions above to each of the adverts. How many of them are present, and what form do they take?

Convention	Advert 1	Advert 2
Face-ism	*Provide your answer...*	*Provide your answer...*

Idealisation	*Provide your answer...*	*Provide your answer...*
Exoticisation	*Provide your answer...*	*Provide your answer...*
Exclusion	*Provide your answer...*	*Provide your answer...*

....

Feedback

There are no correct answers to this activity. Instead, this is another example of how your subjective 'field of experience' will influence the way you engage with marketing materials: first in your choice of adverts, reflecting what you determine to be a 'sexualised' advert; and second, in the extent to which you 'see' the conventions in the adverts.

Having spent time learning about, and reflecting on, these conventions, you may find that you become more aware of just how prevalent they are in marketing communications materials. Perhaps much more so than you ever did before. Not just in the obvious categories of personal grooming and fashion, etc. but in so many everyday, mundane and incongruous contexts. Being critically aware of such practices is a very useful skill for your own approach to marketing.

7.2 Ethics and sales promotion

Whilst there is nothing inherently unethical about sales promotions, that has not stopped the tool from being used unethically. In 2011 the BBC television programme *Panorama: The truth about supermarket price wars* investigated British supermarkets' sales promotions and identified a number of highly unethical sales promotion techniques being used:

• **The wow factor**'Wow deals' is a term used by one supermarket to indicate to customers products being sold below their normal price. Panorama, however, discovered that 11 of the products featured in this promotion had previously been on sale for the same price for the previous six months. In one unethical sales promotion, Panorama found that four products were actually more expensive than before the promotion.

• **Multi-buy deals**Panorama discovered that some supermarkets had price labels on their shelves announcing sales promotion deals for products, such as '2 for £2'. Whilst there was nothing wrong with this pricing there was actually no financial saving as the products were singularly priced at £1!

• **New-yet-old low price**Sales promotions often introduce short term price cuts to increase demand. Whilst this is a very effective marketing tool, Panorama found that British supermarkets were selling products at the same price for a considerable period and then suddenly increasing it, before dropping the price again. The

unethical issues arise because the price drop is presented as a price discount to the customer.

- **Less is more – much more**A popular sales promotion technique is to offer customers a greater quantity of a product for a higher price. By purchasing more, customers are often able to achieve a lower price per unit being purchased. However, Panorama found that supermarkets used this technique unethically. For example, a 1kg tub of a particular brand of margarine spread was priced at £3.20. This appears to be acceptable until it was highlighted that if the consumer purchased two 500g tubs they would have only paid £3!

7.3 Ethics and direct marketing

Ethical concerns relating to direct marketing tend to centre on issues of privacy, protection and pressure selling, such as:

- unauthorised use of lists that are shared without the permission of those listed
- negative option sales, i.e. assuming you will purchase something unless you contact an organisation to advise them to the contrary
- pressuring consumers, i.e. direct marketing approaches that put undue pressure on consumers to accede to the marketers' sales tactics and make consumers feel cornered or unable to reject the proposition, particularly where charitable causes are involved
- disguising direct mail as official documents
- unsolicited intrusion, especially telemarketing during unsociable hours. This problem is increasing with the use of automated calling, which is a telemarketing mechanism for calling multiple numbers simultaneously and responding only to the first number to answer
- prizes with conditions attached, i.e. prizes which place obligations on consumers as recipients. For example, a car dealer might give customers who purchase a car a voucher for a photo shoot at a professional studio. When the customer visits the studio, they realise that the voucher is just for the shooting session, and they will need to pay for any of the photos if they want to have them printed or put on a hard drive.

7.4 Ethics and personal selling

Ethical issues may arise in personal selling where there is a tension between a salesperson's obligation to their organisation, their own interest and the needs of consumers. Thus, they have to reconcile short-term sales quotas against building long-term consumer trust. In addition, salespeople often work on their own, under time pressure and do not have readily accessible support mechanisms when they encounter ethical conflicts (Murphy *et al*., 2005).

Push money (also termed PMs or spiffs) are incentives for salespeople to promote a certain product (Murphy *et al*., 2005). Push money can raise ethical issues if it is misused. For example, by offering it without the approval of the retailer, if it is not offered fairly to all salespeople, or if it encourages the mis-selling of products to consumers.

Sales-related practices that involve ethical issues include (Murphy *et al*., 2005, p. 193):

- overstocking, i.e. getting a consumer to take more stock than required to meet a sales quota

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- overselling, i.e. selling consumers a more expensive model than they require
- overpromising, i.e. promising an unrealistic delivery date
- overtelling, i.e. divulging confidential information
- under-informing, i.e. withholding information from consumers that could affect their purchase decision
- gift-giving, this is accepted practice in some countries but can sometimes cross over into bribery
- product tampering, i.e. sabotaging a competitor's product, for example in a retail store or trade show.

Many of the ethical conflicts and temptations to act unethically arise because of the way in which salespeople are rewarded. This could be addressed by making sales quotas more realistic or basing compensation on measures that reduce conflicts of interest.

7.5 Ethics and online marketing communications

Owing to the borderless nature of the internet, online marketing communications pose an increasing number of ethical issues that can be difficult to control. These include:

- intrusiveness, e.g. spam (unsolicited emails compiled from lists of addresses without recipients' consent), banner or 'pop up' advertisements
- deceptive or disguised marketing, such as commercial websites posing as information sites about, for example, healthcare
- manipulation of online forums, e.g. anonymous messages praising a company's own products posted on internet opinion forums
- violations of privacy
- cookies which enable marketers to track consumers' use of internet sites with users' consent (except strictly necessary cookies)
- requests for personal information, e.g. the collection of personal information from children is of particular concern.
- marketing of dangerous or offensive products or material
- children's access to inappropriate material.

The placement of online advertisements by third parties can raise ethical issues. The cola manufacturer Pepsi discovered this when one of its adverts was placed on the internet site streetfightvidz.com. Pepsi's advert, encouraging viewers to 'Win £1000 with your video clips and show us how much you love Pepsi', appeared alongside video footage of a violent street fight between two boys that showed one of them collapse covered in blood (Gourlay, 2007). Pepsi had paid a third party to place its advertisements online and had not known its advertisement had been placed on this site.

In Activity 8, you will explore the consequences of misusing customer data and sending unsolicited text messages to customers without acquiring their consent.

Activity 8 Ethical issues: privacy invasion

🕐 *Allow around 20 minutes for this activity.*

Read the article 'Just Hype fined for sending 1.7m 'nuisance' texts'. It explains how the fashion retailer, Just Hype, was fined after sending customers unwanted texts. Once you have finished reading, answer the questions below.

Article: Just Hype fined for sending 1.7m 'nuisance' texts

i.   Why is it wrong to send customers unwanted direct marketing texts?

Provide your answer...

....

Discussion

Here the key ethical issue is the fact that these messages are sent to customers without their consent. On Just Hype's website page, there was a box designed to collect customer's telephone numbers. Although the website mentioned that customers would only be contacted about their order, that was not the case, and about 1.7 million text messages were sent to customers, with more than 100,000 texts offering a free face mask in exchange for installing their application.

Just Hype, like many other legitimate companies, offer their customers the ability to opt-out from receiving calls, emails, text messages etc. However, this procedure, and the information about marketing messages they send through texts, could be made clearer on their website. If the customers are not able to proceed with their purchase without entering a phone number, then that is likely to create some problems. Organisations should always obtain permission from their customers to send them direct marketing texts.

ii.   Do you think the fine is proportionate, and why?

Provide your answer...

....

Discussion

You might think that £60,000 is potentially less than Just Hype spent on sending the 1.7 million text messages and, quite possibly, less than what they earned. Perhaps larger penalties would be a more effective deterrent for companies sending unsolicited messages.

Other people might say that sending texts or emails is not so different from sending junk mail through the post. Junk mail tends to go straight into the recycle bin without being read. From this perspective, you might think there is nothing wrong with getting a free mask from Just Hype for downloading their app, especially as Hype is involved in some great charity endeavours that result in the profit being donated to the NHS. However, the rule says that when a customer has opted out of receiving marketing messages, it is illegal to send messages to them without their consent.

Conclusion

Congratulations on reaching the end of this OpenLearn course. We do hope that you have enjoyed the learning experience and that you feel that you have enhanced your knowledge of this fascinating area of study and practice.

After studying this course you have developed an overview of marketing communications, explored different types of marketing communication messages, developed an understanding of the digital marketing communication mix and identified a number of ethical issues in marketing communications. Today, much like print, radio and television before it, the opportunities afforded by digital technology are highly disruptive to marketing knowledge and practice.

The course has discussed the role of digital marketing and key communication tools, each of which provide not only new products or services to market but are impacting the way marketing is conceived and practised. Whilst previous generations of marketers were concerned with marketing across geographic borders, today's marketers need to be fluent in marketing across both physical and digital environments.

There is also a need for marketers to be alert and suitably responsive to ethical challenges in this contemporary setting. It is hoped that this course has played a part in helping you to make sense of marketing communications in the digital age and developed the knowledge and skills to operate in this dynamic environment.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course B328 *Marketing in action*.

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