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The role of mobile marketing communications in media strategy

Abstract

This analysis reviews the factors that make mobile marketing communications a unique media choice with tremendous potential for marketers. Given that media planning must be driven by sound business strategy rather than the novel potential of the technology, this is an important topic of inquiry. When and with what kinds of marketing messages should mobile marketing communications be used to reach consumers? To begin answering these questions first the definitional issues relating to the terms mobile marketing communications are addressed. The relevant literature on the unique characteristics of mobile marketing communications and media planning is then reviewed. Five characteristics of mobile marketing communications are identified as key considerations for decision-making: Ubiquity, Immediacy, Location sensitivity, Personalization, and Consumer controlled interactivity. Finally, recommendations for marketing managers, as well as directions for future research will be presented.

Keywords: mobile advertising, mobile marketing, advertising strategy, promotions mix, integrated marketing communication, media planning.

Introduction

What could be more attractive to marketers than a medium with the power to reach over eighty-two percent of all Americans wherever they are and most any hour of the day (Synovate, 2009)? Furthermore, what medium could claim that more than three quarters of messages sent are read by seventy-four percent of audience members, and of those, seventy-seven percent read the messages as soon as they are received (Barwise and Strong, 2002)? Not only were they read, but sixty-nine percent of audience members recalled more than half of the brands that had been advertised (Barwise and Strong, 2002). These numbers represent the startling potential of mobile marketing communications.

Although many marketers are taking note of the potential of this new advertising medium, ad spending currently lags the growth in mobile use. Recent analysis from ABI Research (2010) reports that globally, over one billion new mobile handsets were shipped in 2009, with another 1.2 billion projected to ship in 2010. With US Mobile ad spending in 2009 estimated at \$416 million and projected to grow to \$1.56 billion by 2013 (eMarketer.com, 2009), it is clear that strategies must be developed to optimize investment in this new channel.

As is often the case with rapidly evolving new technologies, practice advances before theory is developed. Those companies predisposed to innovation and risk taking will be willing to launch marketing communications campaigns using mobile channels with the hope of gaining first mover advantages into a novel and as yet uncluttered medium. The business press (see, for example, www.adverblog.com) abounds with reports of

innovative examples from companies such as MTV (consumers are able to download music to their mobile from European Music Awards winners), the BBC (football fans can send their opinions on football via video messages from their phones), Harper Collins Publishers (consumers can download book chapters to their phones), and the Backstreet Boys (fans can send and receive SMS messages from the band during their concert tour).

Although these examples represent exciting and creative opportunities for marketers, are they being driven by the novel potential of the technology or sound business strategy? Research is needed to assist managers in determining how mobile media can help reach marketing communications goals and objectives. When and with what kinds of marketing messages should mobile marketing communications be used? What are the unique characteristics of this medium that marketers should consider to develop communications strategies? The current analysis is an effort to answer these questions. In so doing, first the definitional issues that have posed barriers to dialog on this topic will be addressed. Next, the relevant literature on the unique characteristics of mobile marketing communications will be reviewed. This will be followed by a review and discussion of media planning issues. Finally, recommendations for marketing managers, as well as directions for future research will be presented.

1. Definitions

One issue that plagues all new areas of research is that of terminology. Mobile marketing communications is no exception. Tähtinen (2006) provides an excellent review of the use of the terms attempting to designate this activity. Her review indicates that although most practitioners (primarily represented by communications from the Mobile Marketing Association) use the term 'mobile marketing', they are primarily referring to only the

communications aspects of marketing. Some academics have also advocated the use of the term mobile marketing (for example, see the review in Leppäniemi, Sinisalo and Karjaluoto, 2006). However, using the term mobile marketing to describe actions that are primarily communications creates the potential for confusion.

Tähtinen's (2006) review demonstrated that most academic researchers use the term 'mobile advertising' for the concept of marketing communications over mobile devices. The definition that is commonly accepted in research is that advertising is "a paid, mediated form of communication from an identifiable source, designed to persuade the receiver to take some action, now or in the future" (Richards and Curran, 2002). The authors provide a footnote to accompany this definition stating that "mediated communication is that which is conveyed to an audience through print, electronics or any method other than direct person-person communication" (p. 74). Clearly, the intent is to replace the prior 'mass media' criterion with something that allows for new media channels such as email and mobile phones.

However, as pointed out by Tähtinen's (2006) review, even this modified definition of advertising does not seem to incorporate the essential elements of mobile marketing communications; namely its personal nature, time and location sensitivity and interactivity. Instead, she proposes the terms *m-adcom* or *mobile marketing communication*. These terms have the advantage of being broad enough to include other promotional and marketing strategies beyond the traditional limits of advertising, which is important given the full range of communications abilities offered by the emerging technology.

Another important reason for naming and defining this new activity is that consumers are likely to receive communication through new media such as through mobile phones quite differently from the way they receive traditional advertising messages (Dahlen and Edenius, 2007). A 2009 study of 8,000 mobile phone owners living in urban areas of Canada, Denmark, France, Malaysia, the Netherlands, the Philippines, Russia, Singapore, Taiwan, the UK and the US found that "people tend to classify the mobile phone differently [from] mainstream media like television, radio, print, outdoor and even the internet. Most people do not think of phones as a media platform at all" (Synovate, 2009).

Furthermore, it is likely that companies who develop strategies for using mobile devices as an "advertising channel" could miss the opportunities to develop communication strategies that build on

the unique qualities of this medium. Non-traditional media and contexts can be used to enhance communication effectiveness (Dahlen and Edenius, 2007). If mobile is evaluated on the same basis as other communication channels, the most powerful aspects of this medium may be missed.

For all the reasons outlined above, this paper will follow the lead of Tähtinen (2006) in using the term *mobile marketing communication* to refer to the concept of interest. However, a literature search on this term finds that there are still a wide variety of activities to which this may be applied. For the reader who is not familiar with the differences, the distinctions will briefly be reviewed here. The scope of this analysis does not include, for example, marketing communications promoting mobile services or mobile technologies (handsets, or billing software, for example). Rather, this analysis will focus on the most basic level of mobile marketing communications: SMS (Short Message Service) which is more commonly referred to as text messaging. Most all mobile phones sold today have the capability to receive text messages, and in fact the number of texts sent via mobile phones surpassed the number of voice calls annually in 2008. In the US, the average mobile user sends or receives 357 text messages per month, compared to 204 phone calls. The number of text messages is up 450% compared to 2006 figures (Nielsen Mobile Research, 2008a). The same study showed that the average teen in the US sends or receives 1,742 text messages compared to 231 mobile phone calls per month.

Marketers who choose to send text messages to customers must first recruit customers' permission and mobile phone numbers through some sort of a campaign, contest, or other sign-up incentive. The messages that are then sent are limited to 160 characters, (no images), but may be replied to, saved, or forwarded, which leads to their potential to "go viral" through consumer to consumer communications.

A similar, but slightly more advanced technology is MMS (Multimedia Messaging Service) which allows for the sending and receiving of graphics, photos, video and audio clips. This service enhances the creative potential of the marketing communications, but it is not available on all mobile phones.

The form of mobile marketing communications that garners the most discussion and certainly holds the most promise for a full range of marketing interactions is mobile internet access. This technology is only available to subscribers who have both the appropriate technology on their

mobile phones (i.e. smart phones) *and* either subscribe or pay for usage through the mobile service provider. While not all websites offer full functionality for those accessing the site on a mobile device, the mobile browsing experience can be compared to internet access through a computer. Consumers are exposed to a full range of internet advertising, from banners, to pop-ups, to the company sites in general. Most academic and practitioner articles on mobile marketing communications are focused on this level of technology. However, it seems that this level of research interest may be misaligned with practice. Most mobile US and Global subscribers do not have access to the internet through their mobile devices (Synovate, 2009). For example, Nielsen Mobile Research (2008b) found that only 37% of US mobile subscribers had access to the mobile internet and of those, less than half were active users of mobile internet services (meaning accessed the services *at least once* on a monthly basis).

Based on the current state of development, this paper will focus on the most basic form of mobile marketing communications, SMS (text messaging). The following sections will first review representative literature to shed light on what characteristics of this communication medium are most important to understand its use and development. This will be followed by a review of literature that guides media channel selection to see how mobile marketing communication should fit into strategic media decisions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Mobile marketing. There is considerable disagreement as to how willing consumers are to receive marketing communications via their mobile devices. The study in the opening example (Barwise and Strong, 2002) found evidence that mobile could be an extremely effective way of reaching consumers and that their response could be quite positive to marketers' text messages. Their study looked at consumers in the UK who were given an incentive to participate in the study (\$7 each) and were compensated (7 cents) per text message received, up to three messages per day. This is substantiated by studies reviewed by Lewis (2001) that found US consumers were receptive to mobile advertising if it offset the cost of other mobile services such as e-mail and news services. A common finding is that the prerequisite for consumer acceptance of this medium is consumer control and permission (Carroll, Barnes, Scornavacca, and Fletcher, 2007; Peters, Amato, and Hollenbeck, 2007; Tsang, Ho, and Liang, 2004). Analysis of databases of actual consumer responses to SMS direct marketing campaigns related to

television programs in the US and UK found that younger, higher SES consumers were the most willing to accept SMS direct advertising and respond favorably to related promotions (Trappey and Woodside, 2005).

On the other hand, surveys of consumer attitudes reveal conflicting information. Using a variety of scenarios, Carroll, Barnes, Scornavacca and Fletcher (2007) found that over fifty percent of respondents rated most forms of mobile marketing communications as "unacceptable". Similarly, according to surveys conducted by Forrester Research and eMarketer.com (2007), 79% of US consumers find the idea of mobile ads annoying, and only 3% say they trust text ads on mobile phones. However, Forrester's analysis of campaigns that delivered valuable information or content found consumers receptive. Unfortunately, there are few such campaigns reaching consumers. According to M:Metrics (2007) only about 7% of US mobile phone users have responded to short message code advertising, and only 2.5% have participated in games or contests.

Worldwide, 40% of mobile users actively access services such as messaging, games and news content (Pringle, 2005). In a 2001 study of over 3,300 people in eleven key global markets, 88% of the respondents were willing to receive mobile advertising in the form of electronic coupons for local retailers (HPI, 2002). However, not all mobile communications might be seen as delivering such a tangible value, therefore these results may not be generalizable to other forms of mobile advertising.

Obviously what's needed is a conceptual framework from which to interpret these diverse findings. Leppäniemi and Karjaluoto (2005) attempted to do just that. They examined the existing literature for factors influencing consumers' willingness to accept mobile advertising. They posit that consumer willingness to accept mobile advertising will be dependent on 1) the development of user-friendly technology, 2) the increasing prevalence of mobile marketing, 3) the successful personalization of messages (user profiles, time and location sensitive information), 4) the development of regulatory guarantees of privacy and anti-spamming, along with 5) the value in the ads themselves (relevant information, rewards, from trusted organizations, with receiver controls). Although this model leads to some testable hypotheses, many of which have face validity, this model has not been tested. Furthermore, there appear to be some individual difference factors omitted, such as those relating to the consumer's involvement level with the product or service and experience with technology. There are also important

characteristics of the medium that are overlooked, for example, the interactivity and viral potential of mobile marketing.

Scharl, Dickinger and Murphy (2005) also developed a conceptual model of the success factors of text messaging. 'Success Factors' are posited to be in the area of either message issues (relevant, entertaining, creative content, personalization, consumer control) or media issues (overcoming device incompatibility and limitations, on-time delivery, product fit, media cost). These factors influence 'Consumer Beliefs', which based on consumer behavior and the acceptance of information technology literatures, are divided into three factors: overall attitudes, perceived usefulness and ease of use, and peer influence. Finally, the success factors and attitudinal factors influence what the model calls 'Success Measures', conceptualized as Consumer Attention, which leads to Consumer Intention, which leads to Consumer Behavior. Although this article does not develop or test hypotheses, the comprehensive review of existing empirical studies combined with content analysis of existing practices and interviews with industry experts provides a firm foundation for the development of this conceptual model. However, the model does not help us to understand the unique advantages of the mobile medium or how it fits into the overall integrated marketing communications plan.

Bauer et al. (2005) looked at consumer acceptance of mobile marketing. Unlike the previous examples, the framework they developed is based on an on-line survey of 1,028 subjects. Results showed that high levels of consumer innovativeness led to higher knowledge levels about mobile communications, which, along with a positive attitude toward advertising led to more positive attitudes towards mobile marketing. Perceived risk was negatively related to attitude toward mobile marketing. And the final construct, perceived utility, comprised of information, entertainment and social utility factors, was determined to be the central driver of attitude towards mobile marketing. Ultimately, attitude toward mobile marketing and perception of social norms influence the intention to adopt mobile marketing.

Although this study takes us a long way down the path to understanding consumer attitudes towards mobile marketing, as the authors explain, it doesn't help us much in understanding how to segment or when to use this form of communication to reach consumers (Bauer et al., 2005). In fact, their study does not address the unique characteristics of mobile marketing such as mobility, interactivity or personalization.

Another study included both of these factors and found that both, along with consumer involvement, incentive level, appeal of the message and attitude towards SMS advertising influenced purchase intentions (Drossos, Giaglis and Lekakos, 2007). However, their experimental design with a student sample had several limitations. Yang (2007) used the Extended Technology Acceptance Model as the basis for a survey (also among students) and found that attitudes towards mobile advertising and social norms significantly influenced intentions to use mobile advertising. Uses and Gratifications Theory was the basis for another study that found that consumers would use mobile marketing communications to stay knowledgeable, build relationships with companies, and feel connected to the "in-group" (Peters, Amato, and Hollenbeck, 2007).

There are numerous other studies, many of which are summarized or reviewed within the above mentioned work, that evaluate factors that lead to success or acceptance of mobile marketing. The research described above, however, represents a sampling of the most comprehensive studies that were designed to develop conceptual frameworks for predicting the acceptance of mobile marketing communications. It appears that a degree of agreement is emerging regarding the key factors influencing consumer acceptance of mobile as a media channel. In general, the evidence indicates that if marketers can build trust through adequate permission-based systems and design messages that meet consumers' needs for utility and/or entertainment, it appears that consumers may accept this new medium.

However, many companies are not waiting for the above mentioned evidence or models to be further tested or developed. Many media planners are already allocating budget and implementing mobile marketing communications programs. For these decision-makers, we now turn to a review of what literature or guidelines are available to answer the central question of this discussion: When and with what kinds of marketing messages should mobile marketing communications be used to reach consumers?

2.2. Media selection and strategy. The goal of Integrated Marketing Communications is to utilize the best combination of available communications tools in a coordinated strategy to achieve the organization's communication objectives. A major part of this strategy is media planning. It might be useful to examine how media alternatives are evaluated to develop an understanding of how mobile marketing communications could fit into the mix.

Coulter and Sarkis (2005) developed and tested a comprehensive model for evaluation and selection of media alternatives. They first conducted a review of existing literature to determine the factors that managers consider when weighing the media choices. They then tested the validity of these factors through an expert panel review. The following five factors emerged from their study: Quality, Time, Flexibility, Coverage, and Cost, with between two and five sub-factors for each (16 total). The goal of their study was to develop and test a media selection optimization decision aid. Although they did not examine mobile marketing in their study, they did include Internet as representative of the new digital media. The factors and decision system they developed proved to be useful for evaluating media options.

Most media planners do not have access to such a decision system and rely primarily on analysis of audience demographics compared to target market demographics to make media buying decisions (D'Amico, 1999). In addition to cost and time constraints, consideration is also given to the characteristics of the message (does it need visuals, will consumers want to refer back to the copy?), the characteristics of the product (high/low involvement) and match these to the unique characteristics of each medium and the marketing communications objective (Russell and Lane, 2002). In either decision-making scenario, an understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of each media option is essential. Therefore the unique characteristics of mobile as a communication channel should be delineated.

2.3. Advantages and disadvantages of the mobile channel. What are the key issues that would lead a media planner to select mobile media for the communications strategy? The mobile channel allows a company to communicate to customers in a unique and engaging way (Sinisalo and Karjaluo, 2007). As discussed, most research has focused on delineating the variables that would predict the consumer's acceptance of this channel, not on how to use it once the conditions for acceptance are present. If a manager is deciding between mobile and another similar communications channel, such as email, for example, the identified variables may not be helpful. Under what conditions would the consumer be more likely to open and read an incoming text message from a marketer as compared to an incoming email message? What factors might differentiate the consumer's response to one over the other? Innovativeness was shown to be a determining factor in consumer acceptance of mobile advertising. Does the consumer have to be more innovative to learn to read text messages than

to read email? Attitude toward advertising was another factor that does not seem to differentiate between mobile and other media channels. Similarly, perceived risk does not seem to help; would the consumer perceive higher levels of risk in receiving a text from a marketer as compared to the same information in an email? And what about perceived utility or entertainment? It's likely that this would be a key driver for consumer response to a message through either medium. The factors influencing consumers' acceptance of mobile marketing communications do not seem to be useful in providing guidance on which communications channel should be used.

Although they may clearly differ from traditional media, many of the advantages of mobile as a medium seem to be similar to those of internet channels (email, blogs, websites, etc.). Both have the potential to be highly interactive, personalized, combining user content, video, music, etc. Both have the potential disadvantages of being perceived as complex, high risk, with considerable security concerns. Therefore, what guidance can be provided to media planners about when to use mobile marketing communications? In the absence of a sophisticated model such as that proposed by Coulter and Sarkis (2005), what kind of "matching" can be evaluated between the unique characteristics of the medium and the characteristics of the target audience? The obvious key characteristic is that mobile is *mobile*. This characteristic not only makes mobile unique, but also is the key to its value. If marketers can capitalize on this characteristic and create value for consumers, mobile marketing communications can be successful.

3. Mobile media considerations

What does it mean to be mobile? What are the impacts on marketing communications? What are the strategy implications of the unique characteristic of mobility?

Being able to reach consumers in real time, wherever they are, at any time, any place, with messages that are relevant to them based on time, place, and space leads us to the following five key implications:

- ◆ Ubiquity: People carry their cell phones everywhere they go, all the time. No other form of media can be accessed by consumers in so many different places.
- ◆ Immediacy: Messages can be sent in response to events and opportunities in real time. People respond to mobile messages (both voice and text) nearly immediately.
- ◆ Location sensitivity: messages can be sent to

consumers that relate specifically to where they are, or where they're going.

- ◆ Personalization: messages can be targeted to individual consumers based on their interests, needs, preferences (and as mentioned above, location in time). Unlike communication through other media, mobile phones are personal, not shared like land lines, television sets, or computers.
- ◆ Consumer controlled interactivity: messages can be two-way, multi-way (conferencing and viral effects), co-created, and co-experienced. This builds on the characteristics mentioned above, as all this can be in real time, anytime, anywhere.

Taken as a whole, these characteristics not only make mobile unique, but also are key to creating value for consumers. The media selection analysis can be stated as follows: If these unique aspects of mobile media can be leveraged in the marketing communications strategy, then value can be created for the consumer and this channel should be utilized. Campaigns that do not build on any of these unique characteristics may be better suited to other media. For example, when the internet was first introduced, some companies created web sites that were nothing more than a digital version of their brochures or annual reports. Communication that ignores the key characteristics of the medium that carries it will fail to create value. But as with all media strategies, maximum impact may be achieved by using multiple channels. As powerful as this new medium appears, mobile communications can achieve synergies through integration with other media as well.

For example, the Adidas case study (see Sultan and Rohm, 2005) points out the risks of not integrating more traditional mass media with mobile in the communications strategy. Although the campaign involved considerable creativity and interactivity using both mobile and internet-based technologies, the results did not meet expectations. On the mobile side, the number of wallpaper downloads and viral activities were minimal. On the internet side, visits to the website were fewer than expected. The campaign never got off the ground because too few consumers knew about it. There was no budget for TV or other traditional media. As Sultan and Rohm suggest, "...although mobile marketing might be a more effective medium in terms of consumer involvement, interaction and response, it could also be a less efficient medium with respect to audience reach (p. 89). In other words, this campaign suffered from a failure to consider the unique contributions of each media channel towards the overall IMC goals.

4. Future research and managerial implications

Although a significant number of studies have begun to define the conditions under which consumers will accept mobile marketing communications, little has been done to examine the impacts of the unique characteristics of the mobile channel on communication. As mentioned earlier, preliminary evidence indicates that consumers don't see mobile as a media channel, but rather as a communication channel. Consumers who give permission to companies to send them messages may perceive these messages quite differently from advertising. Research into this area could lead to a new understanding of communication.

This leads to another area for future research: fusion. Fusion refers to the merging or blending of two or more things. Beyond the usage of a variety of tools in the promotions mix, fusion actually blurs the lines between forms of marketing communication. For example, is delivery of newspaper content over a mobile device still a "print medium" (Russell and Lane, 2002)? In posing this question, the authors point out that media planners must look less at the distribution system for their messages and concentrate more on the value created in communication effectiveness. If the traditional distinctions are no longer present, how will media budgets be allocated? This area is ripe with research possibilities and mobile marketing would be an excellent test of new models.

Furthermore, Yunos, Gao and Shim (2003) point out that wireless advertisers will face several technical challenges such as the small screen size of the devices, inconsistent formatting in the ads, slow download times and varying technological standards. Inconsistent standards for marketing through the various mobile carriers globally and especially within the US will also be a barrier to including mobile media in the IMC strategy. Guidelines are needed for both marketers and intermediaries.

More research is needed as well on minimizing the potential disadvantages of mobile media. Several of the studies reviewed above, point out the potential negative responses to mobile marketing communications. There are fears of spam and invasion of privacy. These potential negative responses may interfere with the creation of value (both for the consumer and the marketer) in the mobile channel if they are not addressed.

Finally, as with any form of marketing communication, no amount of creativity or promotional strategy can make up for failing to understand and meet the consumer's needs. The creative and technological potential of mobile

marketing communications could easily serve to divert managerial attention away from the basics. Overzealous use of the ubiquitous nature of mobile could turn good communications into bad. As with

all new strategy initiatives, an iterative process of research, theory development, and practice will ultimately enable mobile marketing communications to reach its full potential.

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