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Application of the Comprehensive Campaign Planning Practice Method in Integrated Marketing Communication Course

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Abstract: As a core theoretical and practical framework in the field of contemporary marketing communication, Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) emphasizes the strategic integration of various communication tools-such as advertising, public relations, sales promotion, direct marketing, digital marketing, content marketing, and social media marketing-to achieve consistent communication with consumers and build long-term relationships. University IMC course bear the responsibility of cultivating applied professionals who possess both systematic planning capabilities and the ability to execute strategies in real-world scenarios. However, current teaching practices often suffer from a disconnect between theory and practice, fragmented case studies, and insufficient training across the entire campaign lifecycle, leaving students unable to independently develop complete marketing communication plans. The "comprehensive campaign planning practice method" utilizes a complete IMC campaign plan as the instructional vehicle, guiding students through a closed-loop training process-from problem definition to solution delivery-that encompasses brief interpretation, market research and insight generation, strategy formulation, core concept distillation, creative execution, media mix and scheduling, budget allocation, and performance evaluation. This method integrates constructivist learning theory, experiential learning theory, and project-based learning concepts, emphasizing authentic contexts, teamwork, and iterative processes. This paper systematically elaborates on the essence, characteristics, and theoretical foundations of the comprehensive campaign planning practice method; analyzes the current state and challenges of IMC course instruction; and details the design and implementation pathway for applying this method within the curriculum. The method effectively enhances students' systems thinking, problem-solving skills, teamwork abilities, and professional competence, serving as a vital pathway for transforming IMC Course from mere "knowledge transmission" to "competence cultivation."

Keywords: Comprehensive Campaign Planning Practice Method, Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC), Practical Competence Cultivation.

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of digital technology and profound changes in the media landscape, consumer touchpoints have become increasingly fragmented, fundamentally altering the way brands communicate with consumers. Traditional marketing communications relying on single media channels or isolated tactics struggle to effectively reach target audiences or establish enduring relationships. It is against this backdrop that the theory of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) has emerged and continued to evolve. The theory of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC), proposed by Professor Don Schultz in the 1990s, advocates for the unified integration of all marketing-related communication activities[1]. It emphasizes systematic planning centered on a consistent brand message and consumer touchpoints to maximize communication effectiveness and build long-term brand equity. This theory rapidly became a guiding framework for the global advertising, public relations, and marketing sectors, subsequently becoming a core component of curricula in business, journalism, communication, and advertising programs at universities. In the context of Chinese higher education, IMC Course are typically offered to students majoring in advertising, marketing, internet and new media, and public relations; these Course are tasked with both imparting theoretical knowledge and cultivating practical skills. Ideally, through this coursework, students should not only master the fundamental concepts, evolution, core elements, and workflows of IMC but also acquire the ability to independently execute a complete planning process-ranging from market insights to the implementation of a campaign. However, actual teaching practice often suffers from significant issues, such as an overemphasis on theory at the expense of practice, the use of fragmented case studies, and a lack of training that covers the entire operational workflow. Many students can recite the definition of IMC and the "5W2H" framework yet struggle to independently draft a comprehensive, logically consistent, and actionable campaign proposal. Classroom discussions often focus on retrospective reviews rather than proactive strategic design or creative execution training, while assignments frequently require only the completion of isolated modules (such as a single advertisement concept or media plan), making it difficult for students to grasp the true essence of "integration."

The "comprehensive campaign planning" practice method is a systematic pedagogical approach designed to address these specific challenges. Centered on the "complete marketing communication campaign" as the vehicle for instruction and assessment, it requires students to work in teams to tackle real-world or highly realistic corporate briefs. They must execute the entire planning process-from problem definition to effectiveness evaluation-according to professional standards, ultimately submitting an actionable

proposal and presenting it in a formal defense. This method emphasizes completeness, authenticity, teamwork, and a closed-loop process; by simulating the project workflows of professional advertising agencies or brand teams, it enables students to internalize knowledge and transfer skills through "learning by doing." The significance of this study lies in two main areas: first, theoretically, it enriches the teaching methodology for Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) Course by organically integrating theories of constructivism, experiential learning, and project-based learning with the practice of developing comprehensive IMC campaigns; second, practically, it provides actionable pathways and design frameworks for reforming IMC curricula in higher education institutions.

2. Definition, Characteristics, and Theoretical Basis of the Comprehensive Campaign Planning Practice Method

2.1. Defining the Comprehensive Campaign Planning Practice Method

The comprehensive campaign planning practice method uses a complete IMC campaign plan as the core instructional vehicle. Students work in project teams to undertake real or highly realistic corporate briefs. Adhering to professional industry standards, they systematically complete the entire process-ranging from brief interpretation, market research and multi-dimensional insight generation, communication strategy formulation, core concept distillation, and creative execution development to media strategy and touchpoint management, scheduling and budget allocation, effectiveness evaluation design, and final proposal integration and presentation. Throughout this process, they engage in multiple rounds of iterative optimization under the guidance of faculty members and corporate mentors.

Its core focus is not merely on "writing a proposal," but on using the comprehensive campaign-a complete work product-to compel students to experience the full logical chain of "defining the problem and solving the problem." The standard industry structure for such campaigns typically includes modules such as brief interpretation (background, objectives, tasks), research and analysis (five-dimensional insights covering the environment, industry, company, competitors, and consumers), communication strategy, core concept, creative execution, media usage and scheduling, budget allocation, and effectiveness evaluation. Students must ensure systematic integration around a unified core message and brand touchpoints, rather than simply stacking various communication tactics together[2].

2.2. Key Characteristics of the Comprehensive Campaign Planning Practice Method

2.2.1. Completeness and Authenticity

The method mandates coverage of the entire process, from problem definition to effectiveness evaluation, thereby avoiding the fragmented tendencies often found in traditional teaching-such as focusing on creativity without strategy or analysis without implementation. Priority is given to using real corporate briefs or actual requirements from trending brands; where constraints exist, highly realistic, localized case studies are employed to ensure the problem scenarios closely mirror actual industry practices.

2.2.2. Team-based Approach and Closed-loop Process

Working in groups of four to eight, students simulate the operations of a professional agency project team. They assign specific roles-such as strategy, creative, media, execution, and client liaison-to cultivate collaboration and communication skills. The approach emphasizes a complete closed-loop process, extending from goal setting to evaluation and feedback; students are required not only to propose plans but also to design measurable performance indicators and optimization mechanisms.

2.2.3. Iteration and Diverse Evaluation

Through interim presentations, multiple rounds of revision, and formal final defenses, the program reinforces process-oriented guidance and reflective optimization, mirroring the "proposal–feedback–iteration" workflow of real-world projects. Evaluation criteria go beyond the quality of the final proposal to encompass process performance, team contribution, professionalism during the defense, and corporate feedback, thereby establishing an assessment system that integrates both process and outcome.

2.3. Theoretical Foundations

The proposal and application of the "comprehensive campaign planning" practical method rest on solid theoretical foundations in pedagogy and marketing communication.

First, constructivist learning theory posits that knowledge is not passively received but actively constructed by learners through exploration and social interaction within authentic contexts. Comprehensive campaign planning provides highly realistic problem scenarios, compelling students to integrate fragmented IMC concepts-such as touchpoint management, brand consistency, and consumer insights-into actionable solutions, thereby facilitating deep knowledge construction[3].

Second, experiential learning theory describes learning as a cyclical process comprising "concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation." As students draft plans, receive feedback, and iterate on their work, they navigate a bidirectional transformation-moving from practice to theory and back to practice-to achieve genuine deep learning.

Third, the pedagogical concepts of project-based learning and work-process-oriented instruction advocate for restructuring course content around complete work processes. Comprehensive campaign planning is modeled on the actual workflow professional agencies use to deliver client campaigns; by reorganizing course material to align with real-world tasks, it fulfills the requirement for cultivating applied talent through "learning by doing" and "doing while learning." Finally, viewed through the lens of IMC theory itself, the comprehensive campaign planning approach aligns perfectly with the "outside-in" communication planning logic proposed by Schultz. It compels students to prioritize consumer insights and problem definition before formulating strategies and creative concepts; this avoids the traditional "inside-out," product-centric mindset and helps students truly grasp the essence of IMC.

3. Current Status and Issues in IMC Course Instruction

There remains a significant disconnect between theory and practice in university-level IMC Course regarding teaching objectives, content organization, instructional methods, and assessment criteria.

Regarding teaching objectives, while most syllabi emphasize "mastering basic IMC theories and methods" and "developing preliminary planning skills," actual instruction often treats "theoretical mastery" as the primary measurable goal. Consequently, there is a lack of clear process-based support and evaluation standards for the higher-level competency of independently executing a complete, comprehensive campaign.

Regarding content organization, textbooks and lectures are typically structured around theoretical modules (e.g., IMC concepts and evolution, consumer behavior, touchpoint management, advertising strategy, media strategy, and effectiveness evaluation) rather than being reconstructed around a "complete workflow." After completing these modules, students often struggle to organically integrate them into a logically coherent, comprehensive campaign plan[4].

Regarding instructional methods, while case-based learning is widely adopted, it often remains at the level of "post-hoc review"-analyzing successful classic cases-leaving students with few opportunities for proactive strategic design and the practical implementation of creative ideas. Although some Course include group projects, these often require only the completion of specific components (such as writing ad copy or drafting a media plan) rather than offering end-to-end process training[5].

Regarding assessment, final exams or theoretical assignments still carry significant weight. Evaluation criteria for campaign proposals often prioritize formatting standards and theoretical citations, while underemphasizing the rigor of strategic logic, the depth of insights, the innovativeness of concepts, and the feasibility of implementation. Furthermore, opportunities for real-world corporate projects are limited, making it difficult for students to receive authentic feedback from the industry. The direct consequence of these issues is that, upon graduation, students entering advertising agencies, brand marketing departments, or new media operations roles require a considerable amount of time to become competent in drafting and pitching comprehensive proposals; some students even exhibit a disconnect in capabilities—being adept at taking exams yet unable to develop actual proposals. The "comprehensive campaign planning" practical approach is a teaching method specifically designed to systematically address these issues.

4. Design and Implementation of the "Comprehensive Campaign Planning" Practical Method in Integrated Marketing Communication Course

4.1. Principles of Instructional Design

4.1.1. Principles of Real-World Orientation and Process Completeness

Prioritize the use of actual corporate briefs or needs from trending brands; if resources are limited, select localized, simulated cases where students possess some prior knowledge, data is accessible, and the scope of the problem is clearly defined. Mandate coverage of all core campaign modules and require students to complete the entire workflow-from the initial brief to final evaluation-thereby preventing tendencies to focus solely on either the creative aspect or the analytical aspect.

4.1.2. Principles of Team Collaboration and Iterative Feedback

Organize students into groups of 4–8 to simulate professional agency roles, fostering skills in collaboration, communication, and project management. Incorporate interim presentations and multiple rounds of revisions, with timely intervention from instructors and corporate mentors to prevent students from investing excessive time in the wrong direction.

4.1.3. Principles of Multidimensional Evaluation and Theory-Practice Integration

Conduct comprehensive evaluations based on proposal quality, presentation performance, team contribution, attitude throughout the process, and corporate feedback, emphasizing competency-based assessment. Upon completion of the campaign, guide students to distill methodologies from their work, facilitating the transition from practice to theoretical understanding.

4.2. Specific Implementation Process

4.2.1. Preparation and Launch Phase

Instructors systematically introduce the campaign structure, evaluation criteria, and industry-standard logic (e.g., problem definition vs. solution, or the 5W2H framework) while showcasing exemplary campaign cases. Subsequently, the project brief is issued (corporate representatives may be invited to present requirements in person or online); students form teams-either independently or via instructor assignment-and allocate roles (e.g., Strategy Lead, Creative Lead, Media Lead, Execution & Coordination Lead). This phase focuses on establishing a conceptual understanding of "why we conduct comprehensive campaigns" and "what such a campaign looks like."

4.2.2. Research and Insight Phase

Groups conduct desk research and basic consumer research (surveys, interviews, observations, or secondary data analysis) based on the brief, developing insights across five dimensions: the environment, the industry, the company, competitors, and target consumers. Students are required to identify core issues and opportunities, produce an "insight report," and discuss within their groups whether the problem has been correctly defined. Instructors conduct progress checks-either in class or via online platforms-to ensure research goes beyond a superficial level.

4.2.3. Strategy and Concept Phase

Building on the insights gained, groups formulate communication objectives and overarching strategies, distill core concepts, and complete a mid-term presentation. This presentation serves as a critical milestone where instructors and corporate mentors focus their review on: the accuracy of problem definition, the alignment of strategy with the insight logic, and the ability of the core concept to provide a unifying theme and drive effective communication. A first round of iteration is conducted based on the feedback received.

4.2.4. Creative Execution and Media Implementation Phase

Groups develop creative executions (e.g., advertising, content, events, PR, digital marketing, social media) centered on the core concept, while also formulating media mix strategies, touchpoint management plans, schedules, and budget allocations. This phase emphasizes "integration"-all creative and media activities must serve a unified core message and align with brand touchpoints. Instructors may

organize specialized workshops to provide targeted guidance on creative ideation and media strategy.

4.2.5. Proposal Integration and Presentation Phase

Groups compile a comprehensive proposal document (typically covering the cover page, table of contents, brief analysis, insights, strategy, concept, creative, media, schedule, budget, evaluation, etc.) and deliver a formal presentation. Corporate representatives or industry experts may be invited to evaluate the presentations, simulating a real-world pitch scenario. Final revisions are made based on the feedback received, and the final version is submitted.

4.2.6. Reflection and Theoretical Synthesis Phase

Students submit individual and group review reports summarizing their experiences, shortcomings, and key takeaways. Instructors organize a class-wide summary session, guiding students to abstract their practical experiences into a methodology, thereby elevating their understanding from merely "knowing how to create a proposal" to "comprehending the logic behind a comprehensive campaign."

4.3. Teaching Organization and Support

The instructor's role shifts from a traditional knowledge transmitter to that of a project mentor and process facilitator, requiring a significant investment of time in providing ongoing guidance and feedback. The course can be integrated with online platforms (such as Xuexitong and Rain Classroom) to facilitate resource sharing, progress tracking, and formative assessment. Institutions with the necessary resources should actively incorporate lectures by industry experts, workshops, or real-world projects to enhance the professional quality and industry relevance of the plans. Additionally, establishing a repository of comprehensive campaign cases created by outstanding students can provide localized resources for future instruction.

4.4. Design of the Assessment Mechanism

Assessment should combine formative and summative approaches: process performance (quality of research, interim presentations, and teamwork) accounts for 30%–40%; the quality of the final comprehensive campaign plan (depth of insight, strategic logic, conceptual innovation, media feasibility, budget reasonableness, and professional documentation) accounts for 40%–50%; and presentation performance and corporate feedback account for 10%–20%. Grading criteria should be announced in advance to ensure transparency and operational clarity.

5. Conclusion

Centered on comprehensive, authentic, and closed-loop training in marketing communication campaigns, the "comprehensive campaign planning" practical approach effectively addresses key issues in traditional IMC Course, such as the disconnect between theory and practice, fragmented case studies, and insufficient end-to-end process training. It not only equips students with the ability to manage the entire process-from insight generation to final execution-but also systematically cultivates systems thinking, problem-solving skills, teamwork, and professional competence. By integrating concepts from constructivism, experiential learning, and project-based learning, this method aligns closely with the "outside-in" logic inherent in IMC theory, serving as an effective pathway for transforming IMC Course from knowledge transmission to competency development. Looking ahead, as new scenarios-such as digital marketing tools, AI-assisted planning, the metaverse, and immersive communication-continue to emerge, the comprehensive campaign planning method itself must undergo continuous iteration. Further integration of data-driven decision-making, AI tool application, and cross-media storytelling training can bring instruction closer to the latest industry practices. Meanwhile, strengthening deep industry-academia collaboration, building localized case repositories, and developing standardized assessment tools will facilitate the method's wider adoption across universities, thereby contributing significantly to the cultivation of versatile professionals capable of thriving in the marketing communication landscape of the new era.

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