

The Influence of Integrated Communication in Digital Marketing

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Abstract

This article explores the impact of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) on purchasing decisions in the real estate sector, with a particular focus on how the communication message delivered through digital communication channels can influence the choice of buyers in Romania, especially in Bucharest. In a market where information is abundant, the IMC strategy stands out for its ability to create coherent and aligned messaging across various digital channels, providing a unique experience and contributing to increased consumer loyalty. The main goal of the study is to identify the most effective digital communication channels used in real estate to attract customers and increase customer loyalty. For this purpose, qualitative research was conducted, based on an in-depth interview with 15 respondents interested in real estate offers in Bucharest. The objectives of the research were aimed at identifying the digital communication channels preferred by consumers, knowing the main communication barriers at the level of perception of the message conveyed, analyzing the key factors in promoting customer loyalty in real estate. The content analysis revealed that factors such as the transparency of the communication message, the clarity of the presentation of real estate offers and the use of integrated communication channels play a central role in determining the choice of different types of housing. Consumers' preferences are directed towards offers that emphasize concrete benefits communicated through a single communication message delivered through different digital channels. At the same time, the conclusion of the research emphasizes the need to adapt the CIM to overcome communication barriers such as ambiguity of offer information, lack of trust in the information conveyed, ambiguity of offer information, and low level of legal and tax knowledge of customers. The study provides valuable insights into the managerial implications of developing integrated marketing communication strategies, especially in the online environment, which will significantly contribute to improving the ways in which real estate offers are communicated and, at the same time, to strengthening customer trust and increasing loyalty in the Romanian real estate market.

Keywords: IMC, digital communication channel, qualitative research, real estate market.

JEL classification: M31.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to discuss the impact of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) on consumer purchasing decisions in the Romanian real estate sector, with focus on the Bucharest market. Alongside the development of digital communication channels, customers have become flooded with information, which differs both in quality and usefulness. Bearing in mind the market saturation, real estate companies need to cope with the challenge of formulating coherent, compelling messages, for differentiating themselves, thus sustaining success. In this environment, IMC stands as the strategic framework, which integrates several

marketing channels that are aimed at delivering a cohesive message, while demonstrating notable efficiency in tackling the soared difficulties.

IMC plays a key role in improving brand recognition, which cultivates not only trust but loyalty as well, through unified messaging efforts – both being key factors for the real estate sector, a market characterized by substantial financial commitments. Furthermore, it ensures unity for the messages across the various channels, as part of the IMC streamlines consumer journeys, with the latter rendering it seamless and engaging. In intricate sectors this is particularly relevant, especially for high-value sectors such as the one being analyzed, knowing that proficient communication can influence consumer decision-making.

Internet platforms became, and not only for the Romanian market – or in particular for the capital domain – a key part of consumer behavior for property research, especially when we talk about urban residents. Thus, the scope of this paper is to emphasize the relevance of digital environment, whereas the “world wide web” being the touchstone for the real estate companies, and subsequently to examine the impact of digital tools and digital channels on purchasing behaviors and consumer relationships. The results of the study presented through this paper highlight the capacity of IMC to generate an integrated customer experience. At the same time, it speaks about the need of brand distinction, with practical insights into channel-specific techniques, thus confirming the need for marketing enhancements on the real estate sector. Unified messaging across digital platforms – with a focus on social media, alongside with targeted communication for meeting individual requirements allows for amplifying a company’s visibility, while also cultivating trust and loyalty – key factors of success on the real estate market.

1. Literature review

Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) is now recognized as a comprehensive marketing strategy, by unifying various communication methods, thus establishing a cohesive brand experience. That is why IMC is of utmost importance in maintaining message consistency across the constant diversifying channels of communication, particularly when it comes to saturated markets (Belch & Belch, 2018).

Through IMC, one can maintain alignment in all activities while conveying a cohesive and compelling narrative, which resonates with the targeted audience, thus allowing to overcome the so called “communication clutter”, while promoting clear and consistent messaging. We should bear in mind that to gain consumer trust, constancy is of great importance, especially when it comes to business sectors where considerable financial expenditure is needed. Nowadays, in the context of the Internet of Things (IoT) that brought a profound digitalization of our society, IMC plays a key role in controlling and harmonizing brand narratives, as a method of enhancing consumer perceptions (Kliatchko, 2008). For the real estate sector, such connections are crucial, as long as trust, openness and clarity are influencing consumer confidence. Historically dependent on print media, billboards, personal encounters or referrals, the real estate marketing has passed through a true evolution, as a direct result of the introduction of the digital platforms. Such innovations have changed profoundly the behavior of consumers, have changed the way in which they conduct their research, or engage and take decisions. In a world where time is constantly challenged, the use of digital channels – regardless of their form, i.e. real estate websites, social media platforms, as well as email marketing – became essential for potential buyers, by offering immediate access to property listings, virtual tours, as well as interactive participation.

In the IMC framework, efficiency and personalization emphasize the significance of various digital tools, as presented by Duncan and Moriarty (1998). For the real estate sector in particular, personalization is not only limited to meeting unique customer requirements, but to

also for fostering deeper emotional responses from the potential buyers. The efficacy of incorporating digital methods within an IMC framework is showcased by the effects of customized email campaigns with personalized property recommendations and social media advertisements that are tailored based upon the behavior that the customer have on their so-called consumer journeys. Thus, as presented by Schultz et al. (1993), trust within the whole customer experience can be elevated through effective personalization, with IMC being most successful in sectors which rely on substantial consumer trust. Maintaining clear communication and reducing ambiguity of the offerings allows for integrated messaging to mitigate the risk of misinterpretation, crucial for the transaction in the real estate market. Openness represents a key element of IMC, more so in high-value industries – with transparency in pricing being pivotal in fostering brand loyalty (Belch & Belch, 2018). As presented by Bruhn and Schnebelen (2017), maintaining consistency and message clarity not only reassures customers, but also bolsters their confidence in making purchasing decisions. That is why consistent unified messaging, throughout various mediums, is considered to foster memorable, well-rounded experiences (Keller, 2013), with such interactions generating enduring loyalty in the real estate sector. Furthermore, success in the real estate sector can be achieved by cultivating predictable business models and creating referrals, and that is why unified messaging becomes particularly pertinent for the sector in question.

Also, for content marketing, the given research highlights the need for high-quality, consistent and relevant content, as a way of meeting miscellaneous customer needs. It is safe to conclude that the real estate sector is truly an information-based business sector, genuinely influenced by the information technology transformation processes. Thus, real estate companies need to rapidly adapt, as a way of cultivating long-lasting customer relationships and attracting new business (Kumar, 2014).

To summarize, IMC encompasses the strategic framework needed to manage the intricacies of the digital age, while tackling the specific issues of each business sector – in this case, the real estate one. Through message consistency, openness and digital personalization, IMC can bolster customer trust, while also amplifying brand equity. Alongside traditional channels, digital communication technologies enable real estate firms to successfully interact with their potential and existing customers, fostering significant and enduring ties.

2. Research Methodology

The key purpose of this research is to identify the most effective digital channels in recruiting new real estate customers while retaining the existing ones, in Bucharest, Romania. With the analyzed market being influenced by swift urbanization and digital integration, understanding consumer behavior and their key preferences is very important in developing effective strategies, which correspond with the audience's expectations. As a first observation, a significant gap has been identified while examining the digital landscape characterizing the local real estate market.

The research itself consists of qualitative research, conducted through in-depth interviews. Participants were selected using a non-probability sampling method, namely convenience sampling, which is based on the accessibility and availability of participants. Thus, the sample consisted of 15 respondents who accessed websites specialized in real estate sales. In order to ensure the accuracy of the research results, data confidentiality was respected in the data collection process. A more profound investigation of customer experiences and perceptions regarding digital communication was facilitated by the selection of qualitative approaches, with the interviews having been designed to reveal critical insights regarding consumer preferences for digital communication channels, their assessment of clarity in marketing messaging, as well as the degree of trust when being presented by the real estate

business.

Key themes were identified through content analysis of the collected data, revealing the core aspects of efficient digital communication in the real estate business. The critical importance of transparency in communication stood out in terms of importance, with the participants emphasizing that comprehensive, precise and clear information in terms of listings, pricing, as well as terms not only foster trust, but also diminishes the risks perceived. Furthermore, openness was also found to be of great importance amongst participants, with it playing a key role in their engagement with real estate companies, particularly due to the substantial financial ties which characterize the industry. The transparency of real estate proposals was also a prominent subject, with participants expressing a particular preference for succinct, advantage-focused and comprehensible messages. That is why it came as no surprise that intricate or ambiguous wordings are rather unappealing to the potential customer, generating confusion and discouraging additional involvement. In exchange, clear messages highlighting the key selling points of a property – location advantages, distinctive attributes, as well as money incentives – thus focusing on simplicity and clarity, which corresponds with the core principles of IMC, were preferable to potential customers. That is why the authors believe in the necessity of conveying consistent, pertinent consumer-centric messaging across all marketing platforms in achieving desirable results.

The importance of IMC through digital channels emerged as a crucial discovery throughout this study, with respondents valuing cohesive and consistent communication across various platforms, including (but not limited to) websites, social networks or email marketing. Not only does this unity bolster brand trust, but also improves customer experience, thus establishing a unified approach. A perception of reliability and professionalism was recorded for some respondents, that is where social media marketing aligned with the content on the brand's website were provided. Withal, an increasing demand for interactive digital tools, such as virtual property tours, advanced search filters or real time chat sessions was noticed, as participants deemed these attributes as beneficial in streamlining the decision-making process, while enhancing participation. By offering such tools, companies can be regarded as being more innovative, customer-focused or reliable, all of which affect the propensity of investigating and finalizing purchasing selections.

The need to synchronize digital communication tactics with consumer preferences was highlighted by the research results, as conveying clear and consistent messaging through integrated channels. Such channels can help strengthen connections between real estate companies and their audiences, while augmenting their trust and stimulating conversations. Along with the study results, practical insight for firms in the Bucharest real estate sector was obtained, highlighting the importance of IMC principles in the establishment of a cohesive and influential digital presence. Not only do these findings validate the value of digital integration, but also highlight its potential to transform customer experiences, while fostering long-term loyalty.

As mentioned above, the study was conducted through in-depth interviews, executed utilizing a semi-structured 10 question survey, between October and November 2024. To ascertain relevance, a four-question screening questionnaire was employed, while demographic details such as age, gender and background were gathered to contextualize the sample population. Out of the 15 respondents, 60% were women, with men representing the remaining 40%, while their ages varied from 25 to 40. The vast majority consisted of urban residents with the educational levels varying – 40% possessed graduate degrees, 47% postgraduate qualifications, and 13% having only finished secondary education.

Table 1. Respondents' structure

Gender		Age			Residency		Education		
Male	Female	20-30	31-40	41-50	Urban	Rural	Highschool	Undergraduate	Postgraduate
6	9	5	6	4	10	5	1	6	8
15		15			15		15		

Source: Authors' own research results

Inquiries about the participants' experiences in the Bucharest real estate market were conducted, all of them having expressed active interest, either as residents or investors. The main driving force was of personal nature (i.e. acquiring a new residence), property investment being of interest for only a minority of the respondents. In spite of each of the respondent's particularities, one common denominator was their recent engagement with digital platforms, particularly during the previous six months, with specialized sites such as www.imobiliare.ro (Realmedia, 2024) and www.storia.ro (Storia, 2024) being their primary research sources. Thanks to their extensive property listings and intuitive features, as well as their extensive filters and interactive tools, these systems received positive feedback from the respondents, thus underlining the increasing importance of digital platforms in the consumer journeys of real estate transactions.

3. Results and Discussion

The main hypothesis of the study was that the target audience reacts positively to communication messages transmitted through digital channels attentively selected, the construction of the message being based on elements based on truthfulness, clarity and transparency of the transmitted content. If one of the main marketing objectives of real estate companies is to build a solid relationship based on trust with their consumers, it is obvious that they will have to give a major importance to communication efforts aimed at building the unique value of the offer.

The obtained results led to the creation of a clear picture of the preferences and needs of customers when choosing a real estate offer. The data were coded with a view to highlighting categories of information on the same issue. Subsequently, through thematic analysis, the categories were grouped into 4 themes relevant to the research. The analysis revealed four main themes addressed by the respondents regarding preferred communication channels, perception of the communication message, loyalty and trust factors and conclusions and personal preferences.

The themes addressed were supported by relevant questions that generated the key drivers found in the analysis of the answers of all respondents participating in the research.

Table 2. The main themes, key drivers and relevant quotes

Themes	Key Drivers	Relevant Quotes
Theme 1: Preferred communication channels	Consistent, responsive and authentic digital communication is crucial for building trust in the consumer relationship.	<p>"I used the agency's website to browse offers and received quick, clear responses through chat."</p> <p>"Without the internet and social media, I wouldn't have found most offers; they're essential."</p> <p>"I considered an Instagram offer because the agency posted a detailed property video, showing</p>

		both the interior and surroundings.”
Theme 2: Perception of the communication message	Transparency, efficient and personalized communication strengthens consumer trust.	“The agency’s listing didn’t specify additional fees like taxes and commission.” “If I see one thing on Facebook but something else on the agency’s website, I lose trust.”
Theme 3: Loyalty and trust factors	Honest and accurate visual representation in real estate build consumer confidence and loyalty.	“Many listings have photos that don’t match reality; rooms look larger or brighter in the pictures than in real life.” “I want fast, detailed answers. Agencies slow to respond or inconsistent raise doubts.”
Theme 4: Conclusions and personal preferences	Timeliness in response, transparency in cost and high-quality in presentation, positive reviews lead to trust a negative reviews lead to mistrust.	“If I see positive experiences from other clients, I’m more inclined to trust the agency.”

Source: Authors’ own research results

Theme 1: Preferred communication channels

Assessing the preferred communication channels of the respondents reflected on their digital interactions with real estate agencies. Many of them reported positive interactions through agency websites, social media profiles, as well as mobile apps, highlighting timely and relevant responses. One of the respondents noted: *“I used the agency’s website to browse offers and received quick, clear responses through chat.”* – thus highlighting the importance of personalized communication, as presented by Schultz et al. (1993).

As a further consideration, several participants also noted adverse experiences, such as delays or obsolete information, underscoring the importance of real-time, tailored consumer responses in digital interactions. Constant and responsive digital communication is quintessential in fostering trust in consumer-brand interactions (Fill, 2006), while digital channels are unanimously acknowledged as crucial in decision making processes, thus offering swift access to property information and allowing customers to do valuable comparisons.

Furthermore, participants also noted the ease of platforms for making informed decisions, with an individual noting that *“Without the internet and social media, I would not have discovered most opportunities; they are indispensable.”* This reinforces the key role played by IMC in the real estate sector, as presented in the literature review section (Armstrong et al., 2013), with participants also noting that certain elements prompted them to evaluate certain real estate proposition, while identifying clarity, detail and visual quality as essential characteristics. Considering the relevant literature, the respondents’ predilection for high-quality photos and comprehensive description came as no surprise. Key visuals play a key role in the respondents’ consumer journey, particularly video content, which allows for a better understanding of the property being presented. *“I contemplated an Instagram proposal due to the agency’s comprehensive property video, showcasing both the interior and the surroundings.”* The focus on images aligns with the function of visual marketing in fostering customer trust, as articulated by Bruhn and Schnebelen (2017), who contend that meticulously chosen, authentic visual content enhances consumer engagement.

Theme 2: Perception of the communication message

Several respondents mentioned having encountered challenges in comprehending digital communications, regarding pricing or when referencing intricate terminologies. For example, one of the respondents noted that: *“The agency’s listing did not specify supplementary charges such as taxes and commission.”* Furthermore, real estate terminology can be perceived as complicated, establishing obstacles for potential or current customers, clearly showing the need in maintaining clear communication for reducing ambiguity and mitigate the risk of misinterpretation (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Withal, transparency is of the essence in the real estate business, as it is a high-value industry, characterized by greater commitment – from a financial point of view and not only. The relevant literature is once again being supported by the research results (Bruhn & Schnebelen, 2017), thus highlighting the importance of transparency in making informed long-term decisions.

Moreover, another respondent highlighted the need for consistency throughout communication channels, noting that *“When encountering one message on Facebook and a different one on the agency’s website, my trust diminishes.”* Emphasizing the need for message consistency across all platforms, Duncan and Moriarty’s (1998) IMC principles are once again proven right, as a way of ensuring a cohesive presentation, and enhancing consumer trust. While conducting the research, transparency, effectiveness and tailored communication stood out as key factors of influence for the real estate market.

Theme 3: Loyalty and trust factors

Providing transparent cost breakdowns and timely responses turned out to be of great importance when establishing loyalty and trust factors, observation which can also be confirmed by the findings of Belch & Belch (2018), who identified transparency in pricing as one of the main factors in cultivating brand loyalty for high-value industries.

On the other hand, participants articulated frustration regarding properties appearing dissimilar when compared to their listings (both through visuals & text), with one individual noting that *“Many listings feature images that do not portray the reality; rooms appear larger or seem to have better lighting, while in reality things are fundamentally different.”* This emphasizes the significance of truthful depictions, while inconsistencies are eroding consumer trust and allegiance. It can also be noted that respondents often highlighted the need for openness in terms of cost disclosure, as well as the use of real-life images, not only as a way of gaining consumer trust, but also to boost online real estate communications. Virtual tours were notably mentioned, as well as promptness in inquiry resolution, with a respondent noting *“I want fast, detailed answers. Agencies slow to respond or inconsistent raise doubts”*.

Theme 4: Conclusions and personal preferences

In terms of personal preferences and conclusions, when asked about suggestions to improve digital communication in the real estate sector, respondents once again mentioned the greater need for transparency, particularly in cost presentation, as well as the use of real-life photos, as opposed to renders or altered key visuals. Fast, detailed answers when reaching out to agencies were also noted, with customer reviews being also mentioned as a key decision-making factor *“If I see positive experiences from other clients, I’m more inclined to trust the agency”*, said one respondent.

Conclusion, limitations and future research

As highlighted through the above sections, this research depicts the key roles digital marketing and IMC have in the real estate market. Message clarity, price transparency as well as consistency and timely communication are some of the detrimental factors which cultivate

loyalty in such a high-value sector. When effectively implemented, they serve as essential pillars in establishing consumer relations, for those individuals highly reliant on digital platforms when researching property and making impactful decisions. Furthermore, companies can become flexible and adaptable to changes in the external environment, thanks to the application of digital marketing, while building effective relationships with their customers, as well as being more responsive to their needs and understandings (Veleva & Tsvetanova, 2019). Petermann (2021) shows that due to the availability of online platforms as intermediary websites, the complexity of interaction relationships between providers, demanders, and real estate agents has increased significantly. The changes brought in recent years in the field of real estate marketing are based on the development and implementation of digital technologies in the relationship with consumers, which will contribute significantly both to increasing the value of the offer and to strengthening trust in the partnership between the seller and the client. Thus, real estate firms can benefit from the correct implementation of IMC practices, such tactics emphasizing the provision of coherent, consistent and easily available messaging across various digital platforms. Given the customer desire for rapid and precise information, IMC comes as the means for real estate brands to not only fulfil these expectations, but also convey a professional and reliable brand image. Especially vital in real estate transactions, such traits help ease buyers, who undertake significant financial commitments and require assurance in their decisions. As previously stated, transparency has become a core element in fostering trust, offering explicit and upfront information regarding expenses, property specifics and transaction conditions. Consumers tend to feel more confident in their interactions, provided that the firm is honest and transparent, while uniform messaging across platforms is detrimental in strengthening the brand positioning, while minimizing confusion. Hence, ensuring the alignment of the information in digital advertisements, website content and social media fosters a unified and professional experience. As for consumer – real estate firm interactions, the responsiveness of the latter plays a crucial factor in ensuring consumer satisfaction, agencies providing rapid communication and responses being considered to exhibiting dedication in fulfilling consumer requirements.

This study's findings, corroborated by current literature on IMC and digital marketing, indicate that real estate firms can achieve a competitive advantage, by emphasizing transparent cost information, genuine and high-quality visual content, and effective communication strategies. High-resolution photos and virtual tours can assist consumers in the establishment of realistic expectations, while also enhancing their confidence when making long-term purchasing decisions. Furthermore, the integration of these elements, along with coherent, harmonized messaging, fosters the establishment of a reliable brand presence. In the context of the current digital environment, organizations employing such methods have a higher chance of fulfilling and surpassing consumer expectations. Real estate firms may develop enduring relations with their clients by cultivating trust, increasing engagement, and providing value through transparent and regular communication. Consumer loyalty can be enhanced by such strategies, while also guaranteeing enduring success in a swiftly changing market.

As for the study's shortcomings, the limited sample size of 15 respondents should be noted, as it constrains the applicability of the findings to a wider consumer demographic. A more thorough comprehension of consumer attitudes and behavior could be achieved through an expanded, more heterogeneous sample regarding age, income, and regional origin. Additionally, focusing on urban respondents, particularly those living in Bucharest, might inadequately depict the experiences of consumers from rural or smaller urban locales, where digital real estate marketing strategies may differ in terms of effectiveness and influence.

The timing allocated for data collection represents a further constraint with the study having been conducted between October and November 2024, with seasonal variables and

market volatility possibly affecting consumer behavior and preferences, hence, the results might not reflect behaviors applicable throughout the entire year. As for data reporting, it should be noted that the study was reliant on qualitative, self-reported data, allowing for the possibility of response bias, as participants could have opted for offering answers which are in alignment with socially acceptable norms, rather than their authentic experiences.

The enhancement of this study could be done by incorporating a quantitative element, facilitating a more statistically rigorous analysis, while longitudinal studies may yield significant insights into the evolution of customer attitudes regarding digital real estate marketing, given that digital technologies and platforms are swiftly growing within the real estate sector. Lastly, should the study be of relevance to real estate firms and professionals, along with continuing its research efforts, key opinion leaders could try implementing relevant consumer feedback, as presented through the semi-structured questionnaire.

Future communication approaches of companies operating in the real estate market must consider competitive dynamics, the conjuncture factors that define demand and supply, the accessibility and preference of digital communication channels in such a way that communication strategies lead to business success.

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