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Mini-Review Article

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Integrated Marketing Communication as a Business Management Tool in the Context of Sustainable Development

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Abstract: The problem of nowadays is that consumers lack information on food products, their composition and quality, nutritional value, packaging, its impact on the human health and environment, reuse and recycling possibilities, etc. Integrated marketing communications (IMC) as a business management tool may not only draw the consumers' attention and incite a purchase, but also provide information and serve as a facilitator of consumers' knowledge and competence on products, their nutritional value, use and utilisation. The goal of the research is to assess the impact of IMC for sustainability upon demand at Latvian food retail chains and the impact of the use of IMC for sustainability upon sustainable development. The object of the research is Latvian food retail chains, and the subject of the research is the use of IMC for sustainable development. The authors in 2017 surveyed leading specialists from food retail chains. The research confirmed the hypothesis that IMC for sustainability as an innovative business management tool fosters sustainable development. Based on the results of the research, the authors have drawn up a conceptual model of IMC for sustainable business development, and the results of the research are of both theoretical and practical value.

Keywords: integrated marketing communication, integrated marketing communication model, integrated marketing communication tools, sustainability, sustainable development

JEL Classification: M10, M14, M31

1 Introduction

When developing innovation in business, integrated marketing communications (IMC) serve as a process of customer relationship management in the context of sustainable development. Marketing is a key component of a company's business management system in the context of sustainable development, as the promotion of sustainable development sees inclusion, merging and combination of various activities and elements of marketing communications in line with the sustainability targets – economic growth, social responsibility, and environment preservation. When developing innovative business, integrated marketing communications serve as a customer relationship management process in the context of sustainable development.

Sustainability “stands” on three pillars – society, ecology, and economy. All together they are closely related. One cannot exist without the others (Thiele 2013).

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The society must not continue building its economic growth at the expense of environmental protection and social stability (Brassington, Pettitt 2006).

Sustainability is a thoroughly integrated notion where all the elements are interlinked. Sustainability is not limited to environmental and ecological issues which are definitely important – it also deals with social, economic, and cultural development challenges (Bormane et al. 2017).

More and more companies face “the challenge of encompassing sustainability in their business, searching for opportunities to integrate into a global sustainable development,” according to Morioka et al. (2016). Boons and Lüdeke-Freund (2013) maintain that the merging of both fields – sustainable innovations and business – is beneficial and fosters sustainability. Moreover, these business tools may be adjusted to and structured within companies already in operation. Ciemleja (2010) argues that a company may improve its efficiency using a performance assessment system that incorporates the dimensions of sustainable business development combined with elements supporting business sustainability: 1) *the production process* – the use of technical equipment and manufacturing technologies (capacity, economy, modifiability); 2) *the selling process* – a strategically reasoned selection of product type and market orientation; 3) *the staff management process* – a rational and stable provision and coordination of internal structures among structural units; 4) *the financial management process* – an optimum movement, structure and efficient use of financial resources; 5) *the accounting process* – an analysis of management functions as basis for decision-making. When it comes to different dimensions of sustainable business development, Boons and Lüdeke-Freund (2013) and Ciemleja (2010) mention business management tools both directly and indirectly related to marketing, such as offer value and interaction with customers, production process, customer relationship management and the selling process. Consequently, marketing is a key component of the business management system in the context of sustainable development. Furthermore, since the promotion of sustainable development sees merging and combination of various activities and elements of marketing communication, one can conclude that IMC plays a key role in sustainable development.

2 Current developments in integrated marketing communication

The approaches, models and classifications of marketing communications discussed in literature are distinguished between two concepts – inside-out orientation and outside-in orientation.

The inside-out orientation is dealt with by such authors as Schultz et al. (1993) and Duncan and Caywood (1996). According to them, integrated marketing communication (IMC) activities are managed by the company, with the integration having the objectives of: 1) creating internal conditions (such as internal communication activity planning, organisational structure, personnel, implementation, and integration) to lay the internal foundations for an effective external communication; 2) coordinating and approving external communication activities to make sure that the company’s image be clear, unified and comprehensible. This applies to all communication messages generated by the company and addressed to all external stakeholders. Rooted in economics and strategic management literature, the inside-out orientation is an internally oriented strategic posture, the focus of which lies on how a firm achieves superior performance by developing, possessing, capitalising on, and deploying strategic firm-specific resources that are valuable, scarce, inimitable, and non-substitutable (Barney 1991; Miller et al. 2002; Day 2011).

The inside-out orientation is positively related to a firm’s innovation performance and overall performance. A dynamic strain of the inside-out orientation that draws on evolutionary economics is the theory of organizational dynamic capabilities (Zott 2003; Newbert 2007; Day 2011).

The outside-in orientation, in turn, is supported by such authors as Kliatchko (2008) and Bruhn (2014). Under this view, IMC are deemed customer-centric in the sense that the company adapts all its communication activities to customers and integrates customers in their communication by reversing the direction of relationship from company-to-customer to customer-to-company. Both authors also point out that communication activities may be customer-initiated and aimed towards the company; customers actively search for information of interest and thus decide themselves where and when to receive (or pull out)

content from the company or get in touch with it. This view is therefore also known as *pull* communication. Furthermore, the company's activities in the integration of user-generated content fall within the IMC concept, and IMC thus move from telling and selling to listening and learning. Posting user-generated content in the social media enables the company to learn more about their customers' intentions, needs and wishes, and the information obtained through feedback may be used as the basis for the planning and implementation of the company's communication activities. With this extended approach, both the company's outgoing messages and the customers' incoming messages contribute to a consistent presentation of the company's communication. The aspect of meaning creation here is of particular importance, as the customer encodes the message, thus creating the meaning of all the company's marketing and communication activities.

In respect of both above orientations, Bruhn and Schnebelen (2017) emphasise the role of social media. They argue that both parties – senders and recipients – consecutively communicate and the communication roles interact. In such a media landscape, businesses no longer operate in a centralised model as the sole content creators and distributors – social media empowers customers to decide what information they wish to receive from the company and what to send to the company and fellow customers. It is also stressed that the existing IMC concepts do not discuss IMC in detail in the context of social media epoch and most of those IMC concepts present IMC as merely a new communication tool that enriches the set of communication measures, thus overlooking the fact that social media has structurally transformed the communication market, as senders and recipients are no longer clearly defined and may change infinitely. Since the existing IMC concepts do not take into account the said impact, integrated user-generated content and other matters remain an untapped resource.

Segments of users in the market of services can be defined by generations and their distinctive characteristics, so the theory of generations can be used as a consumer segmentation tool (Sabaitytė, Davidavičius 2017).

In the context of social media development, Bruhn and Schnebelen (2017) highlight the current development trends of IMC and the challenges faced when working on corporate IMC strategies. The key challenges and trends, in their opinion, are associated with loss of control, content marketing, dialogue and network communication, and multiple stakeholder management (Bruhn, Schnebelen 2017).

The sustainable development of internet marketing faces the dynamic environment and its alterations, which occurs in both – business terms and conditions, and in the use of electronic tools and applicable concepts. The growing importance of the internet marketing is being indicated by the development of electronic markets, increasing number of new generation consumers, deepening interest of scientists from different scientific fields, as well as widening the related knowledge base (Sabaitytė, Davidavičienė 2018).

The development of social networks leads to new ways of marketing communication and poses new scientific challenges. The growing importance of B2B and B2C communication and the relationship with the customers is influenced by dynamic changes in the e-marketplace (Davidavičienė et al. 2017).

Ashley and Tuten (2015) maintain that, with customers actively contributing to the communication process, the volume of communication and available content has vastly increased, making the social media landscape less transparent for businesses. As customers are able to actively influence, create and manage communication through their contribution to the process and thereby gain power, businesses lose control over their communications. They no longer control when, where and how customers express their opinions about the company, its products and brands, and when, where and how customers share the content of communication messages generated by the company or consumers themselves (Bruhn, Schnebelen 2017).

Jefferson and Tanton (2013) opine that the loss of control and the inflow of content mark the importance of a comprehensive content marketing strategy. This constitutes yet another major IMC challenge. In order to successfully defend themselves in the uncontrolled social media space, businesses need to be able to provide customers with a consistent content that is topical and useful and meets the required quality standard (i.e., content adapted to the customers' needs and wishes). According to Preece (2001), in order to achieve this and generate an added value, the IMC concept needs to ensure that businesses constantly expand their content competence. This requires appropriate technical facilities, attractive presentation of information, and easy access to information. An ever-increasing supply of new media technologies (such as social media and mobile devices) provides alternative communication options that promote

multilateral dialogues among businesses and stakeholders (Mangold, Faulds 2009). These dialogue and network communications pose new strategic IMC challenges. The interactivity and mobility of means of communication now enables and encourages customers to become active content creators, weakening the corporate media control; yet at the same time, this new functionality enables businesses to use this content any time and engage in a direct personal dialogue with the target audience (Kaplan, Haenlein 2010).

Closely related to dialogue and network communication is multiple stakeholder management (e.g., of customers, employees, channel members, society, and suppliers). The task of IMC is to deliver its generated content to all stakeholders and integrate it in strategies, increasing the variety of the needs, interests and wishes to be served. However, the need for individualised communication and customised communication messages makes IMC more complicated, hindering a single and consistent communication process (Mulhern 2009).

Bruhn and Schnebelen (2017) argue that the changed circumstances on the market side and the customer side fundamentally affect the IMC concept in the social media era. In order to cope with the new challenges, IMC need to become customer-centric and thus require new mutually linked principles – in marketing research and practice.

Having developed evolutionarily over the last two decades, the concept of IMC now needs to develop structurally. Hence, the social media era necessitates IMC extensions beyond innovative communication tools, not limited to finding ways to integrate new media in the set of communication measures, but going deeper and affecting the company at all levels (e.g., organisational structure, internal and external communication, philosophy and goals). This includes the improvement of obsolete IMC concepts through new valid IMC concepts (Bruhn, Schnebelen 2017).

A relationship-based approach to IMC is particularly topical when facing the challenge of managing multiple stakeholders and making a customised dialogue and network communication in the social media epoch (Kaplan, Haenlein 2010).

Relationship communication requires development of new concepts capable of addressing communication and interaction among multiple stakeholders. Hence, in the social media era, IMC need to be relationship-oriented, focusing much of communication activities to the maintenance and management of the long-term relationship with all internal and external stakeholders (Shin 2013).

The task of IMC is no longer to popularise the company's products, brands and services in a consistent manner, but to present a story that makes the customer actively participate in the story-telling process (Bruhn, Schnebelen 2017).

The Internet is a cheaper way of distribution of communication than other ATL (*above-the-line*) marketing channels (TV, radio, press, etc.). Furthermore, in the globalised economy, with e-commerce and other services becoming a prominent business sector, it is not just a leisure activity, but an integral part of a business. In the context of sustainable development, the Internet is still developing and improving, with ever new e-businesses or online shops emerging.

The consolidation of the role of social media in the society has lead businesses to focus more on communication with people through these very means. For businesses, it represents an opportunity to save resources and time and to build a positive image, while the buyer can learn and follow any information of interest from anywhere in the world, discuss it with friends, seek opinions, comments, objections. The development of technologies and communication options open up new possibilities for businesses – to involve their consumers not only in the popularisation, evaluation or promotion of existing products but also in the creation of new ones. This is made possible by the development of smartphones, which makes for the growth of a new marketing communication environment – mobile applications, which not only give consumers quick and concise access to information on specific products and services but enable them to use those.

Based on the above, the authors find that “such current IMC development features as the Internet as marketing communication environment; digital promotion based on vast options of communication among consumers; an increased role of direct marketing in the creation of a loyalty system; a stronger link of marketing communications with buyers' market behaviour; selection of marketing communications based on stages of product life cycle etc.” (Praude, Bormane 2012) enable businesses to achieve sustainability goals in the current business environment. IMC development features manifest themselves

as trends and are affected by external environment factors, communication objects, and the specifics of the industry, businesses and products. It would be useful for businesses to increase the share of their marketing communication budget dedicated to direct marketing and personal selling, enhancing the role of personalised communications and developing communications with buyers based on their market behaviour at the relevant stage (Praude, Bormane 2012).

In the context of sustainability, businesses, through IMC, need to create the product consumption value – the need for sustainable products, sufficient information about them, deliberate and well-thought-out buying decisions, and the consequences of excessive consumption, waste quantity.

3 Integrated marketing communication tools classification

The author's previous research suggests that the *problem* of nowadays is not just “the country's economic development, the lack of support for domestic producers, paid work, jobs and job opportunities for people in Latvia, but also the environmental pollution caused not only by waste resulting from product use and packaging but also from poor-quality imported goods ending up as waste after a few times of use, harming the environment” (Bormane et al. 2017).

The concept of sustainable marketing has developed, encompassing changes not just in the process of production, supply and sale of products of a given company, but also in the economic management, thinking, and action of the whole society. When applying IMC, businesses need to focus on the education of consumers.

Consumers need to be further educated on the composition, origin and health impact of products, which can be effected through, for instance, product packaging, marking and labelling, and other marketing communications. These days, information on the product marking does not fully reveal its composition, quality, nutritional value, healthiness, origin, the reusability of packaging, the environmental impact of waste, etc.

Information pertaining to product marking, labelling, packaging and other key characteristics is governed by national legislation, government regulations, and other regulatory enactments. The state thus has tools to introduce changes binding to both producers and traders. The availability of information grows the knowledge of consumers and affects demand, also bringing changes to product assortment in stores. This is how the link between the consumer, the producer, the trader (retail chain), and the state is reflected (Bormane et al. 2018).

The application of IMC tools in the marketing strategy fosters the education of consumers and the enhancement of public awareness. The authors find that, while the sales figures of businesses may be affected by a variety of factors, it is IMC tools for sustainability that benefit the overall economy. Hence, the authors have for the first time made a classification of IMC tools. IMC tools have been classified into 8 groups for classic communication (80 pcs) and in the context of sustainability (105 pcs):

- 1) management tools for running a marketing management system and marketing strategy within IMC;
- 2) product-related tools for building the company's offering;
- 3) price-related tools for setting the overall pricing policy and system based on the company's market positioning;
- 4) promotion-related tools for making information available to consumers within and beyond the shop premises;
- 5) digital promotion-related tools for communication beyond the shop premises using the vast options of modern technologies;
- 6) staff professionalism- and selling-related tools for ensuring an effective personal selling;
- 7) corporate identity-related tools for building and strengthening the company's overall image;
- 8) geographical placement- and technology-related tools for improving the accessibility of the shop and the convenience of shopping.

The IMC tools for sustainability have been developed, collected and classified with a view to provide businesses with a marketing communication management system, promote the availability of ecological, domestic production, a conducive pricing policy thereof, the exchange of information, incl reaching large social groups, the assessment of product quality, and the mitigation of various risks.

An integration and complex application of various IMC tools has an impact on the company, the society, and the country alike. The company, for instance, could participate in building the public opinion

on environment preservation using such IMC tools as *proportion of products with environment-friendly packaging (that quickly biodegrades); price discounts on products with environment-friendly packaging; company information on the Internet and on the website, outdoor advertisements, advertisements in mass media, advertising stands and information in the company's newspapers and catalogues, salesperson advice etc. about the health and environmental impact of product packaging, waste; reuse, recycling and utilisation of packaging; charity initiatives in the context of sustainable development; availability of environment-friendly shopping bags etc.* Such an IMC approach ensures the involvement of all stakeholders – the communication of state and municipal institutions with the society (consumers and businesses), the communication of businesses with consumers and state institutions.

4 Companies' view on the creation of IMC for sustainable business development, analysis of the research

The authors have conducted extensive research to assess the use of marketing communications at Latvian food retail chains in order to highlight the role of IMC as a business management tool in the context of sustainable development. The improvement of business in terms of adhering to the concept of sustainable marketing involves not only such marketing tools as product offering, its quality, packaging, and packaging design, but also distribution and promotion. Thus, building the public attitude towards the importance of environment preservation, raising the level of public awareness and competence, fostering corporate social responsibility for consumer health, ecological products in general, and the role and contribution of green economy in the overall economic development.

The research was held in 2017 at Latvian food retail chain companies. The scientific purpose of the survey of leading specialists at Latvian food retail chains was to find out their opinion on the trends of development at their companies and a sustainable use of IMC in business. The authors developed, collected and classified IMC tools, and the experts were asked 1) whether the communication tools developed by the authors affect demand at the food retail chains; 2) whether the businesses use IMC tools for sustainability; 3) how IMC tools for sustainability affect demand; 4) whether the businesses intend to use IMC tools for sustainability in their marketing strategy within the next 3 years; and 5) how the use of IMC tools for sustainability would affect economic development, social responsibility, and environment preservation.

The results of the research showed that IMC tools for sustainability are usable as business management tools in the context of sustainable development. While the businesses have not yet used some of the IMC tools in their marketing strategy, those are still considered demand-increasing and conducive to economic development, environment preservation, and public wellbeing. The study also revealed that the food retail chain companies intend to use IMC tools for sustainability, especially those related to direct marketing and personal selling, enhancing the role of personalised communications.

The results of the research served as the basis in the development of a conceptual model of IMC for sustainable business development (see Figure 1), in the drawing of conclusions, and in the preparation of proposals.

The conceptual model of IMC for sustainable business development embodies the essence of IMC for sustainability – the integration of IMC tools with public wellbeing, environment protection, and balanced economic development, to increase the product consumption value. The peculiarity of this model is that, while the classic IMC approach enables businesses to reap communicational, economic and social benefits, IMC for sustainability also aims to help foster environment protection, public wellbeing, and economic development through changing the thinking and action of businesses and individuals. The authors stress that an integrated systemic approach enables businesses to receive feedback, especially if all stakeholders become involved in the process – the company with its marketing strategy, shown in the 1st level of the model, the public and its market behaviour (based on the influence of IMC tools for sustainability), shown in the 5th level, and the state that can not only educate and raise the awareness of businesses and consumers through reports, studies, assessments and other information, but also solve sustainability issues through regulatory framework. In the 6th(a) level of the model, the authors have shown the sustainability benefits from an integrated market management by the state, businesses, and the public.

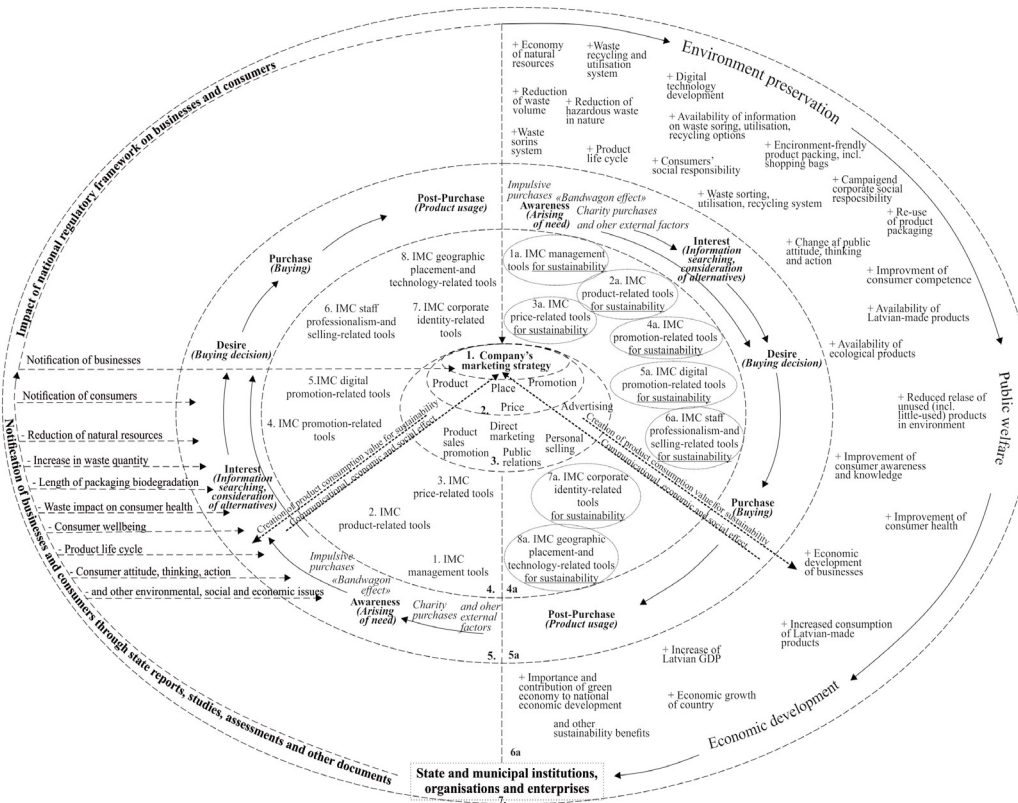


Figure 1. The conceptual model of IMC for sustainable business development (Source: model developed by the authors)

In Figure 1 the authors present the conceptual model of IMC for sustainable business development schematically showing six levels or stages of communication. The 1st level accommodates a company interested in communication with its consumers and a marketing strategy based on the marketing definitions in the scientific literature. The 2nd level features the generally accepted marketing mix or 4P (product, price, promotion, place), which, under a successful marketing strategy and having regard to the organisational goals, enable to build a closer and more valuable relationship with customers. Both the scientific literature and practical business have proven that IMC may be used for effective communication with consumers, so in the 3rd level there are the types of elements of marketing communication: advertising, sales promotion, public relations, personal selling and direct marketing, which help realise the company’s integrated marketing communication for sustainability.

In order to reach the company’s goals in communication with consumers, the IMC must be implemented through specific, customer-oriented IMC tools for sustainability as developed by the authors to increase the consumption value of a product or service for sustainability – economic development, public well-being, and environment preservation.

IMC for sustainability should be implemented through distribution channels (TV, radio, newspapers, the Internet, and other communication channels). Hence, 4) level four (a) of the model provides the groups of IMC tools for sustainability development by the authors 5) in level five (a) the authors have shown that through the said IMC tools for sustainability it is possible to reach the target audience and influence the buyers’ behaviour. The creation of a product consumption value for sustainability is focused on such stages of buyer behaviour as buying and product usage because it is at these stages of buyer behaviour that the essence of sustainability comes into effect. The authors stress that buyers may also make impulsive purchases based on a variety of surrounding incentives or external factors, rather than out of necessity. In such a case it might never come to product usage as a stage of buyer behaviour, the product may end

up in the trash bin and not contribute to environment preservation, social responsibility, and economic development.

Lastly, 6) level six (a) of the model shows the benefits gained from the use of IMC tools for sustainability in a marketing strategy. Successful implementation of the IMC process yields benefits – 1) economic, measured in money, for businesses – increased sales volumes, including an increased number of buyers, repeated purchases, etc.; for consumers – the product consumption value (functions, gains from usage, information) for the given price. Businesses can weigh their economic benefits by making calculations, for instance: the ratio between the company's market share and the share of marketing communication costs in the industry, the company's marketing communication costs against a 1% market share, the additional turnover gained from the implementation of marketing communication activities, the profit from the implementation of marketing communications against the costs of marketing communications, etc. A variety of methods, internal data, industry, data, grouping, comparison, etc. may be used for these purposes; 2) social – a satisfied consumer, corporate social responsibility put into practice, the company's image, reputation, associations, participation in charity events, etc. Social benefits are measured using social media research, sponsorship and its analysis, surveys, etc.; 3) communicational – brand loyalty, a high level of awareness and competence, the attraction of new buyers, the number of repeated purchases, etc., measured using such methods as polling, expertise, information collection, data processing, aggregation and analysis, observation, focus groups, etc.

For the company, the communicational, social and economic effect comes as feedback, but in the context of sustainable development, there is the effect on environment preservation. Saving of natural resources, reduction of waste, environment-friendly product packaging, etc.; social responsibility, which also raises the level of public wellbeing – an improvement of consumer competence, availability of Latvian-made ecological products, improvement of consumer health, change of public opinion, thinking and action, including increased consumption of domestic-made Products, etc.

In communication with consumers (current and potential customers) through IMC, businesses can work continuously, rather than in campaigns, to accomplish sustainability goals – economic development, social responsibility, and environment preservation. Each sector certainly has peculiarities in product selling, service provision, etc., yet there are also common market trends that apply to all industries. Hence, the author urges further market research, also covering product manufacturers that provide the product assortment.

5 Conclusions

With the development of technologies and the increased popularity of social networks, integrated marketing communications have moved from the telling and selling approach to one of listening and learning.

To raise the public's competence in the social media era, the marketing strategy of businesses should make use of integrated marketing communication tools that encourage consumers to get involved, share opinions, form social groups, etc.

The use of integrated marketing communication tools for sustainability enables a business to create the product consumption value – sufficient information for consumers and the need for sustainable products, deliberate and well-through-out buying decisions, buying, etc.

The implementation of a systemic approach in marketing communication generates feedback – the public's market behaviour based on the national regulatory framework, studies, assessments, reports, and accordingly the public's competence based on the economic, communicational and social effect of integrated marketing communications.

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