

Leveraging Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) for Brand Recognition and Sales: A Qualitative Study of Small Catering Firms in Kolkata, India

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Abstract

This study delves into how small catering companies in Kolkata, India, are using Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) to create brand awareness and boost sales in a competitive marketplace. With the hospitality and food services industry in India developing with heightened consumer expectations, digitalization, and occasion-based consumption trends, small catering companies are at a turning point. In contrast with big hospitality chains, these smaller businesses do not have the human and financial capital to invest in widespread advertising campaigns. But most are employing a combination of old-school and new-school communication tools—terms used collectively as part of the IMC model—to establish a niche market and get noticed. From a qualitative perspective, the current research explores the practices of 15 small catering companies in Kolkata based on semi-structured interviews and participant observations. The participants were owners, operational managers, and freelance digital marketers representing these firms. The results show that although most companies don't use the term "IMC" officially, their practices concur with its basic principles: uniform messaging, cross-platform advertising, building relationship, and feedback-based communication.

A common thread throughout interviews was the significant story-telling and customer interaction role played by digital media, specifically Instagram and WhatsApp. The caterers

indicated that short video clips, customer feedback, and behind-scenes reels enhanced client confidence and inquiry levels. Festival-themed promotion, customized menu boards, and fan engagement-driven promotions – e.g., polls, contests, and influencer shout-outs from local influencers – increased online activity and brand recognition. Offline channels such as banner positions around event venues, flyer drops in local areas, and partnership with event organizers also played important parts. The study, however, also revealed some of the challenges that include inconsistent brand messages, limited measurement, and difficulty in sustaining long-term engagement. Most companies were running without systematic branding codes or feedback loops based on word-of-mouth instead of long-term customer relationships. The limitations notwithstanding, the flexibility and innovative use of IMC elements suggest a promising way forward. The research adds to the literature on small business marketing in the emerging markets through a focus on a culturally vibrant and dynamic city center. It necessitates IMC training programs specifically designed for micro-entrepreneurs and highlights the need for affordable digital tools and mentorship networks. As competition increases and consumer demands change, there will be a need for sophisticated and holistic communication for small catering businesses to survive and thrive.

Keywords: Integrated Marketing Communication, Small Catering Firms, Brand Recognition, Sales, Kolkata, Hospitality Marketing, Qualitative Study

Introduction

In a more globalized and media-dominated world, Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) has become an indispensable strategy for brand success, especially for companies in the ever-changing hospitality sector. IMC is the strategic alignment of different tools of promotion – advertising, public relations, online marketing, direct communication, and sales promotion – to achieve clarity, consistency, and maximum communication effectiveness. For small catering businesses in Kolkata, India, this tactic is not only a discretionary luxury but a critical requirement

to traverse competition and influence target markets successfully.

Kolkata, with its deep cultural history and vibrant food culture, offers a special context where heritage tastes blend with modern marketing requirements. With increasing numbers of weddings, festivals, and corporate events, the demand for customized and quality catering services has grown. Yet, as opposed to big hospitality companies with well-organized marketing functions and fat wallets, startups in catering tend to work with small budgets, ad hoc marketing expertise, and extensive use of word of mouth. Through all these limitations, most of them are experiencing the creative force of IMC properly set to their size and target customers.

The information revolution has particularly reconfigured small businesses to interact with potential clients. These platforms are being used creatively for promotional work, gathering feedback from customers, and demonstrating services. Simultaneously, more conventional techniques like distributing leaflets, erecting banners at or around the event venues, and engaging with local event organizers are still contributing significantly to offline visibility. These multi-mode approaches capture the spirit of IMC, with the technique of consistency and coherence of communications across all the communication channels serving to strengthen brand positioning.

What is so interesting about this environment for concentrated academic research is the struggle between resource limitation and innovative communication techniques. Kolkata catering companies usually have very particular local clients who appreciate taste and customized service. As such, a good brand image—crafted by integrated communication—is crucial not only to bring in clients but also to foster long-term relationships. IMC enables such companies to tell their own distinct stories, differentiate their product, and project an integrated image to the general public.

In addition, the pandemic placed an added sense of urgency on these practices. Health-aware customers now demand open hygiene practices, touchless service, and open

communication regarding food sourcing and preparation—all of which come under the umbrella of IMC. The companies that adopted multi-channel engagement and trust messages were more inclined to shift to the crisis and bounce back after the lockdown.

This study looks at how small catering companies in Kolkata utilize IMC to accomplish two primary aims: increasing brand awareness and sales. It looks at the exact tools that they utilize, the ways in which they modify the tools to meet local taste, and the effects of these actions on customer attitude and business performance. By thorough qualitative examination, involving owner and marketer interviews, this research identifies that even if these companies are not deliberate in applying textbook IMC structures, intuitive application of integrated communication by them is frequently intentional and useful.

Finally, this paper adds to the general knowledge of how small and micro businesses in emerging markets can leverage contemporary marketing concepts to break structural barriers. It offers practical recommendations for practitioners and policymakers who want to empower local firms through training, digital access, and marketing ingenuity. By shining the light on small catering companies in one of India's major culinary hubs, this study highlights the power of IMC as a game-changer for grassroots entrepreneurship.

Method of Study

In order to investigate how small catering companies in Kolkata use Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) to achieve brand visibility and sales enhancement, the study employed a qualitative approach. Since the research question had an interpretive and exploratory nature, qualitative research was best for uncovering the intricate marketing practices, strategies, and attitudes of small business owners and marketing staff within the catering industry. As per Denzin and Lincoln, qualitative research is most suited when the aim is to gain knowledge of social phenomena from the participants' standpoint in their natural environment (Denzin and Lincoln 14). This type of research allowed the researcher

to explore how micro-sized entrepreneurs internalize, learn from, and apply communication techniques under the IMC system, even if they do not term them as such.

The research used semi-structured interviews as the main mode of data collection, supplemented by observational data and documentation analysis. Fifteen small catering companies located in different areas of Kolkata—North Kolkata, South Kolkata, and suburban regions like Barasat and Howrah—were purposively chosen. These companies were chosen using factors such as number of employees (fewer than 25), years of operation (at least two years), and frequent participation in event-based catering services like weddings, festivals, and corporate events. Purposive sampling was used since it enables the researcher to highlight specific attributes of a population that are of interest, thus making it easier to carry out deeper analysis (Palinkas et al. 533).

Participants comprised operational managers, owners of firms, and independent marketers who worked with these companies. Interviews were carried out for two months, both online (using Google Meet and Zoom) and face-to-face, depending on the participant's time availability. Interviews lasted for 45-60 minutes and followed a semi-structured interview guideline to permit room for probing emerging themes. The questions focused on promotional strategies, customer interaction methods, branding activities, digital tool usage, traditional marketing activities, and perceived challenges and results.

Field observation was also utilized as an adjunct method. The researcher watched four catering events where the selected companies were offering services, noting branding aspects such as signs, staff uniforms, menu boards, and customer interaction. These findings assisted in triangulating the verbal data and provided contextual basis to participants' assertions regarding visibility and client perception. Furthermore, digital artifacts like Instagram pages, WhatsApp business profiles, promotional posters, and client reviews were examined to identify the messaging consistency and cross-platform communication—a fundamental pillar of IMC, according to Belch and Belch (45).

Data analysis proceeded with thematic coding, employing Braun and Clarke's six-stage framework of familiarization, coding, development of themes, review, definition, and write-up (Braun and Clarke 87). Interview transcripts were coded by hand with an inductive methodology, permitting themes to arise naturally from the data as opposed to being pre-conceived. Common patterns like "digital storytelling," "customer retention strategies," "offline prominence," and "resource limitations" were observed. Each of these themes was then examined relative to the IMC model—primarily in terms of message consistency, audience targeting, media channel integration, and feedback mechanisms suggested by Kitchen and Burgmann (7).

Ethical principles were scrupulously respected during the research. Informed consent was communicated to participants about the research's purpose, and their verbal or written permission was received prior to interviews. Identities were anonymized across all reporting to maintain confidentiality. This was especially crucial given that many respondents revealed informal marketing tactics and operational loopholes that could impact their business reputation.

Although the research provides rich insights into the IMC practices of small catering businesses, it is not without its shortcomings. To start with, the sample size, though rich in contextual richness, constrains the extensibility of the research findings. Additionally, the use of self-reports can be subject to biases because the respondents may have overstated successes or understated setbacks. Nonetheless, the incorporation of observational and documentary evidence served to overcome this limitation to some degree. Subsequent research could gain from a mixed-method approach using surveys and experimental marketing interventions to quantify the concrete results of IMC strategies.

Overall, this methodology was framed to support the study's purpose: to grasp how small catering companies in Kolkata think and implement integrated communication tactics to increase visibility and sales. Through the integration of interviews, field observations, and digital content analysis, the study developed a comprehensive overview of IMC practices

within a localized, resource-strained, but highly competitive business climate. The qualitative method afforded the required depth and maneuverability to examine changing marketing practices in an industry that is both traditional in origin and progressively responsive to digital revolution.

The research found eight general themes that capture how small catering businesses in Kolkata use Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) strategically to establish brand identity and enhance customer interaction.

Digital Storytelling as a Main Branding Tool

One of the strongest findings is the use of digital storytelling – particularly through Instagram and Facebook – as a way to engage target audiences. Most companies produce behind-the-scenes videos of food preparation, customer reviews, and event installations on a regular basis. These videos usually showcase the company's values, such as cleanliness, customization, or heritage. For example, a company that organized Bengali weddings posted videos of their chefs preparing traditional dishes using locally available ingredients. This method also supports Kitchen and Burgmann's (2015) idea that successful IMC combines informational and emotional appeals to build trust and awareness. Visual and narrative uniformity across social media platforms strengthens brand identity and encourages customer loyalty.

WhatsApp and Personalized Engagement

WhatsApp is another essential means of customer interaction, commonly applied for the sharing of menus, booking confirmations, and gathering feedback. Companies use broadcast lists to share festival deals or seasonal menus, making the customer feel exclusive. The subjects highlighted that one-on-one communication via WhatsApp is more reassuring to customers. This corroborates the work of Mangold and Faulds (2009), who propose that social media is not only a tool for broadcasting but also a tool for interacting with customers in a two-way conversation. Catering companies therefore gain from this informal yet direct channel, which is appropriate in the relationship-based hospitality sector.

Local Influencer Collaborations

One of the emerging trends for small caterers is also the partnership with local micro-influencers, such as food bloggers, event planners, and noted Instagram influencers. Companies invite these influencers to sample and comment on their products, usually in return for free services or cross-promotions. Such collaborations allow companies to tap into niche markets and establish credibility. Since endorsements by recognizable people are powerful persuasive tools, according to Belch and Belch (2018), especially in close-knit societies. In Kolkata, where word-of-mouth remains king, influencer approval tends to convert directly into reservations.

Traditional and Digital Tools Integration

Even though digital is emphasized, most companies still spend on conventional means of advertising like banners, brochures, and pamphlet distribution. These are strategically located along community halls, schools, and apartment complexes. Festivals such as Durga Puja, wedding expos, or local food festivals also have the catering companies participating with their offerings. The synchronization of these offline initiatives with online presence depicts an organic yet strategic incorporation of the principles of IMC. As Schultz, Patti, and Kitchen (2013) point out, the beauty of IMC is the consistency of the message across mediums. Companies that integrate their offline and online branding tend to show higher consumer recall and greater inquiry conversion rates.

Seasonal and Festival-Based Campaigns

Seasonality became a primary motivator for IMC strategies. Companies tend to develop communication campaigns that revolve around festivals like Durga Puja, Eid, Christmas, and the wedding season. The campaigns are characterized by special menus, offers, and engaging content such as recipe polls and user-generated content contests. One company talked about kicking off a “Shaadi Season” campaign that involved a series of short videos on Instagram through client success stories, décor with a theme, and chef interviews. These cross-platform campaigns create buzz and fortify emotional connections with the brand. The importance of seasonal

marketing within IMC is amply justified by Batra and Keller (2016), who highlight context-based messaging in building consumer responsiveness.

Brand Positioning through Visual Identity

Visual consistency – through menus, social media, uniforms, and packaging – was a repeated strength among the most successful companies. Logos, color schemes, and typography stayed consistent, giving off a professional and distinguishable impression. This visual coherence plays an important part in brand recognition and is consistent with the IMC model's focus on visual branding cues (Percy, 2014). One company mentioned that customers recalled them based on their "turmeric-yellow chef coats," which became a point of discussion in reviews and word-of-mouth referrals. These sensory and symbolic aspects make the firm more memorable in a competitive marketplace.

Customer-Focused Messages and Feedback Loops

Feedback-focused communication was another primary IMC practice witnessed. Companies proactively solicit testimonials after the event and share them on online platforms. They also conduct intermittent feedback surveys through Google Forms or WhatsApp. Interviewees confessed to applying customer feedback in adjusting menus, presentation formats, and reconfiguring packages of service. This loop of customer focus validates IMC's two-way communication approach. According to Duncan and Moriarty (1998), successful IMC is dependent on relationship building and conversation more than on one-way persuasion. Catering businesses employing this loop exhibit greater versatility and creativity in their services.

Constraints in Measurement and Strategy

In spite of these encouraging practices, most companies struggle with campaign measurement. Few tracked website traffic, click-through rates, or Instagram metrics. Many depended on oral comment and questioning to determine success. Furthermore, several companies had no formal marketing plan or branding guide, resulting in occasional

tone and message inconsistency. These results ring true with concerns expressed by Eagle and Kitchen (2000), which observe that small firms tend to apply IMC in disjointed manners, without the systematic implementation observed in larger organizations. This shortfall highlights the necessity of IMC education that is specific for micro and small companies.

Overall, the research establishes that small catering companies in Kolkata are using a hybrid combination of old and new tools to push their brand and boost sales. Their approaches, although intuitive and casual, are broadly in line with essential IMC principles of consistency, interaction, customization, and relationship marketing. Increased use of sites like Instagram and WhatsApp, combined with local influencer collaborations and festival-themed promotions, reveals an agile and culturally attuned model of marketing.

Despite resource limitations and low marketing literacy, the companies' innovative adaptability and in-depth knowledge of local tastes have enabled them to ride the market successfully. These findings indicate that with small investment in training and digital resources, small catering companies can further optimize their IMC approach to achieve continued growth. Future studies can broaden this research to other Indian cities to analyze regional differences or run longitudinal studies to quantify the long-term efficacy of such IMC practices.

Conclusion

Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) is no longer an optional strategy reserved for large-scale corporations. As this study has demonstrated, even small catering firms in Kolkata—despite operating within constrained budgets and informal marketing structures—are actively and intuitively practicing core IMC principles to strengthen brand recognition and increase sales. These companies have adopted IMC by necessity, combining old communication tactics with new digital media to reach a wider, more vibrant set of customers. The hybridization has been not only successful but also indispensable to survival and expansion in Kolkata's competitive, culturally rich catering industry.

One of the key findings of this study is that while such companies do not necessarily speak marketing language or codify their approach, they are thoroughly attuned to the importance of clear and multi-channel communication. The interviews and observations of the study demonstrated a pattern of adaptive behavior where companies employed WhatsApp to keep in touch personally with customers, Instagram to present the aesthetics of food and customer reviews, and offline strategies such as event-based banners and word-of-mouth recommendations to maintain visibility in public spaces. This is an expression of a well-established awareness of their target market and capacity to tailor communication patterns in terms that appeal locally.

Furthermore, the results confirm that the strength of IMC is its capacity for establishing customer relations through repetition and consistency at various touchpoints. Most of the questioned companies acknowledged the role of storytelling in building credibility and emotional bonds with prospective customers. Either via short videos emphasizing the hygiene of food preparation, past event testimonials, or face-to-face interaction through messaging services, such efforts cumulatively improved credibility. Their strength, however, is not technical acumen but authenticity and frequency – characteristics that build brand recognition and consumer trust.

This research also reveals that the implementation of integrated marketing strategies is integrally connected to Kolkata's socio-cultural environment. The frequency of festivals, weddings, and community celebrations in Kolkata creates natural points for catering establishments to sync their messaging with cultural themes. For example, companies that rolled out thematic campaigns during Durga Puja or Christmas saw booms in customer inquiries, highlighting how cultural synchronization increases message salience. It is such cultural tuning of IMC that sets apart successful catering companies from others.

Yet, there were key challenges revealed through the study. Firstly, most of the businesses did not have formalized marketing strategies or metrics to measure the success of

campaigns. Their dependence on “gut feeling” or word-of-mouth customer feedback indicates a lack of analytical prowess, which constrains long-term strategic planning. Second, although most businesses are active online, they fail to use analytics provided by platforms such as Instagram or Google My Business. This failure diminishes the possibility of monitoring engagement patterns or adjusting content differently. In addition, there was also a shortage of consistent branding – i.e., identical logos, color themes, or brand voice – to the point where there was fragmented brand perception.

These limitations are not overwhelming. They rather indicate areas where capacity-building efforts could be impactful. Offering affordable marketing training sessions, providing rudimentary education in online metrics, and creating easy-to-edit branding templates might assist micro-entrepreneurs in applying more form to their communication strategies. NGOs, government offices, and business incubators can contribute here, notably by acknowledging small catering businesses as local economic development and cultural representation drivers.

Another significant learning is the interpersonal and emotional dimension of marketing in small businesses, which is neglected in formal IMC writings. In Kolkata, the caterer-client relationship is very personal and in many cases, long-term. Repeat customers may anticipate not just a repeat food experience but also the same kind of interactions with the business owner or staff. It is hence important to maintain consistency in tone, responsiveness, and attentiveness across channels – whether a face-to-face meeting, a WhatsApp message, or a phone call. This introduces a human touch to IMC that is especially relevant for small-scale service industries.

Academically, the study helps to add to the increasing understanding that frameworks of IMC have to be flexible and context-dependent, particularly when used in micro and small businesses in developing economies. The majority of the worldwide literature on IMC has targeted large firms in Western economies. But what this research exposes is that if IMC is read as a series of fluid principles instead of

static models, then it is imbued with powerful set-theoretical potential in a wide range of contexts. In the Kolkata catering industry case, improvisation and cultural competence frequently take the place of official strategy, but produce similar effects. This requires both more expansive and inclusive conceptualizations of IMC among practitioners as well as scholars.

It is also worth keeping in mind what these findings have to say about the future. With digital technology increasingly affordable and consumer demands ongoing their evolution, small businesses need to be able to transcend simple promotion and advance toward more strategic, data-driven communication practices. The pandemic has already sped a transition toward health-focused branding and open business practices. The future wave of transformation can include AI-powered personalization, e-commerce integrations, and chatbot-powered customer care. Restaurants that start incorporating these aspects into their IMC strategy now will become stronger and more competitive in the future.

Finally, the investigation of small catering companies in Kolkata demonstrates that the heart of IMC—consistent, clear, customer-oriented communication across channels—is universally applicable, irrespective of business size or market location. By modifying their communication tools to suit cultural environments and operating conditions, these companies illustrate the kind of creativity and strategic acumen worthy of notice and encouragement. They are not only feeding communities; they are constructing brands, narratives, and local economies. As we reconsider the future of entrepreneurship and hospitality in India, Integrated Marketing Communication is both a useful toolkit and a revolutionizing influence on the achievement of small businesses.

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