

UK LEVEL 7 — POSTGRADUATE / MASTERS



Integrated Marketing Communications: Strategy, Coherence and Channel Integration

A Critical IMC Audit and Strategic Framework — Case Study: Verdure Kitchen Ltd

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1. INTRODUCTION AND CASE OVERVIEW

Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) has evolved from a tactical coordination exercise into a strategic discipline that positions the firm's entire communication architecture as a core driver of competitive advantage. At the postgraduate level, IMC demands critical engagement with definitional debates, framework application and the empirical tension between theoretical integration ideals and the operational fragmentation realities of contemporary multi-channel media environments. This assignment critically examines the IMC strategy of **Verdure Kitchen Ltd** — a fictitious UK plant-based meal kit subscription brand founded in 2017, headquartered in Bristol, with £31m annual revenue and 85,000 active subscribers. Verdure Kitchen occupies the intersection of the premium meal kit sector and the growing plant-based food movement, competing against HelloFresh, Gousto and Mindful Chef. Despite an NPS of 71 and strong product satisfaction among existing subscribers, Verdure's unaided brand awareness sits at only 34% among its target segment (health-conscious urban adults aged 25–40, ABC1 socioeconomic classification) — against HelloFresh's 89% and Gousto's 76%. The IMC challenge is therefore one of awareness building and distinctive brand positioning, without disrupting the retention communications that sustain the current subscriber base.

Four theoretical frameworks structure this analysis: Kliatchko's (2008) audience-driven IMC definition; Fill's (2011) DRIP framework; Pickton and Broderick's (2005) 4Cs of IMC; and Lecinski's (2011) Zero Moment of Truth (ZMOT) model. These are applied sequentially to diagnose Verdure Kitchen's current communications position, evaluate strategic options and generate evidence-based recommendations.

The academic trajectory of IMC definitions reveals a progressive shift from firm-centric coordination to audience-centric orchestration. Schultz, Tannenbaum and Lauterborn (1993, p. 18) offer the foundational definition: IMC is "a concept of marketing communications planning that recognises the added value of a comprehensive plan that evaluates the strategic roles of a variety of communications disciplines and combines these disciplines to provide clarity, consistency and maximum communications impact." While seminal, this definition's limitation — identified by numerous scholars including Kitchen and Schultz (1999) and Duncan and Moriarty (1998) — is its producer-centred framing, which positions the consumer as a passive recipient of coordinated messages rather than an active, channel-agnostic participant in brand meaning-making.

Kliatchko (2008, p. 133) offers the most operationally complete contemporary definition, characterising IMC as "an audience-driven business process of strategically managing stakeholders, content, channels and results of brand communication programmes." This four-pillar framework — **audiences, channels, content, results** — is significant for Verdure Kitchen's situation in three respects. First, it places audience insight rather than message production at the strategic departure point, requiring the firm to map how its target consumers actually navigate information search and category evaluation before determining channel mix. Second, it explicitly includes stakeholders (not merely consumers) — acknowledging that Verdure's communications must address sustainability-conscious journalists, nutritionist influencers and retail partners alongside end consumers. Third, the results pillar mandates measurable accountability, preventing the common practitioner error of equating spend with effectiveness.

"The strength of IMC lies not in the number of channels deployed but in the degree to which each channel reinforces a single coherent brand proposition."

— De Pelsmacker, Geuens and Van den Bergh (2021, p. 6)

3. MESSAGE STRATEGY: THE DRIP FRAMEWORK APPLIED

Fill (2011) proposes the DRIP framework — **Differentiate, Reinforce, Inform, Persuade** — as a message strategy diagnostic that aligns communications objectives with the brand's competitive position and the consumer's stage in the decision journey. Unlike the reductive AIDA hierarchy, which implies a linear progression from awareness to purchase, DRIP recognises that different consumer groups require different communications missions simultaneously, and that effective IMC programmes must disaggregate these missions across appropriate channels.

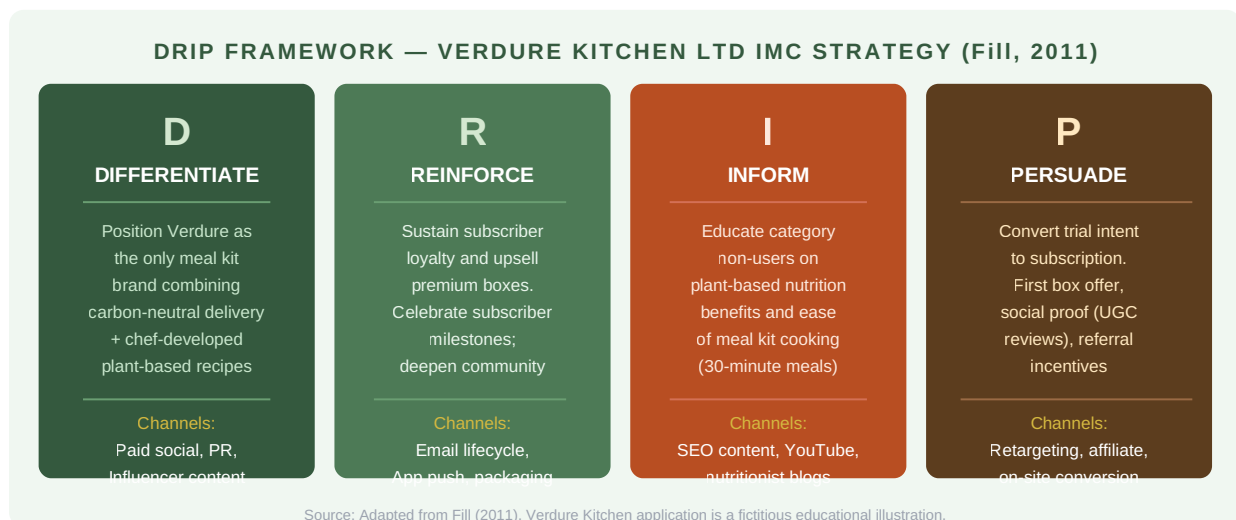


Figure 1: DRIP Framework Applied to Verdure Kitchen Ltd IMC Strategy. Each pillar maps a distinct communications objective to appropriate channel clusters. Source: Adapted from Fill (2011, p. 42). All data fictitious.

The DRIP analysis reveals a critical structural weakness in Verdure Kitchen's current communications architecture: it is performing the Reinforce and Persuade functions competently (lifecycle email, retargeting, referral programme) but significantly under-investing in Differentiate and Inform activities — the two functions essential to closing the awareness gap with non-subscribers. This finding aligns with Kitchen and Schultz's (1999) observation that most IMC failures occur not from poor execution within existing channels but from strategic omission of entire communications functions required to address different consumer stages simultaneously.

4. INTEGRATION ARCHITECTURE: THE 4CS FRAMEWORK

Pickton and Broderick (2005) propose that IMC programme quality should be evaluated against four diagnostic criteria: **Coherence**, **Consistency**, **Continuity** and **Complementarity**. These 4Cs provide an auditing lens that moves beyond the question of which channels to use and addresses the more strategically important question of how effectively channels and messages operate as an integrated system rather than isolated tactical efforts. Applied to Verdure Kitchen, the 4Cs reveal both strengths and material integration gaps.

Coherence — whether different activities logically connect to each other and to the brand strategy — is partially achieved by Verdure Kitchen. The brand's core proposition (carbon-neutral, chef-designed plant-based nutrition) is reflected coherently in packaging, email tone and website copy, but diverges in paid social executions that emphasise price promotion over provenance, creating a proposition gap between acquisition and retention communications. Madhavaram, Badrinarayanan and McDonald (2005) demonstrate empirically that coherence between brand identity and marketing communications is a primary predictor of long-term equity building — a finding that underscores the risk in Verdure's current approach of discounting as an acquisition mechanism, which may attract price-sensitive trialists incompatible with the brand's premium identity.

Consistency — shared tone, visual identity and core content across channels — presents Verdure Kitchen's most pronounced gap. The brand's tone-of-voice in email communications (warm, knowledgeable, purpose-driven) diverges from its Instagram aesthetic (polished food photography with minimal brand voice) and its performance marketing copy (urgency-driven, price-led). De Pelsmacker et al. (2021) identify visual and verbal inconsistency as the primary mechanism through which multi-channel IMC programmes erode rather than build brand associations, effectively spending media budget against brand equity.

Continuity — sustained communications over time — is structurally challenged by Verdure's seasonal campaign cadence, with elevated investment in January (New Year health resolutions) and September (autumn relaunch) creating significant awareness gap periods that allow competitor brands to consolidate top-of-mind positioning during the off-peak months. **Complementarity** — channels operating in mutually reinforcing configurations — is underdeveloped: Verdure's digital channels (paid social, SEO, email) operate within separate agency relationships with no shared dashboard or attribution model, preventing the cross-channel amplification effects that Tuten and Solomon (2017) identify as the primary advantage of genuinely integrated digital-physical IMC programmes.

5. THE COMMUNICATIONS MIX: CHANNEL STRATEGY AND AUDIT

Table 1: Verdure Kitchen Ltd — IMC Channel Audit (Current State vs Recommended State)

Channel	DRIP Objective	Current Investment	Current Limitation	Recommended Shift	Primary KPI
Paid Social (Meta, TikTok)	Differentiate / Persuade	High (38% of budget)	Price-led creative; weak brand signalling	Shift 40% of creative to brand-building storytelling (carbon journey, chef series)	Brand recall lift; CPM efficiency
Search (SEO + PPC)	Inform / Persuade	Moderate (22% of budget)	PPC terms dominated by generic "meal kit" — no category education content	Invest in informational content cluster (plant-based nutrition, quick vegan meals)	Organic impressions; ZMOT capture rate
Email & CRM Lifecycle	Reinforce	High (active, 18 sequences)	Sequences not segmented by subscriber engagement tier; batch-send cadence	Rebuild on engagement-triggered behavioural model; add churn prediction layer	Retention rate; upsell conversion; unsubscribe rate
Influencer / Creator Partnerships	Differentiate / Inform	Moderate (14% of budget)	Undifferentiated mid-tier food creators; no nutritionist authority voices	Shift mix to registered nutritionist creators and plant-based athlete ambassadors (micro: 10k–80k)	Earned media value; share of voice in plant-based category

Channel	DRIP Objective	Current Investment	Current Limitation	Recommended Shift	Primary KPI
PR / Earned Media	Differentiate / Inform	Low (8% of budget)	Reactive PR only; no strategic thought-leadership programme	Develop annual "UK Plant-Based Eating Index" proprietary data report as PR anchor asset	Tier-1 media placements; domain authority links
Packaging & Unboxing	Reinforce / Differentiate	Moderate (embedded in COGS)	Packaging under-exploited as communications medium; generic insert cards	Introduce personalised "Your Impact" insert (carbon saved, meals cooked, subscriber milestone)	UGC generation rate; social shares per delivery
Referral Programme	Persuade	Low (currently inactive)	Discontinued after high initial churn from referred cohort	Relaunch with brand-aligned gifting (first box free, not cash discount) to improve referred cohort quality	Referred subscriber LTV vs CAC ratio; 90-day retention of referred cohort

Note: All figures are fictitious and produced solely for educational purposes. Budget percentages are illustrative estimates only.

The channel audit in Table 1 reveals a pattern consistent with what Kotler and Keller (2016) describe as "the communications mix imbalance of the growth-stage firm": disproportionate investment in conversion-oriented channels (paid social, PPC) at the expense of brand-building and category education activities, which are the primary levers for closing awareness gaps and establishing long-term pricing power. The audit also exposes a structural complementarity failure — packaging, PR, referral and influencer channels are under-connected, each operating in strategic isolation rather than as components of a reinforcing system.

6. CONSUMER JOURNEY AND THE ZERO MOMENT OF TRUTH

The traditional stimulus–first moment of truth–second moment of truth model (Procter and Gamble, cited in Lecinski, 2011) assumed a linear path from advertising exposure to in-store purchase decision. Lecinski's (2011) Zero Moment of Truth (ZMOT) concept — grounded in Google's empirical research demonstrating that consumers conduct an average of 10.4 online research interactions before purchase — fundamentally disrupts this linearity and demands that IMC programmes treat the digital research environment as a primary brand experience rather than a secondary information source.

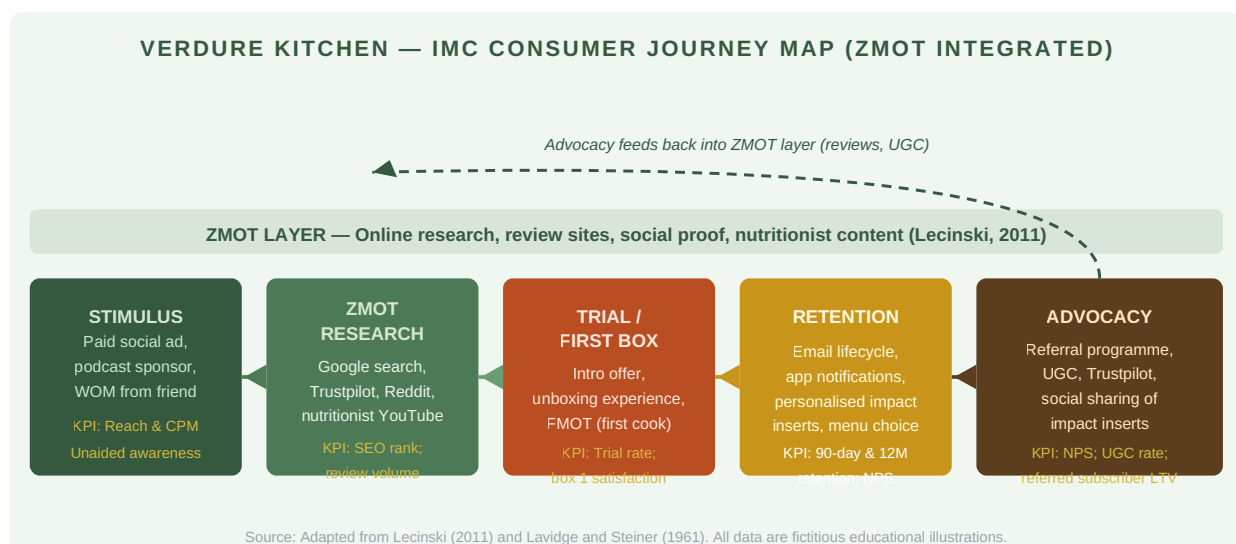


Figure 2: Verdure Kitchen Ltd IMC Consumer Journey Map with ZMOT Integration. The ZMOT layer operates as a parallel digital research environment intersecting all journey stages; advocacy outputs (reviews, UGC) feed directly back into the ZMOT layer for future consumer evaluation. Source: Adapted from Lecinski (2011, p. 8) and Lavidge and Steiner (1961). All data fictitious.

Figure 2 illustrates the critical strategic implication of the ZMOT model for Verdure Kitchen's IMC architecture: the digital research layer does not correspond to a single journey stage but functions as a continuous ambient environment through which consumers move iteratively across all stages — from initial category awareness through to post-purchase validation. A consumer who receives a friend's referral (Stimulus) will typically execute 4–7 search interactions (ZMOT) before committing to trial (Lecinski, 2011). Verdure Kitchen's current ZMOT presence is

characterised by insufficient SEO-optimised educational content (the primary format consumed during plant-based food research), an under-maintained Trustpilot profile with 214 reviews (vs Gousto's 38,000) and absence from the nutritionist and dietitian creator ecosystem that functions as a primary trusted source in the health-conscious consumer segment. Rosser Reeves' (1961) concept of the Unique Selling Proposition — adapted by Rossiter and Bellman (2005) into the contemporary "benefit claim hierarchy" — suggests that Verdure Kitchen's IMC content strategy must establish a clear, searchable, credible and ownable content position in the plant-based cooking education space to capture consumer attention during ZMOT interactions.

7. MEASURING IMC EFFECTIVENESS

The measurement of IMC effectiveness presents one of the discipline's most persistent theoretical and practical challenges. Lavidge and Steiner (1961) propose the hierarchy of effects model — in which consumers progress sequentially through Awareness, Knowledge, Liking, Preference, Conviction and Purchase — as a framework for mapping communications effects to measurable outcomes at each stage. While the linear assumption of this model has been substantially critiqued (Weilbacher, 2001; Barry, 2002), its value for IMC planning at the practitioner level lies in its insistence on stage-specific measurement: brand awareness metrics (unaided recall, aided recall) measuring the communications effect at the Awareness/Knowledge stages; attitudinal tracking surveys measuring Liking/Preference; and conversion and retention metrics measuring Conviction/Purchase and beyond.

For Verdure Kitchen, an integrated measurement framework should comprise three tiers: **brand-level metrics** (unaided awareness, brand associations tracking, NPS trajectory — measured quarterly via independent consumer panel); **channel-level metrics** (reach, frequency, engagement, CPM, CTR — measured continuously by channel); and **business-level metrics** (CAC, subscriber LTV, 90-day retention, revenue per subscriber — measured monthly via CRM). The

critical integration requirement — absent in Verdure Kitchen's current approach — is a unified attribution model that connects channel-level expenditure to subscriber LTV rather than first-touch or last-touch conversion, enabling genuine ROI evaluation of brand-building investments whose effects materialise across multiple months (Binet and Field, 2013).

8. CONCLUSION AND STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

This assignment has critically applied Kliatchko's IMC framework, Fill's DRIP model, Pickton and Broderick's 4Cs and Lecinski's ZMOT theory to Verdure Kitchen Ltd, revealing a communications architecture that competently executes retention and conversion functions but systematically under-invests in the differentiation, education and ZMOT-layer activities required to close the brand awareness gap that represents its primary growth constraint. The 4Cs audit demonstrates that while Verdure Kitchen communicates with reasonable coherence within channels, cross-channel consistency, continuity and complementarity are materially deficient — generating fragmented consumer impressions rather than the cumulative, reinforcing brand-building effects that sustained competitive differentiation requires.

STRATEGIC IMC RECOMMENDATIONS — VERDURE KITCHEN LTD

1. Restructure the communications mix toward dual-investment in

brand and performance: Allocate a minimum 40:60 ratio between brand-building (Differentiate/Inform) and performance/conversion (Persuade/Reinforce) communications activities, rebalancing the current overinvestment in paid conversion. Binet and Field's (2013) empirical analysis of 1,400 IPA case studies identifies the 60:40 brand-to-activation ratio as optimal for long-term profitable growth in subscription consumer categories.

2. Build a ZMOT content architecture in the plant-based nutrition

category: Commission a dedicated content cluster of 24 SEO-optimised educational articles, 12 nutritionist-authored recipe videos and one annual "UK Plant-Based Eating Index" proprietary research report. This positions Verdure Kitchen as the authoritative information source at the ZMOT

research stage, capturing consumer attention before category-level brand consideration is formed.

3. Implement a single cross-channel tone-of-voice and visual identity

framework: Resolve the consistency failures identified by the 4Cs audit by commissioning a formal IMC guidelines document (covering paid social, email, packaging, PR and influencer briefs) that specifies the brand's tone registers, visual hierarchy and message priority for each channel context — while permitting channel-appropriate adaptation within defined parameters.

4. Establish a unified measurement dashboard linking channel spend to

subscriber LTV: Replace the current siloed analytics model with a shared data infrastructure connecting paid media, CRM, website and customer satisfaction data — enabling true multi-touch attribution and empowering evidence-based budget reallocation between channels based on contribution to long-term subscriber value rather than last-click conversion.

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