**Multi-channel marketing - buzzword and must-have. But how does it actually work?**

If a company wants to implement multi-channel marketing, it must first ask itself the key question of "Where are we and where do we want to be?". Then, among other things, messages are specifically prepared for and assigned to particular channels.

Authors: Dr. med. Jörg Kohler and Thomas Gladisch, both from McCann Health

Multi-Channel-Marketing is a self-renewing process cycle that helps to continuously increase the understanding of the target audience and its communication preferences.

The cycle consists of **7 steps** that need to be constantly adjusted
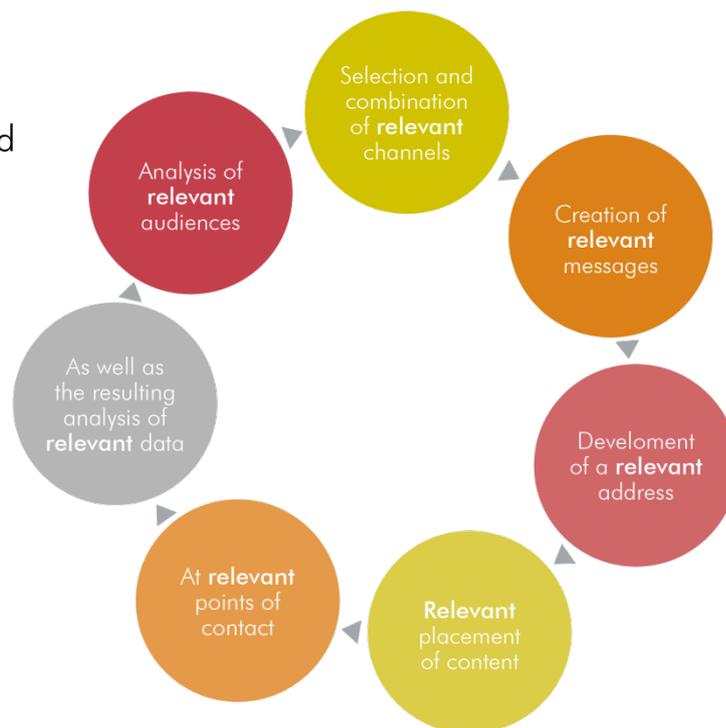
These days everyone is talking about multi-channel marketing (MCM). The ambition to implement MCM demonstrates a commitment to innovation and progress. It is apparent, however, that the understanding of what MCM actually means when implemented for companies often varies widely. This not only affects local marketing but also is a fundamental problem.

A key factor here is the often high internal importance of the subject: MCM is often understood as a means of reducing costs. By using various channels, the aim is to establish broader contact with the target group and communicate messages to the target group without the need for a supposedly expensive sales force. This is often based on a well-meant concept of service: The aim to reach the customer via the channel that s/he prefers best. This concept falters, however, when it is established, for example, that although the target group likes looking for information on the Internet, it does not like being contacted by companies via channels that it uses for private purposes (e.g. social media).

Brand management is required by the time the company management incorporates MCM as an action. A second factor comes into play here: The differences between what is understood and what is expected of MCM. Ultimately, to be effective, this needs to be anchored from the outset in a brand plan. It should be noted, however, that there is no one right way of looking at MCM. There simply needs to be agreement on the aim to use other channels (in addition to those already in use) that are also accepted by the target group. Finally, a target group analysis is required in each particular case to show which channels these are.

If the brand team is then ready to decide on actual MCM measures, a further factor enters into play: the maturity of the company. The extent to which a company can rely on technical and staff potential makes a difference to the possible and practical design of MCM implementation.

And so, before implementing MCM, the key question that always needs to be asked is: Where are we and where do we want to be? Those who answer this question realistically will come to the conclusion that success is achieved in small steps.

But what are these steps?

Finding the target group

The statement "We know our target group" is undoubtedly one of the most common misjudgments in marketing. In order to employ MCM correctly, it is essential to find out about the target group but not just from one source. Since there is no such thing as "the" target group, however, channels need to be found to gain as concrete a picture as possible of the desires and requirements of, in particular, parts of the target group that are not directly accessed by the sales force. A mix of experiences at relationship level (e.g. insights of the sales force) and "hard facts" (e.g. market research/CRM data) is therefore helpful in bringing the picture of the target group into focus.

It should be kept in mind, however, that target group analysis can also reveal that some parts of the target group may not be considered in the planned communication. There may be numerous reasons for this, including simple accessibility for communication (for example, opt-ins) as well as the economic benefit expected from communication with the target group.

Channels for the target group

One of the first things many people think of on the subject of MCM is that it is about distributing product messages via as many channels as possible. Although this is not wrong, it does not take into account the fact that quantity is not the same as quality. Two factors are crucial in bridging this gap:

On the one hand, there is the aim of the communication. If the aim is purely to increase the visibility of the company's own product, a larger number of channels should be considered than if the aim is to transmit product-specific content in a targeted manner which is not possible through every channel. While some channels are ideal for increasing visibility, in some circumstances, however, they are less suitable due to their characteristics (e.g. display format) to portraying complex content in a way that makes sense to the user.

On the other hand, of course, the target group's preference is always the first priority. Especially in the case of extremely heterogeneous target groups, it is difficult to use all the major channels without coming across as arbitrary. The problem of arbitrariness when selecting channels can easily be avoided, however, by organizing the channels sequentially rather parallel to each other. This requires the clear selection of a manageable number of channels that are relevant to the target group. If this selection is clearly presented and tracked in a contact point plan, it can serve as a useful tool for displaying the thematic sequence of contacts and supporting communication on the customer side as well as coordinating with the agency.

Messages for the channels

Messages must be relevant to the target group – there is a basic consensus on this.

However, the relevance of a message is not just about its content. Underlying every product are, of course, key messages that describe its characteristics. These messages are, however, usually created depending on the channel and media used, i.e. they do not scale from a website to a conference or a presence on social media.

It makes sense to coordinate the messages with the various channels as early as in the positioning process. This, however, would require the selection of channels to remain the same. The key statements of the messages can be enhanced with channel-specific content or media types without "squeezing" and therefore distorting the original statement into the channel's characteristics and making it uninteresting to the target group. This is not just about "retro-fitting" the message but about the content of the statement: it is no secret that messages that are excessively commercial are rigorously rejected.

Accordingly, the messages should be designed in line with the requirements of the channel. So, for example, the attempt to break down a PR report of several pages into a brief news format is bound to fail. The communication can thus only be successful if the characteristics of the selected channel are known and taken into account. The relevance of the content of the messages to the target group is clearly always the first priority and must not be neglected by the characteristics of the channel.

Beyond the channel

A good selection of channels is not enough in itself to establish successful MCM in product communication. Rather, the channels must be broken down according to the touchpoints that the target group can have with the product within the channel.

The easiest way to illustrate this is with the well-known "digital" channel: Strictly speaking, digital just means that the information is not in a tangible format. Where and how this information is used is not defined—digital is simply a way of transmitting information. So if the sales force transmits messages, it can do this by both analog and digital means. In this instance, for example, information can be transmitted via the touchpoints of a feedback card and an iPad sales presentation. Every channel should therefore be checked to establish which content can be placed on which touchpoint in order to generate the greatest possible relevance to the target group.

Understanding and starting anew

By the time the first touchpoints are used by the target group, it is too late to consider how well the communication is being received and perceived by the target group.

For the marketer, on the other hand, this means that any communication needs to be planned so that it can be assessed at a later stage. Assessing the success of an action is the key to the continuous optimization of the channel and the choice of touchpoint as well as the development of messages. In this way, the process cycle can be started anew in the next step, but this time with a more exact supporting database than in the previous cycle.

Summary

There is certainly no single means of MCM that can act as the new panacea to customer communication for every company and every product. Rather, it is a process that is subject to continuous development by gaining knowledge about oneself and one's customers. MCM is ultimately about targeted communication with relevant target groups via various media. This includes analysis of the right channels, contact points and measures. Based on this analysis, the key content is produced and positioned in the right places—in coordination with each medium and addressee. The only way to ensure the messages are received successfully is through the continuous optimization of all efforts. So, a collection of channels becomes a selection of touchpoints that are relevant to the target group and MCM becomes MTM – multi-touchpoint marketing.