

# **INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATION FOR SME'S ORGANIC FERTILIZER: THE CASE STUDY OF MEN-NGERN**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Agriculture is an important economic sector in Thailand. However, the use of modern marketing concepts has been scant in this area especially for the small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). This case study is, therefore, intended to illustrate how a small agricultural business entrepreneur can use the integrated marketing communication concept to develop and improve its business for liquid organic fertilizer branded "Men-Ngern." Given the limited financial and human resources, the firm needs to review its current marketing communication practices which consist of advertising, public relations, personal selling and sales promotion and consider what IMC strategy could be adopted based on the relevant environmental factors and consumer behavior.

## **INTRODUCTION**

IMC is evidently an important development in marketing. In fact, several organizations view IMC as a critical competitive tool (Weilbacher 2001). Many people view IMC as the act of combining marketing communication tools together and make them look alike. In other words, IMC is considered an attempt to integrate and synthesize its promotional mix (e.g., advertising, sales promotion, public relation, personal selling, event, and direct marketing) so that advantages of one tool will offset the disadvantages of others (cf., Kitchen et al 2004). For example, while advertising are appropriate for reaching large audience, creating brand awareness, and changing attitude and brand image (Duncan 2008) in a relatively one-way communication, personally selling works best when the objective is to reach specific target groups, and persuade them for behavioral responses such as purchase through the use of two-way communication.

The nature of business, the development of market, and the required investment by business and support possibly provided by the relevant organizations are critical in the formulation of an IMC strategy (Kitchen et al 2004). In this article, one aim is to study how the IMC concept has been implemented for an SME in an agricultural business in Thailand.

The agriculture sector is an important driver of Thailand's economy system. However, the use of modern marketing concepts has been scant in this sector (cf., Polyorat & Mualmontri 2009). This phenomenon is particularly pronounced for the small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) which seem to lack the understanding and know-how to apply the concepts of marketing communication into their business. This study is, therefore, intended to examine how a small agricultural business entrepreneur can integrate the concepts to develop and improve their business.

It is thought that the results from the current study will demonstrate that IMC may be beneficial to business in several ways (Caywood 1997; Kim et al 2004). That is, IMC may increase the firm competitiveness through the use of several new marketing communication strategies as the use of traditional media alone may now not always be the most effective approach while the information technology is under rapid change. In addition, the firm's need to keep pace with on-going changes in more diversified consumer lifestyle may require the use of more elaborate and faster communication approaches, one of which could be through the use of IMC.

## **METHOD**

Several methods were used for data collection. In-depth interviews were conducted with the firm management and consumers. A number of observations were conducted with the product usage. Documents from various sources including, for example, the firm documents, promotional materials, websites, newspapers and trade magazines in agriculture were analyzed.

## **FINDINGS**

Data from interviews with the the firm management provide insights regarding the company background. Specifically, Kun is an entrepreneur and manager of Men-Ngern organic liquid fertilizer business, which has been operated for 5 years. Men-Ngern has a production facility in Chiangmai while the major markets are in the northeastern region. This fertilizer is produced by fermenting micro-organism. The product is harmless to farm soil.

Throughout the operation since the beginning, Kun has attempted to implement marketing communication concepts so that the product could be accepted and trusted from customers. Advertising, public relations, personal selling and various marketing activities have been used. Nevertheless, these marketing communication strategies used by Kun can simply slightly increase sales while the marketing expenses have been increased by up to 20-30%. Kun has already incurred lost for a certain period of time.

Kun has an impression that if his business keeps on operating at a loss, it may not survive. Kun, therefore, is trying to search for marketing communication approach that will make Men-Ngern more popular in the market. The idea of using more integrated marketing communication has come to his mind. After an initial discussion with some marketing people, he finds out that integrated marketing communication (IMC) reflects the use of various forms of marketing communication tools including advertising, public relations, personal selling, and sale promotion to persuade and influence consumers' cognition, attitude, and behavior.

## **FIRM AND PRODUCT BACKGROUND**

Data from interviews with the firm management and content analysis of the firm documents provide a good start for the understanding of the background of the firm, its owners, and its product.

Kun, a young, small entrepreneur in his late twenty, has college education from one of the country's leading universities in agriculture. He is actively looking for a new opportunity in agricultural business. One day, he meets one of his senior, Ton, who graduated some time before him. Ton has researched microorganism to develop organic fertilizer. Kun found this product interesting and is likely to have business potentials. Kun views that the present-day agriculture increasingly uses fertilizers and chemicals. People, thus, are forced to consume more chemicals via agricultural produce. With the advent of organic fertilizer, farmers can reduce the extent to which they use inorganic fertilizer. As a result, Kun decides to partner with Ton. The capital of Men-Ngern is 2 million baht. They register the business as a limited partnership. The factory and headquarter is located in Chiangmai. Kun is responsible for the management and marketing tasks of this organic liquid fertilizer branded "Men-Ngern" (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Organic Liquid Fertilizer Branded “Men-Ngern”**



Men-Ngern is an organic liquid fertilizer in green color and contains no sediment. It must be diluted with water before use. The stock life is long. The product is in 1-liter plastic container. This fertilizer is produced by fermenting micro-organisms with molasses through biotechnology. Five uses of this micro-organic product cover the domain of vegetables, agronomy, fruits, flowers, and water treatment. The major nutrients include nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium. The secondary nutrients are calcium, magnesium, iron, zinc, copper, and manganese. Kun positions Men-Ngern as a medium-priced, organic liquid fertilizer with complete nutrients. It can substitute chemical fertilizer up to 90%.

Kun sets the business mission as a producer and seller of products that support the approach of natural agriculture. The aim is to increase farmers' level of life quality and status. In addition, the business also attempts to improve consumers' healthiness. The 5-year goal is to be a leader in organic liquid fertilizer with highest market shares in three northeastern provinces. In addition, Men-Ngern is aimed to be the first choice for farmers who want to reduce the use of chemical fertilizer and switch to organic fertilizer, instead.

In terms of management, Kun sets the organizational structure by dividing it into 3 divisions as follows.

1. *Production division.* There are 5 people including 3 permanent staff and 2 casual staff. The positions are production manager, production officer, driver, and packaging staff.
2. *Marketing division.* There are 4 people including marketing manager, direct sale staff, agent sale staff, and agriculture expert.
3. *Finance and administration division.* There are 4 people including finance and administration manager, accountant, and factory administration staff.

Kun's primary target group of consumers is farmers with farmland of at least 100 rai for commercial purpose while those with less than 100 rai are the secondary target group.

In the past, Kun conducted market tests in several demonstration farms in Khonkaen, Chiangmai, Lumpoon, Nakornsawan, Uthaitanee, Roi-Et, Nakornratchasima, Kalasin, Mahasarakam, Trad, and Phattalung.

## **BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT**

Data from trade magazines and websites in the agriculture area provide a big picture for the business environment, market situation, and competition situation relevant to organic fertilizer. In addition, to get a better understanding of these external variables, agriculture experts, marketing experts, product users, and the firm management were consulted.

Agriculture is the main occupation of the majority of Thai people. Consequently, agricultural market is enormous. Several merchandises are used during the agricultural process: for example, fertilizer, plough and other agriculture machinery, chemicals including pesticide, insecticide, and herbicide, and hormones to accelerate plant growth. Fertilizer is one primary product to be used with farming. If the fertilizer price is high, the cost of agriculture is inevitably high, as well. Nowadays, farmers have an increasingly high production cost. Moreover, when they sell their produce, middlemen often try to lower the farmers' selling price. This results in farmers barely making any gains from their occupation.

On top of that, the soil quality is deteriorating due to the use of various chemicals which are not suitable with the real need of the soil, together with the users' lack of knowledge and expertise. Moreover, a number of agricultural activities are dangerous to the quality of the soil surface, for example, the frequent burning of weed and stump, and the lack of structural improvement of the soil quality (by using manure and other organic substance, the widespread of chemical fertilizer). All of these practices result in the lower level of output, the hardened soil which can absorb less water, and severe lack of necessary nutrients for plant. Although farmers use more fertilizers in their farms, the produce does not increase proportionately, or even decrease. All these result in higher cost, which in turn render in insufficient income. Many farmers even incur loss from their operation.

The fertilizer developed by Kun's company can help farmers to increase their productivity. Therefore, Kun and his senior form the BioFarm to produce the organic liquid fertilizer to cater to farmer's need. The aims are to stop nature destruction and improve soil quality and fertility. The idea is to make farm soil similar to the one after freshly clearing the forest. The so-called fresh soil does not need much fertilizer, yet can be very fertile and productive for planting. This is because the soil has accumulated a lot of organic matters and still have microorganism critical for the decomposition of organic matters and turn them to be fertilizers for plants. The results include primary and secondary nutrients which encourage productivity, color, flower, sprout, disease and insect prevention. The final outcomes include sustainability, lower cost, safety and less world pollution.

## **MARKET SITUATION**

At present, fertilizer markets are growing in many angles. Fertilizers can be primarily classified into two categories: organic fertilizers and inorganic fertilizers. Organic fertilizers include manure, compost, bat's dung, ground bone, and dry blood. Inorganic or fertilizers are those from non-living things such as stones and minerals or those from synthesis. These include urea fertilizer, ammonium sulfate fertilizers, ground phosphate stone, and those chemical fertilizers with different formulae.

Fertilizer is needed by farmers. Fertilizer with higher growth nowadays is organic fertilizer. This is because consumers/people are more concerned with health than in the past. As a result, plants grown with inorganic fertilizers (for example, urea and other chemicals) are less welcome from consumers. Therefore, more farmers turn to organic farming.

Data from the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperative Agriculture indicate that nowadays there are more than 6,000 farmers who conducted 100% organic farming, with the total amount of land higher than 200,000 rai. At the same time, there are 746,420 farmers who are trying to reduce the use of

inorganic fertilizers and increase the use of organic fertilizers, with the amount of land equivalent to 30,287,322 rai.

In terms of liquid organic fertilizer, the market size is 10,000 tons in 2005 with an average annual growth of 10-15%. It is expected that the market size will reach 16,105 tons in 2010.

The Northeast region has the highest demand for fertilizers. It is estimated that the growth of fertilizer demand is around 4%. The main crops grown in this region include sugar cane, rice, cassava, and corn. The area of these 4 crops in this region is approximately 6.44 million rai, representing about 35% of the whole country.

## **COMPETITIVE SITUATION**

There have continually been new players in the organic fertilizer market. This reflects in the influx of new product names from both big and small players. This trend represents threats to Men-Ngern's marketing efforts as Men-Ngern is a small enterprise with limited financial and human resources. Furthermore, more competitors imply more farmers' alternative as they can switch to new fertilizers as they wish. In this regard, farmers appear to have high bargain power especially when each brand of organic liquid fertilizer is not much different since the main ingredient is the micro-organisms which are not difficult to find. Only the minor ingredient of each brand is different. Farmers can readily switch to the less costly brand. Each fertilizer, then, must use marketing techniques to distinguish its brand from others and communicate the unique selling point of their brand. In addition to direct competitors, Men-Ngern also faces a situation where some groups of farmer even work together to produce organic liquid fertilizer to use in their groups to reduce farming cost.

Concerning the market for organic liquid fertilizer, Men-Ngern has numerous direct competitors who have similar organic liquid fertilizers. Some examples are the following brands: Alex 500, Bio Thai, Bio Fertile, D4, and Khun Nai. In addition, Men-Ngern is also faced with the indirect competition from chemical fertilizers which cover 70% of the overall fertilizer marketing share. The brands of chemical fertilizers include, for instance, Hua Wua Kun Tai, Kratai, Ruebai Viking, Pui Hang Chart, and Ma Bin.

An example of direct competitor is the organic liquid fertilizer branded "Bio Fertile" which has similar products to those of Men-Ngern. In addition, Bio Fertile has special formulas for insect-repelling, trunk-enriching, and size-enlargement. For example, the insect-repelling formula can repel insects that are the enemy of plants. The result is very noticeable with gold houseflies, and the full age flies of all kinds of plant worms. The trunk-enriching formula is composed of primary and secondary nutrients. It also contains natural hormones in the form that can be instantly used by plants. This formula can stimulate the production of leaves and flowers. It restores the trunk and promotes the growth of trunk and output. It also strengthens the stems of flowers and fruits, thus preventing them from dropping down. This fertilizer is made from natural substance and thus does not damage leaves and peels. It can be used with all kinds of plants and in all stages of plant life. Its lack of chemicals means it is safe for plants, users, and consumers. It is more economical than chemical fertilizers because it is fertilizer, natural hormones, and insect repellent, simultaneously. The size-enlargement formula's main qualification is increasing the quantity, quality, and size of fruit. It also improves colors, smoothes peels and makes them shine. It also increases the fruit pulp, make it bigger, and heavier.

Under the intensely competitive situation, all the fertilizer producers try to maintain their market shares by using many marketing communication strategies. For example, TV commercials are used to persuade the target customers, emphasize and remind consumers of the product and its quality. Other forms of marketing promotion are also used to make target consumers to switch or try their products.

## CURRENT MARKETING COMMUNICATION PRACTICE

Data from interviews with the firm management and firm's promotional materials were used to identify the current marketing communication practice. Overall, the results indicate a variety of communication tools used by this product.

### Advertising

Kun uses several media to advertize the product as follows;

*Brochure:* Kun has employed pamphlets or brochures which are distributed when Kun makes a field trip to see prospect customers. The brochure is also distributed in public places and in exhibitions. The brochure provides the basic introduction of the product, followed by its benefits and the occasion under which the products can be used. Mostly important, the brochure also indicates how a farmer can earn more profits from using the product. The brochure will also be used when Kun conducts an on-farm demonstration.

*Billboard:* Another type of out-of-home media used by Kun is billboards or vinyl posters. Kun places the billboards in the following locations: public pavilions in villages, roads to markets, roads to temples, and the farms adopting the products. These billboards are all posed in the easily distinguishable points. Examples are provided in Figure 2, Figure 3, and Figure 4.

**Figure 2: Billboard/Poster (1)**



Figure 3: Billboard/Poster (2)



Figure 4: Billboard/Poster (3)



*Announcement Truck:* The kind of transit media is used by Kun to reach the target farmers to announce the product messages in several different locations. Kun uses this method because he wants the farmer to be able to see and hear the message when the truck is moving.

The message broadcast via the truck is:

*“Dear all the farmers: rice farmers, vegetable farmers, fruit farmers, and all kinds of farmers. Today, Men-Ngern liquid fertilizer is coming to you and your village. The fertilizer is coming to help you to make more profit. Men-Ngern liquid fertilizer is made from natural micro-organism, not chemicals. After you use Men-Ngern, your crops will be growing very well. The fruit will be big. The leaves will be big. Let’s try it. We guarantee that Men-Ngern is safe, worthy, and profitable. Men-Ngern liquid fertilizer returns life to earth, improve life of farmers.”*

## **Public Relations**

Kun uses public relations to build good relationships with farmers as well as with other stakeholders. Men-Ngern liquid fertilizer uses two main types of public relations: interviews and PR events. Kun always grants an interview when he is approached by media: Most of the times, the interview occurs with agriculture magazines such as Muang Mai Pol (City of Fruits) and Puk Settakrit (Economic Vegetation). The content provided in the interview and appearing in these media often includes: (1) how the product can improve the soil quality, (2) the benefits from each kind of micro-organism in Men-Ngern, and (3) Kun’s telephone number and contact address in case magazine readers are interested and want to have more information. Kun uses PR events in conjunction with personal selling. In most cases, Kun organizes the event by himself. These events include (1) a seminar to give a lecture to farmers, and (2) sponsors of prizes to various social activities. It is expected that these events will elicit farmers’ more favorable attitudes toward Men-Ngern. These public relation activities are illustrated in Figure 5 and Figure 6.

**Figure 5: Public Relation Activity (1)**



**Figure 6: Public Relation Activity (2)**



## *Personal Selling*

Kun conducts the field work by himself to better understand farmer's need through interpersonal communication. This is often the most effective way to promote the product. This is because, in addition to the explanations and sale offer delivered by Kun, he also has a chance to hear various kinds of problems from farmers. Consequently, he has a chance to solve the problem or clarify any misunderstanding farmers might have. To extend the business, Kun hires salespeople to visit small-sized farmers. These salespeople will use the same approach as used by Kun (Figure 7). The use of his own sale force alone, however, may not be able to cover the market. Therefore, Kun decides to have dealers (fertilizer shops) to distribute the product to cover all areas in a cost-effective manner as the use of his own sale force alone will be very costly.

**Figure 7: Personal Selling**



## **Sale Promotion**

Kun use sale promotions to persuade farmers to do the buying decision more easily and to help the dealers to increase their sale volumes. So far Men-Ngern has used six kinds of sale promotions.

1. *Discount.* Kun uses discounts as a tool to persuade farmers and dealers. For farmers, Kun used discount to collaborate with other integrated marketing communication (IMC) tools. For example, after the product demonstration is finished, Kun will give special offers to farmers such as “Today, if you buy at least 5 bottles, you will get 20% discount right away. Normally 5 bottles will cost you 1,500 baht. But today, you will pay only 1,200 baht only.” This discount scheme will be used only for the first time of the demonstration to farmers. Trade discount will be offered when dealers place big orders: 6 box (or 72 bottles) order will get extra 3% discount and 10 box (120 bottles) order will get 5% discount.

2. *Demonstration Farms.* This integrated marketing communication tool is used to increase farmers' confidence in the product. Kun arranges a demonstration farm in a portion of a farmer's land. When a farmer starts to grow a crop, Kun will approach that farmer and ask if he could use a small piece of farmer's land. Kun will offer the free product trial to that farmer by applying Men-Ngern for free in that piece of land. After the crops grow and the harvest time is reached, Kun will visit the farm to check and point out the differences between the portion of farm that uses and does not use Men-Ngern. Figure 8 illustrates a demonstration farm.

**Figure 8: A Demonstration Farm**



3. *Money Incentive for Sale Force.* This tactic is used when Kun wants his sale forces to reach the sale target. For example, if a salesperson can find three new dealers within a month or when a salesperson can sell up to 100 boxes, special bonus will be given.

4. *Credit Provision.* This is somewhat risky method but it is quite effective in boosting sales. The credit will be given to end-user farmers and to the dealers. For the farmers, the limit is 10-20 bottles. Farmers will get the product to use in their farm and make the payment after cultivation. For dealer, credit term of 15-30 days is provided.

5. *Sample.* Product sample is used to stimulate product trial. The sample will be distributed when the sale forces go to the fields. This is often used when farmers show some interest but not to the extent that they decide to buy the products.

## **CONCLUSION**

Kun is a young entrepreneur of a small-sized, recently-established company. Their product is liquid organic fertilizer branded "Men-Ngern". Product awareness, image, and sales are lower than expected. Given the limited financial and human resources, he needs to do his best for the desired marketing communication practices. He must decide what he should do in terms of IMC based on the relevant environmental factors and consumer behavior.

So he may need to seek some advice regarding how to conduct their marketing communication practices more effectively in order to boost the sales. He should understand that while sales represent the ultimate target, to achieve this, however, may require the changes in consumers' cognition and attitude before behavioral response (purchase) can occur. A number of hierarchy of effect models such as AIDA (Strong 1925), Hierarchy-of-effects model (Lavidge and Steiner 1961), or Innovation adoption model (Rogers 1962) may need to be taken into consideration to turn the marketing communication efforts into sales. The AIDA model, representing the stages through which a sales representative and a consumer go in the personal-selling process, approaches the consumer response in four stages: attention, interest, desire, and action. The Hierarchy-of-effects model delineates how consumers respond to advertising in six steps: awareness, knowledge, liking, preference, conviction, and purchase. In the Innovation Adoption model, consumer responses progress from awareness to interest, evaluation, trial, and adoption.

In addition, the firm must do more than bundling promotional mix tools together and goes more than simply creating the one-voice communication (cf., Kitchen et al 2004). In fact, there is a need to move beyond tactical promotional component to strategic marketing communication. As IMC represents a process of developing and implementing various forms of communications to persuade consumers, the goal of Men-Ngern is thus to influence the cognition, affect, and behaviors of the target market. The firm must inevitably reconsider all sources of brand contacts with consumers and may start working from here. That is, the firm should beginning with examining consumers' needs and wants and then works back to determine the appropriate form of communication, message, and channels that which be most effective (Schultz 1993).

Furthermore, there remain a number of questions to consider including (cf., Swain 2004): (1) who should assume the leadership role in the development and practice of IMC?, (2) how the success of IMC program should be measured?, and (3) what will be the role of external supporters (e.g., advertising agency)?. These questions need to be answered so that formulation and implementation of the IMC strategy can be conducted more effectively and efficiently.

This case study, however, has a number of limitations which therefore suggest avenues for future studies. First, the present study focuses on one specific firm. Future research therefore may seek to study a marketing communication practice of SMEs in other firms in this industry. The research in this line will provide a better understanding of opportunities and constraints for SME in a broader perspective. Next, other elements of marketing mix including product, price, and place also warrant more attentions. The findings from these three major areas will complement what is learned from the marketing communication perspective. In this line, integrated marketing (where the four basic marketing elements are simultaneously considered, rather than integrated marketing communication) could suggest a more comprehensive guideline for the business. Finally, consumer research may provide a better understanding for the cause of the marketing success or failure. That is, future research may investigate the consumer behavior in the context of this product to better understand their cognition, affect, and behaviors. The information gained through this kind of study will provide a good starting point for the formulation of marketing communication plan.

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