

Developing an Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) Strategy for a New Fitness Brand in the UK: The Case of APs Health Club

The UK fitness industry has experienced remarkable growth, with intense competition and evolving consumer demands. In this dynamic environment, APs, a new no-frills health club, aims to establish itself as a market leader by providing an affordable, inclusive, and flexible fitness experience. To navigate the unique challenges of this sector, particularly in customer retention and service management, APs require a tailored integrated marketing communications strategy (IMC). García-Fernández et al. (2018) underscores the critical importance of customer loyalty in the fitness industry, highlighting that effective marketing communications are essential for building and maintaining strong relationships with members. Their findings show that service convenience and perceived quality significantly influence perceived value, directly impacting customer satisfaction and loyalty. This emphasizes the necessity for APs to deliver high-quality service experiences that align with customer expectations. This essay will explore the key components of APs' marketing communications strategy, including creative messaging, IMC framework, and evaluation methods, to effectively address diverse customer needs while ensuring a consistent brand message.

Section 1: The Creative Strategy & Key Message

In the competitive UK fitness industry, APs face several established players in the no-frills gym sector. PureGym, one of the largest operators, boasts a wide network of locations and 24/7 access, but often struggles with overcrowding during peak hours. The Gym Group offers flexible contracts and affordable pricing, yet lacks personalized training options. Fitness First provides high-quality equipment and classes but at a higher price point. To differentiate itself, APs aims to address the diverse needs of various customer segments identified in the UK Fitness Report by PureGym. These segments include health-oriented users prioritizing overall well-being, appearance-driven individuals focused on aesthetic goals, social users seeking community interaction, and performance-oriented members aiming to improve athletic abilities. The report highlighted cost as a significant barrier to gym membership, with 54% of

respondents citing it as a deterrent, rising to 65% among those aged 35-44 (PureGym, 2023). By offering affordable pricing, combined with a more personalized approach than competitors, APs can cater to these diverse motivations. This segmentation strategy allows APs to provide tailored experiences, from community-focused classes for social users to advanced training options for performance-oriented members, while maintaining an accessible price point that sets it apart in the market.

The proposed key message for APs, "Your Fitness, Your Way - Affordable, Accessible, and Adaptable," encapsulates the brand's core values and aligns with its mission to provide an inclusive and flexible fitness environment. This message strategically addresses the diverse needs of the various identified customer segments. By stressing affordability, APs directly tackle one of the primary barriers to gym membership. Moreover, to combat "gym intimidation," APs can adopt an approach similar to The Gym Group's recent campaign, which effectively addressed this issue by presenting their gyms as accessible and convenient alternatives to home workouts (Account Planning Group, 2023). APs can highlight its welcoming and non-judgmental atmosphere, potentially increasing membership inquiries by making fitness more approachable to a broader audience. Drawing inspiration from The Gym Group's "We're with you" platform, APs can create a supportive message that resonates with potential members who may feel intimidated by traditional gym environments. The focus on accessibility and adaptability resonates with the varied motivations of potential gym-goers.

To operationalise the Key message, AP should offer a diverse range of services, including group exercise classes, personal training options, and customizable workout plans. This variety caters to different fitness goals and preferences, appealing to both novice gym-goers and experienced fitness enthusiasts. The emphasis on flexibility in workout options and intensity levels is crucial in attracting performance-oriented users and those with specific fitness objectives. Personalisation can be a key in marketing communications for consumer engagement. Customised experiences are highly effective in promoting repeat customer engagement and long-term brand loyalty (Arora et al., 2021). For example, implementing a mobile app that tracks members' workout preferences, frequency, and progress. Based on this data, the app could generate personalized workout

recommendations, suggest appropriate classes, and offer tailored nutrition advice. Also, the gym could use this information to send

targeted promotional offers, such as discounts on personal training sessions for members who frequently attend group classes but have not tried one-on-one coaching. This level of personalization not only enhances the member experience but also demonstrates AP's commitment to individual fitness journeys, potentially increasing member retention and word-of-mouth referrals.

Additionally, research has shown that incorporating ethical practices can further enhance customer relationships and loyalty in the fitness industry. Paschalidou et al. (2023) found that segmenting fitness centre customers based on their perceived ethicality can significantly enhance loyalty, trust, and word-of-mouth communication. For instance, AP Gym will not only offer flexible workout schedules and personalized training plans but also can integrate ethical practices. They can use eco-friendly equipment, provide recycling bins throughout the facility, and have solar panels installed to power the gym. Additionally, AP Gym can organise monthly community fitness events, such as charity runs and free wellness workshops, partnering with local non-profits to support various causes. They can also maintain transparency with their members by sharing their sustainability goals and progress through regular newsletters and social media updates. Hence, AP Gym will not only promote its flexible fitness solutions but also emphasize its ethical practices and commitment to customer satisfaction.

This strategy will incorporate storytelling, showcasing real members with diverse body types, ages, and fitness levels to reinforce inclusivity. Storytelling has been identified as a potent tool in advertising, particularly for cultivating robust brand engagement through the establishment of emotional connections with consumers (Dessart et al., 2019). A series of mini-documentaries featuring members' fitness journeys could highlight how APs' flexible approach supports various goals. For example, one could follow Sarah, a 45-year-old working mother, as she regains strength after an injury, detailing her challenges, progress, and the supportive community she found. This approach taps into emotions associated with personal fitness journeys, creating a powerful and relatable message. By presenting authentic and diverse fitness experiences, APs can foster deeper connections with their audience, encouraging brand loyalty and motivating potential members to join.

Additionally, applying semiotics to APs' creative strategy can significantly enhance their visual and verbal communication effectiveness. Semiotics plays a crucial role in decoding the meaning behind visual elements like colour palettes, typography, imagery, and logo design, which are essential in conveying the brand's personality, values, and message (Udris-Borodavko, 2023). Key semiotic elements include a colour palette using energetic colours like vibrant orange for energy and calming blue for accessibility; clean, modern typography reinforcing the no-frills aspect while maintaining professionalism; imagery showcasing diverse body types and fitness levels to promote inclusivity and combat "gymtimidation"; logo design incorporating elements symbolizing flexibility and adaptability; and linguistic choices using empowering and inclusive language to emphasize personal choice and community support. By carefully considering these semiotic elements, APs can create cohesive visual and verbal language that resonates with their target audience, reinforcing brand values and enhancing communication effectiveness.

Section 2: Implementation of Campaign

An IMC approach ensures consistency across all touchpoints and maximises the campaign's impact. Reinold and Tropp (2012) highlight the effectiveness of multi-channel strategies in modern marketing, demonstrating that campaigns integrating both digital and traditional media channels are more successful in building brand awareness and driving consumer action. To implement the IMC strategy effectively, AP will set specific, measurable marketing objectives: increasing brand awareness by 30% within six months, attracting 50,000 new members within the first year, and achieving a Net Promoter Score of 50. These clear targets allow for precise measurement of success against predefined benchmarks. Communication objectives will focus on increasing emotional affinity with the brand, addressing "gymtimidation," and conveying AP Gym's unique value proposition of affordability, accessibility, and adaptability. These objectives align with the overall marketing goals, ensuring all communication efforts are directed towards achieving desired outcomes. The audience will be segmented based on factors, including fitness

experience, motivations, and lifestyle, with detailed personas developed to guide messaging and channel selection. This

targeted approach allows AP to customize its messaging, enhancing engagement and effectiveness across diverse audience segments.

AP Gym's digital marketing strategy will focus on social media engagement to effectively reach its target audience. A study by Felix, Rauschnabel, and Hinsch (2017) found that user-generated content and influencer partnerships are particularly effective in engaging younger demographics in the fitness industry. By leveraging this insight, AP will create compelling content on platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, showcasing member success stories, quick workout tips, and behind-the-scenes glimpses of its facilities. This approach aligns with Ashley and Tuten's (2015) emphasis on driving customer word-of-mouth through social media interactions. Collaborating with micro-influencers who align with AP's values will help reach diverse audience segments, as these influencers are known for their authenticity and ability to foster trust among followers (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017).

AP will establish itself as a trusted resource in the fitness community through content marketing. Tiago and Veríssimo (2014) highlight the trend of fitness brands becoming lifestyle content creators. Following this trend, AP will create a blog and YouTube channel featuring fitness advice, nutrition tips, and motivational content. This content strategy will include quick 15-minute workout videos, healthy recipe tutorials, and monthly fitness challenges catering to various member preferences and fitness levels. Additionally, AP will develop personalized email campaigns for different audience segments and optimize its website for relevant keywords, focusing on long-tail phrases that reflect specific user intents in the UK fitness domain. As Felix (2017) notes, this approach, combined with responsive website design, can significantly improve a brand's online presence and accessibility. By implementing these digital marketing strategies, AP can build a strong online presence, engage its target audience effectively, and establish itself as a credible brand in the fitness industry.

Public relations play a pivotal role in bolstering APs' credibility and reputation, particularly through strategic community engagement and transparent communication of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives. As noted by Kim and Ferguson (2014), stakeholders

increasingly demand that CSR communications be not only transparent and factual but also substantiated by reliable sources. This expectation dovetails with a significant trend in the fitness industry: the rising importance of group fitness and community-oriented health initiatives, a movement that persisted even during the unprecedented challenges of the 2020 pandemic (León-Quismondo, 2020). To effectively respond to these evolving stakeholder expectations and harness industry momentum, APs can implement targeted strategies. These might include hosting complimentary fitness classes and wellness workshops within local communities, which not only support public health but also reinforce the brand's commitment to holistic well-being. By championing the mental and emotional benefits of group fitness, APs can position itself as a brand that is intrinsically connected to and invested in the communities it serves.

Sales promotions can be effective in driving short-term membership growth, but they must be balanced with long-term brand building. For APs, this could include incentivising current members to bring friends with discounts or free months through referral programs. This leverages the power of word-of-mouth marketing and can help expand APs' customer base. , The integration of formal and informal marketing strategies, such as digital loyalty cards, can enhance market orientation and provide precise targeting of promotions (Donnelly et al., 2015). Providing short-term free passes for potential members to experience APs' facilities through trial offers can help overcome the barrier of commitment that some potential members may feel. As trial-based promotions can offer an effective way to engage potential customers, particularly when combined with data-driven insights to tailor the offers. Additionally, offering special deals during key periods, such as New Year's resolutions or summer fitness pushes, should align with the overall brand message and not undermine the perception of value. Hence, maintaining a balance between short-term incentives and long-term brand value is crucial.

Experiential marketing is an effective approach to alleviate "gymtimidation" and introduce potential members to the unique atmosphere of APs. By creating immersive experiences,

APs can demystify the gym environment and make it more inviting for newcomers. For instance, setting up temporary AP-branded workout spaces in high-traffic areas. These pop-up gyms can be strategically placed in shopping centres or at local events, providing an opportunity for

passers-by to engage with the brand in a low-pressure setting. They can feature mini-classes, demonstrations, and interactive sessions where potential members can try out equipment and participate in short workouts. Another tactic is hosting regular open days at AP locations. People can participate in various fitness classes, meet personal trainers, and interact with current members. This not only provides a comprehensive view of what membership entails but also fosters a sense of community and belonging. The hands-on experience allows individuals to get a real feel for what APs have to offer, breaking down barriers and reducing the intimidation factor.

Sponsorship provides a powerful means of boosting brand visibility and credibility, particularly when these efforts are strategically aligned with APs' core values and aimed at health-conscious individuals. Recent insights from Cornwell and Kwon (2020) suggest several effective strategies for maximising the impact of sponsorships. One such strategy is sponsoring local sports events like community runs, cycling races, and other fitness-related activities, which naturally attract a health-focused audience. These events offer APs an ideal platform to increase brand visibility by setting up branded tents, banners, and interactive booths, thereby forging a strong association between APs and a healthy lifestyle. Additionally, sponsoring fitness programmes in local schools presents another valuable opportunity. By supporting youth health initiatives, APs can promote physical activity among younger generations while reinforcing its image as a community-centric brand. Programmes that introduce students to various forms of exercise and educate them about healthy living can have a profound and lasting impact. Involving AP trainers and nutritionists in these initiatives can strengthen the connection between the gym and the community, cultivating loyalty and positive perceptions among both students and their families. Overall, these sponsorship efforts are key to enhancing APs' reputation, building credibility, and increasing brand awareness within the community.

Section 3: Campaign Monitoring & Evaluation

To ensure the effectiveness of this IMC strategy, a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework will be implemented. This framework will incorporate the AIDA, DRIP, and SOSC models, providing a holistic understanding of the campaign's performance. The AIDA model will assess each stage of the customer journey and consumer progression from awareness to action (Tristano, 2023). Attention will be measured through brand awareness surveys and social media mentions; interest through website visits and social media interactions; desire through trial sign-ups and information requests; and action through conversion rates from leads to paid memberships. Specific Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) will be established for each stage, such as social media impressions for attention, click-through rates for interest, trial sign-ups for desire, and conversion rates for action (Páramo, 2021). The DRIP and SOSC models will complement this framework, providing insights into the campaign's differentiation, reinforcement, informational, and persuasive aspects, as well as its segmentation, objectives, strategies, and control mechanisms. This approach will enable APs to accurately measure their marketing impact and make data-driven decisions to optimize their strategy for maximum effectiveness.

The DRIP model will be used to evaluate the strategic impact of APs' marketing communications. In the competitive fitness market, where differentiation is key, this model will ensure that APs' messaging remains distinct and compelling. Competitor analysis and customer perception surveys will be employed to measure differentiation, while brand loyalty and repeat purchase behaviour will be assessed through metrics such as customer retention rates and Net Promoter Score. The effectiveness of educational content, which is a significant part of APs' strategy, will be evaluated through engagement metrics on blog posts, videos, and social media content. Understanding the persuasive power of content across different touchpoints is essential for refining marketing strategies. Soti (2022) discusses how persuasive language strategies significantly influence consumer behaviour, as advertising can impact consumer attitudes and behaviour through both central and peripheral processing routes. Persuasion will be analyzed by tracking conversion rates at various stages of the sales funnel and evaluating the impact of different marketing touchpoints on decision-making.

The SOSC model will be employed to ensure that APs' marketing communications are aligned with its overall business goals. This alignment is critical, as Adama (2024)

underscores that effective IMC must ensure that each communication effort is strategically aligned with the overarching business goals. Regular reviews of the target audience definition and market segmentation, along with continuous assessment of progress towards specific marketing objectives, will be integral to this process. The evaluation of chosen marketing channels and tactics will be conducted through attribution modelling and ROI analysis. A system of regular reporting and analysis will support agile decision-making and campaign optimization, allowing APs to quickly respond to market changes and campaign performance.

To ensure timely insights and agile decision-making, a clear schedule for measurements and reporting will be established. This will include daily monitoring of social media engagement metrics and website traffic, weekly tracking of lead generation metrics and conversion rates, monthly brand awareness surveys, and NPS measurements, and quarterly comprehensive campaign performance reports, including ROI analysis. Consistent and frequent evaluation is key to maintaining the effectiveness of marketing strategies in rapidly changing environments. By maintaining a pulse on campaign performance, APs can make data-driven decisions that are responsive to the dynamic nature of the fitness market. Additionally, the monitoring and evaluation process will be supported by a suite of advanced data collection and analysis tools. These tools will include social media analytics platforms like Hootsuite, web analytics through Google Analytics, a robust Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system, and survey tools such as Qualtrics. Additionally, a marketing automation platform will be used for tracking email metrics and lead generation. By leveraging these technologies, APs will gather comprehensive data and derive actionable insights efficiently.

Pre-testing and post-launch evaluations will be implemented to ensure a thorough assessment of the campaign's effectiveness. Pre-testing will involve focus groups with representatives from different target segments to gather qualitative feedback on creative concepts, messaging, and overall brand perception. Post-launch evaluation will encompass brand awareness tracking, engagement metrics assessment, lead generation

tracking, conversion rate analysis, and multi-touch attribution modelling. Competitive benchmarking will be conducted to compare APs' performance against key competitors in the no-frills gym sector, and ROI calculations will assess the overall effectiveness of the campaign. The importance of continuous evaluation and adaptation is stated by Kumo (2023), who emphasises that the

ever-changing nature of consumer behaviour requires continuous evaluation to refine and optimize marketing strategies.

A clear feedback loop will be established to ensure that insights from monitoring and evaluation inform ongoing campaign adjustments. This process will include regular review meetings to discuss performance metrics, identification of underperforming areas, development of action plans for improvement, implementation of changes, and continuous monitoring of their impact. Sushil (2016) stresses the importance of an iterative approach in campaign management, where real-time data is used to continuously optimize and enhance the impact of integrated marketing communications strategies. This process involves repeating a series of steps with incremental improvements in each cycle. By implementing this comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework, APs will be well-positioned to assess the effectiveness of their marketing communications strategy.

Conclusion

APs' IMC strategy presents a comprehensive approach to establishing the brand as a market leader in the UK fitness industry. By focusing on affordability, accessibility, and adaptability, APs address key consumer concerns while differentiating itself. The creative strategy, leveraging storytelling and personalisation, creates emotional connections with diverse customer segments, effectively combating "gym intimidation" and promoting inclusivity. Implementation across various channels ensures a cohesive and impactful campaign. The comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework, incorporating the AIDA, DRIP, and SOSC models, provides a robust mechanism for assessing effectiveness and facilitating data-driven decisions. This approach allows for continuous optimization, ensuring APs remain responsive to market dynamics and consumer needs. By delivering a consistent brand message that resonates with diverse customer needs, APs is well-

positioned to increase brand awareness, attract new members, and foster customer loyalty in the competitive UK fitness market.

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Appendices

Creative Strategy and Key Message

APs positions itself in the competitive UK fitness market with the key message: "Your Fitness, Your Way - Affordable, Accessible, and Adaptable." This messaging strategically addresses diverse customer segments and common barriers to gym membership, such as cost and "gym intimidation".

Target Audience Segmentation

The campaign targets four main customer segments:

1. Health-oriented users
2. Appearance-driven individuals
3. Social users seeking community interaction
4. Performance-oriented members

This segmentation aligns with findings from the UK Fitness Report, allowing APs to tailor experiences while maintaining an accessible price point.

Marketing Communication Objectives

1. Increase brand awareness by 30% within six months
2. Attract 50,000 new members within the first year
3. Achieve a Net Promoter Score of 50

These specific, measurable objectives provide clear benchmarks for evaluating campaign success.

Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) Strategy

The IMC approach ensures consistency across all touchpoints, maximizing campaign impact. Key components include:

1. Digital marketing: Leveraging social media engagement, influencer partnerships, and content marketing to establish APs as a trusted fitness resource.
2. Public relations: Focusing on community engagement and transparent communication of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives.
3. Sales promotions: Implementing referral programs and trial offers to drive short-term membership growth while balancing long-term brand building.
4. Experiential marketing: Creating immersive experiences to alleviate "gymtimidation" and introduce potential members to APs' unique atmosphere.
5. Sponsorship: Strategically aligning with local sports events and school fitness programs to enhance brand visibility and credibility.

Evaluation Framework

A comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system incorporates the AIDA, DRIP, and SOSC models:

- AIDA: Assesses each stage of the customer journey (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action)
- DRIP: Evaluates Differentiation, Reinforcement, Information, and Persuasion aspects

- SOSC: Ensures alignment with overall business goals
(Segmentation, Objectives, Strategies, Control)

This multi-model approach allows for holistic performance assessment and data-driven optimisation of marketing strategies.