The Interaction Marketing Mix: A balanced framework to defining commercial policies.

Abstract :

The marketing mix has long served as a central framework for structuring marketing strategy. Despite its enduring influence, the traditional 4P model has been widely criticised for its rigidity and its predominantly firm-centred perspective. This article introduces the Interaction Marketing Mix (IMM), a conceptual framework designed to integrate transactional and relational perspectives within a unified structure centred on exchange. The IMM conceptualises marketing exchanges as reciprocal interactions between two entities – typically a firm and its customers – organised around three categories of action factors: offering factors, relationship factors and contribution factors. By emphasising balance and reciprocity within exchange relationships, the model provides a framework capable of reflecting contemporary marketing environments characterised by customer participation, value co-creation and digital interaction. The article presents the theoretical foundations of the IMM, describes its structure and components, and discusses its implications for marketing strategy and research.

Key words: *marketing mix, marketing mix models, interaction marketing mix.*

> Jean Dufer
Former Associate Professor in Marketing
Toulon University
jean@dufer.fr

> Frédérique Orticoni
Associate Professor in Marketing
Toulon University
frederique.orticoni@univ-tln.fr

INTRODUCTION

The marketing mix is traditionally defined as the optimal combination of controllable variables available to a firm in order to influence market demand. Although widely recognised in both academic literature and managerial practice, scholars have long debated the number and nature of the variables composing the mix.

The terminology marketing mix was first introduced by Neil Borden in 1953 (Wood 1963). His initial framework comprised twelve variables, intended to guide commercial policy. Shortly afterwards, alternative classifications were proposed by Frey (1956), Howard (1957), Kelley and Lazer (1958), and Lazer and Kelley (1962).

The concept gained widespread recognition following the simplified formulation proposed by McCarthy (1960), who organised marketing decision variables into four categories: Product, Price, Place and Promotion. Popularised by Kotler (1967), this framework rapidly became the dominant reference model in marketing management.

While the model's elegance and pedagogical clarity contributed to its widespread adoption, it has also attracted sustained criticism. Scholars have frequently argued that the framework reflects a transactional and firm-centred conception of marketing, that does not fully capture the complexity of contemporary market interactions.

In response to these limitations, numerous attempts have been made to revise or extend the traditional marketing mix. Notable examples include the 7P framework for services marketing (Booms & Bitner 1981) and the SAVE framework developed for industrial markets (Ettenson et al. 2013). These initiatives reflect broader transformations in marketing thought, particularly the growing importance of relational perspectives – challenging the transactional paradigm and inspiring models such as Gummesson's 30R framework (1994) – as well as customer participation in value creation. More recently, digital transformation has intensified interactions between firms and consumers, enabling new forms of engagement and collaboration.

Despite these conceptual advances, their practical impact on McCarthy's quadrilogy remains limited. Kotler (2013) himself acknowledged that the 4P model continues to dominate both academic teaching and managerial practice. According to Constantinides (2006, p. 407), "few topics in commercial theory have so intensively inspired as well as divided the marketing academia as the 4Ps Marketing Mix framework." The model continues to stimulate scholarly debate, as evidenced by recent reviews highlighting ongoing efforts to revise and compensate for its limitations (Orticoni & Dufer 2022).

Contemporary marketing aspires to be less mechanistic and more humanistic – less firm-centered and more attuned to the Other, who is no longer viewed as a passive consumer but as an active participant in value creation. Marketing thus evolves toward a participatory and interactive orientation. As Wichmann et al. (2022, p. 1) note, "the marketing mix has reached a crossroads, with opposing scenarios for its future."

In this context, there is a clear opportunity to propose a model grounded in a more inclusive, holistic, and balanced framework – one capable of integrating multiple perspectives, while remaining generalisable. The purpose of this article is therefore to introduce and develop the Interaction Marketing Mix (IMM), designed to address these challenges by embedding reciprocity, balance, and interaction at its conceptual core. The paper is structured as follows: Section 1 outlines the model and its genesis; Section 2 offers a critical discussion; Section 3 explores its scope and potential applications; and the final section presents its theoretical and managerial implications, identifies its limitations, and suggests avenues for future research.

THE INTERACTION MARKETING MIX (IMM)

The Interaction Marketing Mix (IMM) is an integrative framework that reconciles transactional and relational logics. It reasserts exchange as the core element of marketing strategy, while incorporating the co-creation mechanisms that underpin contemporary marketing.

1 - Genesis of the model

The conceptual foundations of the IMM date back to the 1990s – a particularly prolific decade for marketing and the marketing mix.

The early 1990s marked a turning point in marketing theory with the advent of the market orientation paradigm, notably through the seminal contributions of Narver and Slater (1990) and Kohli and Jaworski (1990). Building on these works, new formulations of the marketing mix emerged – more consumer-oriented and seeking to move beyond the productcentric logic inherent in the 4P model (e.g. Lauterborn 1990; Bennet 1997).

Customer relationships came to be regarded as the firm's key strategic resource (Webster 1992). The notions of satisfaction and loyalty regained prominence (Moulins 1997), with loyalty increasingly conceived in relational rather than transactional terms (Vavra 1993).

Relationship marketing subsequently gained traction, with several schools of thought critically challenging the dominant marketing management paradigm and its traditional 4P foundation – most notably the Nordic School (Grönroos 1994). Holistic and strategic perspectives on marketing emerged, redefining it not as a mechanism for manipulating consumers, but as a process of genuine engagement (McKenna 1991).

Taken together, these developments reveal the intellectual vitality and conceptual richness of marketing in the 1990s, while also shedding light on the context in which the idea of the IMM emerged. As Dominique Crié (2002, p. 2) observed, "the last decade of the twentieth century witnessed an evolution – if not a revolution – both conceptual and praxeological, in marketing thought and practice."

Inspired by this intellectual effervescence, our aim was to elaborate a conceptual model that reconciles the perspectives of firms and customers, by integrating transactional and relational dimensions within a coherent and unified framework. At a time when marketing theory was marked by increasing fragmentation, this endeavour also sought to advance a more integrative and generalist approach – one applicable across contexts involving physical goods, services, and social marketing. This effort culminated in the development of the IMM model, which was initially introduced at a conference of the French Marketing Association (Dufer 1997) and afterwards validated through ongoing consultancy work with the Inter Service CAM (ISC) consortium, which brought together representatives of the Crédit Agricole Mutuel Group (the European Union's leading local retail bank), including several Directors from its 39 regional banks.

Since then, the marketing mix has continued to stimulate substantial academic research, and its relevance remains undiminished. In light of recent developments in marketing theory and practice, it now seems timely to reintroduce the IMM to the academic community – having considerably refined and expanded it – and to make it available to practitioners as a tool tested and validated through our consulting and fieldwork. The following section presents the structure and core components of the IMM, together with the guiding principles underlying its design.

2. Presentation of the IMM

The primary characteristic of the IMM lies in the close symbiosis it establishes between the firm and its clientele – a form of coupling that generates mutual benefit for both parties. At the heart of this association stands a principle that, although some authors have questioned its primacy in favour of value creation (Sheth & Uslay 2007), remains one of the foundational pillars of marketing: exchange. Such reciprocity has already been highlighted by R. Cialdini (2024), according to whom one must "give in order to receive".

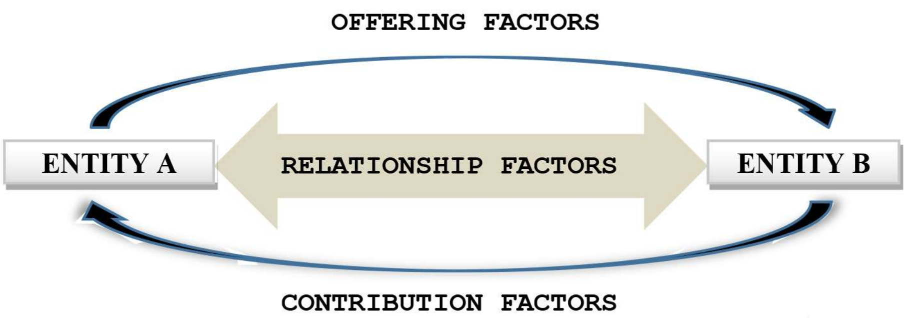
Accordingly, the IMM can be defined as follows:
"A COMBINATION OF INTERACTING FACTORS, ESTABLISHED FOR THE MUTUAL BENEFIT OF TWO ENTITIES (A AND B), WITHIN AN EXCHANGE RELATIONSHIP".

Its basic expression is deliberately simple:

- A and B are engaged in a relationship;
- A provides a set of offerings to B;
- B, in return, provides contributions to the exchange with A.

Figure 1 and table 1 illustrate this principle.

Figure 1
Representation of the IMM



The IMM assumes that mutual benefit must actively pursued between the interacting entities.

Table 1
Example of a food brand (A) to a consumer (B)

A provides to B B contributes to A	Quality products, nutritional information campaigns, new recipes, product innovation, limited editions, broad distribution. Monetary compensation, repeated purchases, participation in surveys, social media engagement, feedback, positive word-of-mouth.
Relationship between A and B Mutual benefit	Engagement through loyalty programmes and sharing platforms initiated by A. A strengthens its reputation and customer base, while B enjoys enhanced value, exclusive advantages, and satisfaction.

A (the provider) initiates the exchange, while B (the buyer) is initially the recipient. However, these roles are not fixed: both can alternately act as sender or receiver. The IMM framework therefore encourages adopting the other's perspective – particularly that of B, the customer.

Within the IMM, interaction between the two entities manifests through flows of actions composed of various action factors, distributed according to the direction of the exchange.

3. The components of the IMM

The IMM combines two types of actions – transactional and relational – that operate in opposite directions (A→B or B→A). Each is driven by what we term action factors, the core analytical units of the model.

3.1 The notion of action factors

Action factors (also referred to as associated or intervening factors) stem from an analytical process aimed at identifying the underlying drivers of marketing actions, beyond their observable forms. They represent the conditions, constraints, and resources that make action possible and shape its outcomes. They occupy an intermediary position between means and results:

MEANS → ACTION FACTORS → RESULTS.

This bidirectional structure (A → B and B → A) can be examined through three key dimensions:

- The offering dimension (O):
  Offerings provided by A → Offering factors → Benefits perceived by B
- The relationship dimension (R):
  Relations deployed by A → Relationship factors A/B → Relations experienced by B
  Relations experienced by A ← Relationship factors B/A ← Relations deployed by B
- The contribution dimension (C):
  Benefits obtained by A ← Contribution factors ← Contributions provided by B

The framework can be illustrated through two examples drawn from various industries.

Example 1 – Consumer Goods: A Soft Drink Manufacturer

O: Natural flavours → health benefit → serene pleasure
O: Multiple formats → choice → adaptation to needs

R: Creative marketing → playful advertising → emotional connection
R: Brand stores → atmosphere creation → proximity
R: Brand awareness ← visibility ← positive word-of-mouth
R: Loyalty ← privileged relationship ← club membership

C: Engagement ← participation ← recipe forums
C: Stable revenue ← recurring demand ← regular purchases

Example 2 – Services: A Hotel Establishment

O: Booking centre → online purchase → time saving
O: Downtown location → accessibility → reduced effort

R: Staff motivation → warm welcome → pleasant atmosphere
R: Service improvement ← feedback ← call centre interaction

C: Cash flow ← advance revenue ← card payment
C: Capacity optimisation ← occupancy programme ← booking compliance

This analytical structure allows for either a factor-based or a means-based approach. If the former appears too complex, the analysis can be simplified to a means-based correspondence, provided it systematically links the firm's actions to the customer's outcomes, and vice versa:

• MEANS of A → RESULTS for B
• RESULTS for A ← MEANS of B

Example:
. A promotional campaign by A at the point of sale → modifies perceptions of B .
. A's database enrichment ← B's participation in a survey.

The factor-based reasoning helps assess how specific actions, implemented through given means, affect their targets – an essential approach, since the same variable can serve multiple purposes. For instance, at the point of sale, a sales promotion – typically transactional – can also serve relational goals (Mussol et al. 2013). Likewise, merchandising may aim to boost sales or enhance the consumer experience, and a contest may foster loyalty or simply update a customer database.

Similarly, while all communication fosters connection, not all communication is relational. The ligative dimension of communication must be distinguished from its informational function. Persuasive and narrative advertising may transmit product information, whereas symbolic communication may build brand meaning and emotional resonance. One may therefore distinguish between functional communication (which supports performance) and relational communication (which strengthens or repairs trust). For instance, a personalised response to a complaint can restore confidence and reinforce loyalty.

3.2 The three categories of factors

As mentioned earlier, while the traditional 4P model is based on four classes of marketing variables, the IMM framework is structured around three categories of action factors. Each category constitutes a composite set, that warrants closer examination.

Offering Factors (OF)

The term offering refers to the full range of what a company provides to consumers, which may include tangible products as well as intangible services. It represents the core object of exchange and the foundation of the business relationship. Only part of these actions translates directly into perceived benefits for the customer, as not all initiatives are targeted at them and their yield is never perfect. Broadly speaking, offering factors constitute the main source of satisfaction and, consequently, the core of value creation. They can also be referred to as performance factors.

Within the offering factors, distribution plays a crucial role, since the product and its delivery are no longer separate spheres. While firms may internally distinguish between these two sets of activities, the buying experience occurs at their intersection. From the customer's standpoint, the delivery mode – including both channel and context – is inseparable from the offering itself. This is particularly evident in services, where production and consumption often occur simultaneously (Eiglier & Langeard 1987), and service appreciation depends directly on how it is provided.

This logic equally applies to tangible goods. The purchase of a product in a specific outlet fuses both dimensions into a single aggregate – the delivered product or service. For instance, the perceived quality of a toothpaste bought in a supermarket may differ from the same product purchased in a pharmacy. Likewise, an ice cream eaten in a Häagen-Dazs café evokes a different consumption experience than the same product bought in a supermarket.

Thus, commercialization modalities merge, in the consumer's perception, with the offer itself: the experience of the offer is inherently composite, integrating both product and context.

Relationship Factors (RF)

Every offer is embedded within a relationship, which may be explicit or implicit depending on the context. Relationship factors refer to the various forms of connection linking the firm and its market in a bilateral perspective.
A relationship is both an outcome – the bond uniting two parties – and a process – the construction of that bond. Relationship factors therefore encompass all elements that create, maintain, strengthen, or repair this link. With the rise of social media, they also include connections among consumers who share experiences with a product or brand.
These factors generate relational benefits and, consequently, relational value. The relational domain is broad and may be analysed across several key distinctions: collective vs. individual, vertical vs. horizontal, and interpersonal vs. institutional relationships.

- **Collective–individual:** distinguishes mass communication from personalised interaction. Impersonal communication – often media-based – contrasts with individual connection relying on human interfaces (e.g. front-line staff) or technological ones (e.g. digital platforms). Access to branded retail outlets enhances atmosphere and proximity: by opening its own stores, L'Oréal strengthens direct ties with consumers, while personalised digital offers and social media engagement extend this connection.
- **Vertical–horizontal:** with the rise of social media, the traditional top-down communication flow from companies to consumers has been increasingly complemented by horizontal communication processes, in which consumers actively generate content and construct relationships, notably through the online sharing of experiences. This shift calls for new skills and tools; for example, micro-stories on social networks increasingly complement traditional meta-narratives, relying instead on storytelling capabilities.
- **Interpersonal–institutional:** yields two levels of trust. In an era of declining institutional credibility, firms emphasise direct human interfaces to foster individualised relationships. The bank Crédit Agricole, for example, organises its operations around a multichannel advisor, who connects customers to multiple contact points within a single "relational space", allowing engagement through the customer's preferred channel.

Introducing relationship factors makes it possible to assign specific purposes to each of these forms of interaction – such as to disseminate, welcome, assist, inform, persuade, reassure, reward, remind, repair, or compensate. A TV spot (means) builds an image (factor) that reassures (outcome). A physical store (means) creates an atmosphere (factor) that enhances proximity (outcome). A phone call (means) provides attention (factor) that fosters recognition (outcome). An online forum (means) facilitates choice (factor) that supports decision-making (outcome). A commercial gesture (means) provides a benefit (factor) that rewards (outcome).

Contribution Factors (CF)

This third category encompasses the actions and resources mobilised by the customer – aside from the relational dimension – as compensation for the benefits received. To properly assess these contributions, they must be considered within a broader perspective than mere monetary payment. As noted by authors such as Zeithaml (1988), it is necessary to take into account all costs incurred by the consumer beyond purely financial expenses. The range of elements involved is therefore extensive. In the pursuit of a comprehensive understanding, these resources – many of which lie outside the firm's direct control – may be:

- **monetary contribution** (price paid and financing arrangements as forms of economic participation in the exchange)
- **material contribution** (equipment and resources mobilised by the customer in order to access and engage with the service)
- **temporal contribution** (time invested, including duration, waiting, and delays – reflecting trade-offs between financial and temporal commitments)

- **physical contribution** (travel and physical effort involved – participating in the coproduction of the service outcome)
- **psychological contribution** (attention, interest, and decision-making processes mobilised – contributing to relationship co-production and the disclosure of personal data)
- **informational contribution** (pre-purchase: expression of needs, projects, and orientations, including possible disclosure of personal data; post-purchase: word-of-mouth, online evaluations, forum-based recommendations, and ex post communication of the customer experience)
- **ecological contribution** (choices related to recycling, limitation, exclusion, or renunciation – reflecting the customer's engagement with environmental options).

Taken together, contribution factors represent the full spectrum of customer inputs that complement the firm's offer, shaping both perceived value and the overall experience. A comprehensive understanding of these contributions enables firms to better evaluate the customer's total cost of participation and to design more equitable exchanges.

4. Building the IMM

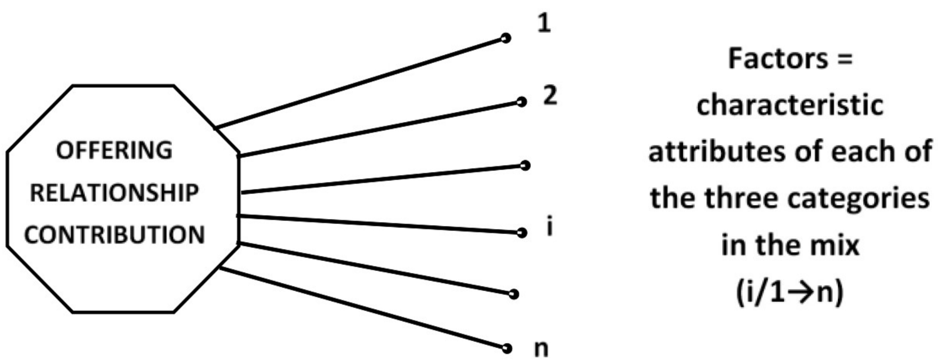
A central feature of the IMM lies in the principle of balance governing the combination of action factors.

The construction of the IMM unfolds on two levels: first, the identification and prioritisation of each factor; and second, the determination of the most appropriate combination among them.

4.1 Defining the factors

The identification of each factor can rely on established commercial research methods. These methods help assess both the salience of factors (through qualitative exploration) and their importance (via quantitative surveys). A thorough understanding of customer needs – across a full spectrum of factors – and of the relative weight assigned to each attribute enables firms to design comprehensive offers and emphasise the dimensions most valued by their customers.

Figure 2
Factors determination

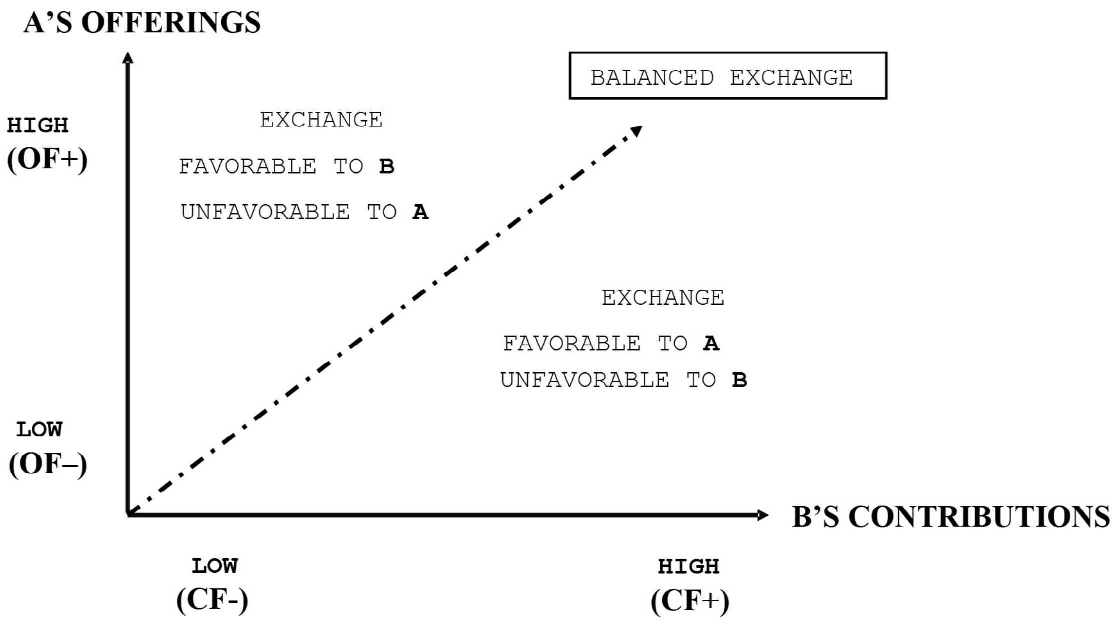


4.2 Combining the factors: the search for balance

Combining factors within the same category poses little difficulty, as a simple ranking by importance can guide prioritisation. However, integrating factors across the three categories – offerings, relationship, and contribution – is more complex.

Traditionally, marketing mix design relies on a principle of coherence, according to which the various elements of the mix must align consistently. This coherence, however, remains approximate: its objective is mainly to avoid major contradictions among components. In contrast, the IMM focuses on the balance between what the firm provides and what the customer contributes.

Figure 3
Offerings / Contributions



From the outset, trade-offs must be made between offerings and contributions, echoing the quality–price ratio (Tassinari 1985) and grounded in equity theory (Walster, Walster & Berscheid 1978). In the IMM, customer benefit results from a favourable combination of action factors, achieved through comparison and compensation among them. A deficit in one factor may be offset in two ways:

1) Direct mitigation:

- When a high contribution is required from the consumer – for example, a high selling price (CF+) – the effect can be reduced by lowering the latter (CF–).
- When an offer fails to meet expectations – such as a product poorly suited to its target audience (OF–) – the situation can be corrected by improving the offer (OF+).

2) Compensatory enhancement:

- Lower prices (CF–) but slower delivery and no free returns (OF–).
- High selling prices (CF+) legitimised by exceptional offer quality (OF+).
- Customer participation (CF+) or data disclosure (CF+) offset by a more personalised offer (OF+).

When compensation occurs within a single category, it is still governed by the search for balance. For instance, within contribution factors, greater customer effort (CF+) can be offset by a lower price (CF–); high selling prices (CF+) can be balanced by credit or deferred payment options (CF–). Similarly, the ecological cost of disposable products (CF+) can be mitigated through recycling programmes involving consumers in the return process (CF+), thereby reducing the psychological cost (CF–) through a mechanism of guilt alleviation.

The integration of relational factors enriches this dynamic. Within the IMM, relationships – and the trust they foster – can compensate for asymmetries such as information deficits or perceived risk. Often, it is precisely the relational dynamics of trust and perceived value that help re-equilibrate the exchange.

The IMM's adjustment mechanisms are inherently flexible: firms can add, modify, or remove factors with a reasonably predictable impact on outcomes. As customer expectations evolve or competitive conditions change, the mix can be adapted to maintain alignment with its environment. This adaptability is one of the defining features of the model.

Furthermore, by incorporating relational factors, marketing actions can follow either a transactional logic – aimed at short-term sales increases – or a relational logic, oriented toward longer-term engagement. Unlike the 4P model – where a retail outlet would be categorised under the variable "Place" – the IMM allows the same action to serve a relational purpose.

For instance, when L'Oréal – historically a mass-distribution brand – opened its first proprietary stores, the initiative was not merely distributive but relational. The goal was to establish a direct link with consumers, eliminate intermediaries, and deliver a personalised experience – including beauty advice, diagnostics, and exclusive services – while collecting data, through loyalty programmes and strengthening brand capital through proximity and trust.

5. A practical illustration of the IMM: the case of Nespresso

Table 2 illustrates how Nespresso strategically combines performance, contribution, and relationship factors through a coherent set of mutually reinforcing actions. The interplay of these factors sustains a balanced value proposition, where deficits in one domain are offset by strengths in another.

A high price (CF+) is legitimised by an unparalleled premium offer (OF+) and reinforced by personalised relationships and a superior customer experience (RF+). The use of aluminium (OF–) is justified by its exceptional aroma-preserving properties (OF+). The ecological cost for the consumer (CF+) is mitigated through a recycling system that allows consumers to offset environmental guilt (CF–) by returning used capsules (CF+). The potential moral cost associated with perceived health concerns linked to aluminium (CF+) is neutralised by reassuring information on product safety (OF+) and compensated by brand trust (RF+). Finally, customer engagement in a structured consumption model (CF+) is balanced by the symbolic benefit of belonging to a luxury universe and an exclusive brand community (RF+).

Table 2

Synthesis of IMM factors within Nespresso's strategy

IMM factors	Key Actions Implemented	Objective / Expected Outcomes
Offering (OF+/-)	**OF+**: Premium capsules with consistent quality, wide flavour range, and limited editions; capsules ensuring aroma preservation and safety (with recyclability emphasised). Design-driven machines and accessories. Exclusive distribution network (boutiques, e-commerce, mobile application); boutique experience (tastings, personalised service); Premium after-sales service (repair, loan, recycling).	Guarantee controlled quality across the value chain. Deliver a premium and consistent experience. Reinforce differentiation and premium positioning.
	OF-: Aluminium capsules	Ensure aroma preservation and safety.
Relationship (RF)	Nespresso Club (personalised interaction; recommendations, loyalty). Premium advertising (George Clooney) with a refined, humorous tone; ongoing storytelling and personalised communication. Consistent omnichannel experience; experiential retail environments. Sustainability commitments (AAA Sustainable Quality™ programme, recycling).	Build a direct, emotional, and rewarding connection. Strengthen loyalty. Promote responsible consumption and community belonging. Develop brand trust.
Contribution (CF+/-)	**CF+**: Financial contribution – acceptance of premium price. Behavioural effort – purchasing through exclusive channels and engaging in structured consumption (subscriptions). Moral cost acceptance (aluminium) Ecological contribution – capsule recycling.	Ensure the profitability of the premium model. Encourage active participation. Promote responsible behaviour.
	CF-: Environmental guilt mitigated through capsule recycling	Reduce guilt.

JUSTIFICATIONS / DISCUSSION

Following the presentation of the IMM, this section clarifies and justifies the key choices that guided its construction.

1. Exchange as the foundation of the model

IMM reinstates exchange at the cornerstone of marketing strategy, warranting closer examination of this foundational concept.

Social exchange theory – introduced into marketing largely through Bagozzi (1975) – was gradually overshadowed by the rise of the value-creation paradigm. The removal of "exchange" from the AMA's 2004 definition of marketing illustrated this shift; its reinstatement three years later reaffirmed its centrality to the discipline.

In traditional perspectives, exchange occurs at the end of the process: the firm offers, the customer buys, and the transaction concludes – a clearly transactional vision. Contemporary views, however, conceive exchange as continuous and relational, involving ongoing interactions and significant customer participation. The customer is no longer as malleable as models such as the 4Ps once assumed, but an active co-creator and co-producer of value (Marion 2016; Grönroos 2013), sometimes even reversing the producer–consumer roles (Firat et al. 1995). Consumption thus becomes a form of production, and the customer an active interlocutor.

The IMM incorporates this circular view of exchange, where roles are fluid: A (the supplier) and B (the buyer) alternately act as sender and receiver. Marketing is not a one-way process directed from firm to consumer but a network of mutual interactions operating before, during, and after the transaction. This structure promotes enduring relationships and positions marketing as an interactive system of reciprocal engagement, rather than a unilateral mechanism of persuasion.

2. A model guided by the search for balanced exchange

At the heart of the IMM lies the principle of balance, in sharp contrast with the asymmetrical, firm-dominant orientation of traditional transactional marketing. This notion, with deep theoretical roots (Blake & Mouton 1971; Barnard 1974), has long been recognised as a unifying concept in business strategy (Doyle 1994). The IMM highlights this principle by placing at the core of entrepreneurial activity a central objective: optimising exchanges between the firm and its customers. Temporary imbalances simply reflect the natural dynamics of market power.

Among the key criticisms of the 4Ps is its unidirectional and hierarchical view of exchange, depicting a sovereign firm and a passive consumer, with clearly delineated roles for buyer and seller and an unbalanced relationship favouring the former. In contrast, the IMM seeks equitable reciprocity, aiming for mutual benefit: when the offer meets the buyer's expectations, the latter rewards the seller in ways that also benefit the firm – through payment, positive word of mouth, or repeat purchase. The market thus becomes a mechanism of transformation, that generates mutual satisfaction.

The IMM perspective grounds firm performance in a win–win relationship with the customer rather than dominance. This orientation is especially relevant today, as consumer contributions are not always matched by proportional benefits, leading to imbalances favouring firms (Derobert 2016; Assens & Gerber 2023). In a balanced exchange, by contrast, the customer perceives fair value while the firm earns a just return – a foundation for durable, ethical, and profitable relationships. Transparency and respect reinforce trust and loyalty, while the firm enhances its legitimacy through responsible behaviour. A notable illustration is provided by the French brand C'est qui le Patron?! ("Who's the Boss?!"), which invites consumers to pay slightly higher prices for ethically produced goods co-designed with consumers, to ensure fair income for farmers and sustainable practices (Renault 2019).

Finally, balance replaces coherence (the organising principle of the 4Ps) as the IMM's governing mechanism. Balance is easier to assess – term by term – whereas coherence requires holistic evaluation.

3. The relationship as an adjustment variable: rebalancing transactional and relational logics

Beyond balance, the IMM introduces the relationship as a key adjustment variable, that integrates transactional and relational perspectives, within a single conceptual framework.

The dichotomy between transactional and relational marketing has long structured marketing thought. The former emphasises discrete, short-term transactions between dominant firms and passive consumers; the latter stresses continuous, mutually beneficial relationships. While some view relationship marketing as an evolution of marketing management, others regard it as an alternative paradigm (e.g. Grönroos 2004). With the inclusion of relationship management in the AMA's latest definition of marketing, however, the relational dimension can no longer be treated as peripheral but must be regarded as integral to all exchanges.

In the IMM, the relationship functions as a social bond that both enables and sustains transactions. Its intensity varies by context – from minimal (self-service purchases) to substantial (personal consultations). It contributes to value creation by enhancing experience and trust, or by compensating for structural asymmetries (e.g. high prices offset by perceived quality).

The model encompasses a continuum of relationships, ranging from anonymous, transactional exchanges to socially embedded, co-creative partnerships. This flexibility allows firms to align marketing actions with strategic intent: transactional logics favour short-term efficiency, while relational logics foster long-term engagement, loyalty, and trust.

Even in low-involvement categories, relational mechanisms can operate before or after purchase. Examples include Lay's "Do Us a Flavour" campaign (2024–25), which engaged consumers in co-creation and voting; or Colgate's educational campaigns and social media initiatives. Such actions transform routine consumption into opportunities for interaction and community-building, even for utilitarian products. Some campaigns extend relationality further, by linking purchases to social or environmental causes, reinforcing brand legitimacy.

By positioning the relationship as both variable and mechanism, the IMM integrates transactional and relational logics within a unified structure. It demonstrates that even transactional actions can serve relational purposes – such as learning, visibility, experience, and connection. The systematic inclusion of relationship factors thus promotes a more customercentric and sustainable approach to marketing practice.

4- A broad approach extending beyond the boundaries of marketing action

Because the IMM integrates overlapping capabilities and covarying synergies, it offers a broader and more transversal perspective than the 4Ps. For instance, customer service can foster loyalty as effectively as a marketing campaign. A relational approach to service recovery helps prevent the "double deviation" effect – where failure to repair a problem worsens dissatisfaction – making relational management essential for restoring trust (Belhour et al. 2023).

Similarly, sales teams can build loyalty by providing personalised follow-up and anticipating needs. Satisfaction and retention become shared responsibilities across the organisation, not the exclusive domain of marketing. Beyond core product performance, loyalty arises from a constellation of perceived benefits cultivated over time.

Another example of synergy concerns marketing research and customer insight. The IMM repositions market research – originally among Borden's twelve mix variables – as both a relational and contributive factor: surveys, feedback loops, and co-design processes become not only tools for data collection but also moments of engagement that create awareness and relational value.

In this way, the IMM encourages an integrated, de-siloed organisational logic, aligning marketing, operations and management around the shared objective of balanced exchange.

Scope and fields of application of the IMM

The question of whether marketing mix frameworks can be transposed beyond their original commercial domain has long been debated. Despite numerous extensions – such as the 7P or SAVE models – the traditional mix has struggled to accommodate the diversity of market contexts. By contrast, the IMM offers a structure capable of achieving such integration. Its adaptable architecture naturally extends to a wide range of marketing forms, as outlined below.

• "Traditional" Marketing

In conventional marketing – focused on exchanges between a firm and its target market – operations directed at a given customer segment rely on a combination of factors, guided by the following questions:
Which offerings should be emphasised – the core benefit or peripheral attributes? How credible is the value proposition? How can the prospect's interest be aroused? What type of relationship should be established, and how can it be sustained over time? What contributions can reasonably be expected from the consumer? Is the transaction perceived as fair? Which variables can be adjusted?

• Competitive Marketing

In a competitive context, the IMM serves as a powerful analytical tool for strategy formulation, prompting questions such as:

What actions are competitors taking – are their efforts concentrated on offering, relationship, or contribution factors? Should these be neutralised, bypassed, or countered? What positioning should be adopted?

The IMM thus helps to generalise key strategic options: seeking competitive advantage through quality (offering factors) or through cost (contribution factors), in line with Porter's well-known typology (1982); and increasingly, through relationships, which may constitute a decisive differentiator (Langlois & Tocquer 1992).

• Relationship Marketing

The IMM places relationship marketing at the forefront. By combining transactional and relational logics of commercial action, it clarifies the positioning of various marketing strategies. The model contrasts three main approaches.

. Transactional: purchase decisions are primarily driven by offer-related or cost-related factors (quality, price, value for money).

. Relational: the long-term relationship itself becomes the key determinant of loyalty, emphasising relationship factors.

. Hybrid: seeks to meet immediate market needs, while cultivating enduring relational ties.

While the IMM reconciles these orientations, its approach – through factor arbitration, client-centric continuity, and pursuit of balance – is particularly suited to relational strategies.

• Personal selling/Negotiation

When applied to sales and negotiation, the IMM helps salespeople better understand counterpart positions and identify opportunities by asking: What are the needs of my counterparts? Are there implicit needs or specific projects? What do they value in our offering? Are they satisfied with performance? What contributions are we requesting in return? Is the exchange perceived as fair? What resources do they allocate elsewhere? What kind of relationship exists, and does it suit them? How is the broader organisation involved? This approach was successfully employed by customer advisers, after they had been trained in it.

This framework enables a relational, client-centred approach to negotiation that enhances mutual understanding and perceived fairness.

• Internal Marketing

Applying marketing logic within the organisation involves extending externally proven principles to employees, thereby strengthening internal alignment and reinforcing the logic of exchange. Internal marketing thus appears as both a success factor for external marketing (Dufer 1988) and a driver of organisational commitment (Zekri & Zaiem 2024).

Nevertheless, several reservations have slowed its diffusion. As Soulez and Pujol (2022) note, “human resources marketing” may still sounds like an oxymoron: the tools used by HR practitioners remain largely rooted in internal communication, whereas a broader, crossfunctional perspective is needed.

A literal application of the 4P mix often reinforces this limitation – questions such as “Who is the product?” or “What is the price?” quickly reach their conceptual limits. By contrast, the Interaction Marketing Mix offers a more appropriate framework. The firm provides employees with various offerings: job content, remuneration, training, rewards, career opportunities, and self-enhancement. In return, employees contribute commitment, engagement, flexibility, and mobility. These exchanges occur within a network of internal relationships that shape the organisational climate.

The IMM proves particularly fruitful here, as it enables personalised approaches tailored to specific employee segments and needs. Observing the effectiveness of this concept, the management of a banking institution appointed one of its top performers as Director of Internal Marketing. In collaboration with the Human Resources Department and the Sales Department, his role is to identify and develop synergies between the bank’s internal and external approaches.

Internal marketing also encompasses internal client–supplier relationships, as described by Zardet (1995). These relationships form an internal value chain (Schonberger 1992), in which each department acts simultaneously as a client of one unit and a supplier to the next.

The IMM provides a structured framework that applies readily to such varied professional contexts, supporting a culture of reciprocity and service throughout the organisation, as illustrated by the following two examples we have encountered in a company :

Internal relationship	Offerings (A → B)	Contributions (B → A)	Mutual benefits
Computing (A) ↔ Commercial (B)	Provision and maintenance of CRM tools, technical support.	User feedback, reporting of malfunctions, expression of needs.	High-performance tools for B; continuous improvement of services for A.
Human Resources (A) ↔ Managers (B)	Recruitment, training, legal and regulatory advice.	Definition of competency requirements, validation of profiles,performance monitoring.	Well-matched and motivated teams for B; better HR alignment for A.

This approach had been systematically implemented across the company's various units, as part of a "Total Customer Satisfaction" programme.

Contributions, limitations and research avenues

Having presented the model and discussed its underlying principles, this section outlines the main contributions of the Interaction Marketing Mix (IMM). As both a conceptual framework and a managerial tool, the IMM offers significant theoretical and practical advances. The discussion below highlights these contributions, followed by its limitations and avenues for future research.

1. Theoretical contributions

This work proposes and explores a conceptual model that contrasts with existing frameworks. Compared with the numerous reformulations of the marketing mix – of which Booms and Bitner's 7P model remains the most operationally comprehensive – the IMM stands out for its logic of reciprocity. Whereas most models remain anchored in an instrumental and unidirectional view of marketing, positioning the firm as sender and the market as receiver, the IMM introduces a bilateral dynamic in which both parties – the company (A) and the customer (B) – alternately act as sender and receiver, within a balanced exchange relationship.

By allowing A and B to interchange the roles of provider and requester, the interactive structure underpinning the IMM transcends the traditional divide between supply-driven and demand-driven marketing. Marketing thus becomes not a set of actions directed at the market, but a system of reciprocal interactions pursuing mutual benefits. The IMM places exchange once again at the core of marketing strategy.

Conceptually, the model replaces traditional instrumental variables (Product, Price, Promotion, Place, etc.) with three categories of action factors: offering factors (representing what the firm offers); relationship factors (encompassing the social and symbolic ties structuring the exchange); and contribution factors (referring to the resources – monetary or otherwise – that customers invest). This third category explicitly recognises the customer's active role in value creation, not only through purchase but also through time, attention, coproduction, data sharing, or word-of-mouth. Value co-creation is therefore fully integrated into the structure of the IMM, rather than treated as a peripheral principle.

The model replaces the traditional principle of internal coherence, with the search for a dynamic balance between offerings and contributions. This equilibrium – enriched by relational components – becomes the new criterion for assessing exchange quality, from both actors' perspectives.

By restoring mutual respect to marketing thought, the IMM reconciles managerial efficiency with social legitimacy. It represents less an adaptation than a paradigmatic reorientation, embedding performance within fairness and relational sustainability. Its principle of reciprocity aligns with contemporary ethical expectations and with the definition of marketing proposed by the French Marketing Association (AFM 2015): "Marketing is a concept of exchange and a set of practices that aim to create sustainable value for all stakeholders (individuals, businesses, or organisations)."

The guiding concept of balance gives the IMM particular relevance today, allowing bridges to be built between approaches that might otherwise appear incompatible. It also addresses certain internal limitations of the 4P framework. For instance, the "Promotion" variable – often criticised for its excessive focus on persuasion – finds renewed meaning within the IMM's bilateral and participatory logic. The model also clarifies long-standing ambiguities (e.g. the place of sales force or branding) by shifting the analytical focus from variables to action factors.

Finally, the universal and ethical orientation of the IMM extends its relevance beyond commercial sectors to domains such as internal, competitive, and negotiation marketing.

2. Managerial implications

For marketing practitioners, organisational leaders and entrepreneurs, the IMM provides a practical and flexible framework for implementing customer-oriented strategies. It encourages systematic consideration of the recipient's perspective when defining operational elements: How is the offer perceived? What type of relationship is expected? What contributions are required in return?

The contribution factors highlight the need to account for non-monetary efforts – such as time, attention, data, and engagement – when evaluating exchange value. The IMM also invites firms to adopt a relational mindset, even when products naturally lend themselves to transactional management. It supports strategic planning by integrating relational and ethical dimensions across several parameters: customer orientation, buyer type (relational or transactional), product nature (durable good, consumable, or service), and level of corporate social responsibility.

The model thus contributes to more responsible business practices and to a fairer economy. Its emphasis on interactivity aligns with the goals of sustainable development, promoting harmony and mutual understanding among stakeholders.

Furthermore, the IMM avoids the "marketing myopia" denounced by Levitt (1960), by focusing on performance factors rather than on products themselves. It recognises that value creation extends both before and after the transaction, integrating activities such as market research and after-sales communication into the mix.

Finally, the IMM's dual adaptability – commercial and organisational – constitutes one of its distinctive strengths. It can be adjusted to evolving environments, while remaining applicable across a variety of contexts beyond traditional marketing.

3. Limitations

Although the IMM is well suited to core marketing activities – such as interpersonal negotiation – it remains primarily strategic rather than operational. Field applications often require more concrete tools than those offered by conceptual models. By emphasising the customer's perspective and focusing on the final outcome (the delivered offer), the IMM may appear less practical for tasks such as pricing or logistics management. It is arguably easier for managers to set a price or an advertising budget, than to analyse the range of contributions and relational factors involved in a transaction. Yet, while traditional approaches may be simpler to apply, they are not necessarily more effective: the IMM offers a more demanding but more relevant framework.

By distinguishing between offering and relationship factors, the model also clarifies two forms of loyalty – one based on the offer, the other on the relationship. While its interactive structure may create virtuous feedback loops of mutual satisfaction, maintaining this equilibrium can be difficult. The IMM may therefore prove more effective for retention than for acquisition.

Lastly, its high adaptability represents both a strength and a weakness. While it allows application across diverse contexts, excessive flexibility might lead to suboptimal outcomes compared with more targeted approaches. In certain situations, strategic withdrawal may prove wiser than constant adjustment.

4. Research avenues

The IMM opens up a wide range of opportunities for future research. Chief among them is the need for empirical validation across different sectors to assess its robustness and applicability, particularly in the context of physical goods. Comparative studies with traditional marketing mix models (4P, 7P, SAVE, etc.) could further evaluate its conceptual relevance and operational effectiveness.

Future research should also examine relationship and contribution factors in greater depth, especially regarding the customer's role as a co-creator of value and the mechanisms that sustain balance in exchanges. Both the compensatory mechanisms underpinning the model, and the underlying pursuit of equilibrium that guides them, may be of particular interest to scholars investigating perceived value and its operationalization.

Finally, the transformations brought about by digitalization and the rise of artificial intelligence invite research into how the interaction mix can be adapted to hybrid environments, where physical interactions, digital platforms, and online communities converge. The observation of emerging practices in these settings could refine the model, highlight its limitations, and suggest new avenues for application.

CONCLUSION

By linking managerial applicability with theoretical coherence, the IMM offers a renewed foundation for marketing thought and practice. Beyond its conceptual contribution, it promotes a responsible and human-centred vision of marketing – one that reconciles managerial performance with fairness and mutual respect. In doing so, it opens promising avenues for research and innovation, towards sustainable and balanced value creation. In this respect, the paper serves as an invitation to both scholars and practitioners, to further explore and validate the IMM across diverse marketing contexts.

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