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21/10/2019 Mon 16:13 in Indonesia by Avelyn Ng

Specialists versus generalists: Which attributes will land you in the CMO seat?



With more big companies such as [Coca-Cola](#) and Johnson & Johnson rethinking the role of CMO, replacing it with titles such as chief growth officers and chief experience officers, the CMO role has undergone [massive changes](#). No longer confined to the realms of marketing alone, CMOs of the future need to be equip with skills in technology, transformation and possess insight that will drive overall business growth.

Yet, often enough, finding the next generation of CMOs remain a struggle for top management. According to an Accenture study published in March, two in three CEOs today don't believe that their current marketing leads have the leadership skills or business acumen required for the role.

Harriet de Swiet, managing director, APAC at Brand Learning, a marketing and sales capability consultancy which was acquired by Accenture in 2017, said that many marketers today are "trapped in the frozen middle" because they spend too much of their time managing the basic tasks. As a result, they do not have the time to think and break through to innovative "blue sky thinking" and need to think much more holistically across the organisation.

Agreeing to the point, TrinityP3 CEO Darren Woolley said that marketers today come across as "specialists" in their function, rather than "generalists" in organisations. While they hold deep expertise when it comes to the marketing knowledge, their views of the overall business strategy might not be as comprehensive.

"The problem is specialists will be a mile deep in their topic and only an inch wide. They are so

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focused on their discipline that they can lose sight of how an approach fit the overall strategy,” he said. This problem is further exacerbated as more marketers choose to be specialists within the marketing field, further isolating themselves from the overall business direction.

“One of the biggest challenges for a specialist, especially those wedded in a digital or technology approach, is they often discount the non-digital option as being outdated or irrelevant,” he explained.

Generalists, who have a working knowledge of all the available options, make the best CMOs, Woolley said. They not only have a broad understanding of marketing but they also understand the business when developing and delivering the marketing strategy, leading to business results. “The strength of the generalist as a marketing leader is in their ability to form the big picture in strategy and objectives, and manage specialist resources in their team to deliver the results as a coordinated team,” he added.

Adding on, Cheryl Lim, VP, head of branding, communications and sponsorships at Manulife told *Marketing* that generalists also have an advantage when it comes to getting buy-in at the board room. Armed with general knowledge about other domains, she said those marketers tend to be “street-wise” internally and know how to navigate the “hot buttons of various key stakeholders” better. In doing so, they are also able to change the misconception that the marketing department that merely splashes money around, and communicate how it has been contributing to business effectively.

However, marketing leaders who have climbed their way up the career ladder as a subject matter expert may find getting out of their comfort zones a challenge. Lim suggested that they reach out, engage and learn from other specialists in the areas they are aiming to expand into.

“They can try reverse mentoring with younger, promising staff from a different department or volunteer in a cross-department project to gain more exposure beyond marketing,” she added.

Need for hybrids

But even generalists are not perfect. On the flip side, lack of specialist knowledge can leave many leaders feeling vulnerable in areas where their expertise is lacking. For instance, generalists can be misled by advice from the various specialists, who may have a vested interest in pushing the investment in their specialty. Else, they may also completely err away from what they do not know or over-compensate by jumping for quick fixes and promises of a solution.

With two sides to each coin, perhaps what is needed in every organisation or team is both generalist and specialist skillsets. Xaxis Asia Pacific SVP Deepika Nikhilender said to *Marketing*: “Just like how we choose between a spanner and a Swiss army knife depending on the task at hand, there will be circumstances where either will shine and emerge successful in achieving the desired outcome.”

Nikhilender explained that specialists tend to work better in clarity or structure, while generalists work easily in chaos and fluidity.

“Specialists find the dots, but generalists may be better at joining the dots and seeing the patterns.”

Facing changing media and buying behaviour as well as digital ecosystems, Nikhilender said CMOs are under pressure to be “T-shaped” marketers. While having specialist knowledge in one or a few marketing fields, ranging from branding to media and communications, CMOs also need to possess a basic understanding across a wide breadth of topics. They include data analysis, email marketing, funnel building, and HTML coding.

Against a dynamic landscape that evolves at a furious speed, remaining a generalist or specialist alone will limit the success and growth of the CMO, said Nikhilender. Being either one or the other would result in short-term decisions being made with lacking perspectives – which may disadvantage the marketing outcomes.

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Does the perfect CMO exist?

As marketing teams grow in size and diversity, CMOs are also challenged to decode the complexities of marketing and ad technology to decide the right structure, talent, skills and outcomes for the company. "Their leadership skills to steer collaboration and purpose will be challenged and tested like never before," she added.

Be it specialist or a generalist, Nikhilender said the CMO that will ultimately thrive in today's landscape is one who is ready for change. She shared: "Be ready to "unlearn", be comfortable with the uncomfortable. Be curious – upskill and reskill. Be brave to hire talent from diverse backgrounds, skills and cultures. And finally, be fearless about failure."

These hard and soft skills however, are hard to come by. Raja Rajamannar, chief marketing and communications officer at Mastercard, said that in the past, CMOs typically came from the creative side of the house. But simply being creative, is totally inadequate now. Marketers need to understand the quantitative side of the house. Rajamannar added that unfortunately, individuals with both creative and quantitative qualities now often choose to venture out into the start-up space or start their own companies.

Calling it a "serious existential situation" for the traditional marketers, Rajamannar added that knowing the "classics" of marketing such as the four P's are no longer sufficient at a time when CMOs in some companies manage bigger technological projects than chief information officers. "Marketing has become data-driven, empowering marketers in an unbelievable way," he explained.

CMOs are required to establish a "causal relationship" between marketing actions and business outcomes. Without the right answers to how they are driving margins and strengthening brands' positions in the market, CMOs risk losing their credibility. "They should be quintessential business man with a deep-rooted understanding of marketers' specialisation," he said.

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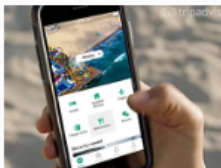
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