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Is Your B2B Marketing Department Tapping the Right Talent?

Frank Mulhern, Ph.D.

Northwestern University



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No longer outposts serving in a supporting role, today's top-notch B2B marketing departments interact with customers, collaborate with colleagues and advise leaders in a brand new way.

Rapidly evolving technologies have altered the way business is done and demand new skillsets.

Meantime, another seismic shift is afoot: vast demographic changes are altering the supply and make-up of available talent.

The shifts in the technological and demographic landscapes can offer more promise than peril to marketing departments with the agility—the optimal talent mix--to meet the challenge.

So, what are the specific talent challenges B2B marketing departments must hurdle to fulfill their expanding roles?

TECHNOLOGY SHIFT

In PricewaterhouseCoopers' 17th annual CEO survey released this year, 81% of respondents named technological advances as a top “transformative trend” for their businesses. That rate of mention far outpaced that of any other top trend.

Certain hard and soft skills rise to the surface as essential in today's B2B marketing departments. They integrate traditional marketing competencies with new ones.

Exemplary B2B marketing departments will include employees who can bring these roles to life in the digital workplace:

- Brain-Trust

- Customer Insight Providers
- Brand Insight Providers
- Internal/External Messengers
- Internal Bridge-Builder

The Brain Trust

Meeting the demands of the marketing profession is “not formulaic like it used to be,” according to Linda McGovern, vice president of marketing at USG, the Chicago-based manufacturer and distributor of building materials.

McGovern says today’s marketing departments demand a mix of analytical skills, creative thinking skills and strategic mindsets. Problem-solving skills are also a must. “We can get experts to crunch the data. Marketers need to know what the data means,” she said.

A marketer is increasingly becoming seen as the brain trust of organizations, collaborating extensively with IT, HR and Sales to create internal and external mechanisms to ensure the success of a brand (Edelman, 2012).

In addition, marketers have ongoing knowledge about competitors and other conditions outside the company. In increasingly complex environments, marketers (with the ability to think strategically about actions and outcomes) are in a position to harness all aspects of an organization to improve performance.

Marketing departments have the power to leverage the insight that analytics offer.

But according to Andy Crestodina, co-founder of the Chicago-based Orbit Media Group, many companies fail to make the most of the data employees now have at their fingertips.

“If you have a question about your business, you should be looking at analytics for the answer. It is real-time market research.” Analytics tell you about what products are most in demand down to details about when customers become bored and leave a webpage,” he said.

Essential Brain Trust Skills:

- Strategic thinking and the ability to envision organizational outcomes and pathways to reach them
- Analytics – either being able to do so directly or to manage analysts doing so
- Leadership – ability to take a leadership position across organizational silos

Deep Customer Insights

Marketing departments need to define those skills that are critical for the customer experience. What is the customer driving?

Traditional marketing skills were oriented around functions and tasks. Now, skill requirements are shifting to be more people and information based. Above all, marketers are the stewards for customers. Doing this successfully today requires a substantial upgrade in research skills, well beyond traditional marketing research.

Technology can be used as a tool for increased communication and feedback with the customer base. Many companies today are sharing content, like best practices and industry news; and getting leads and

acquiring customers through Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Google+ and Facebook. Social media is allowing marketers to explore entrepreneurial opportunities for their companies by uncovering unmet needs and providing unique solutions (Meister and Willyerd, 2010).

Command and control marketing is dead, and connectivity is the new way.

Software-as-a-service company Leadspace has made a business of filling a niche for its customers by finding prospects in social media networks and lead databases based upon potential customers' online preferences and the similarity to existing customer base.

These initiatives are important examples of the challenge—or opportunity--that the availability of detailed information about the customer base poses, and a company's ability to create a unique approach to its customers.

Google's Arjan Dijk, Vice President for Global Small Business Marketing, has been quoted as saying he believes products should be designed to market themselves. For Google, marketing isn't about "pushing people's thoughts and actions. It's about amplification, helping what's already happening grow faster" (Bonchek and France, 2014).

Essential Customer Insight Skills:

- Research skills
- Social media monitoring
- Understanding entirety of the customer experience/journey

- Harnessing data for relevant information
- Leading change by using information to influence other employees

Branding

Branding is important, but less brand loyalty exists than in the past, because the buyer can do so much research on their own. In the past, the buyer relied on a sales person and advertising for brand information. How does the marketer contend with this?

Buyers today, particularly the younger generation, are doing online research and often enter the picture well into the marketing funnel.

To adapt, marketers must have communications skills to genuinely participate in social media environments in ways that are relevant to customers and not perceived as selling. Marketers must know what information customers are interested in consuming and shift emphasis to information and services that enhance the customer experience.

American Express and IBM are two examples of companies with enhanced connection with the customer. Both publish useful content on their websites. AMEX's Open Forum is an advice-sharing platform for entrepreneurs while avoiding any hint of a hard-sell. Entrepreneurial businesses can share input, get advice and unite with other businesses. The site promises to allow these start-ups to "exchange experiences, insights, tools and tips to inspire each other to take action and succeed."

Another example: Microsoft is overhauling its approach to marketing—shifting from product-specific ads to broader customer and business-oriented campaigns.

Technology also opens new doors for branding internally, as the next section explores.

Skills for new brand environment:

- Marketers must monitor closely what is said about a brand online, particularly in social media
- Research and communications skills to produce relevant content

Internal and external messengers

Marketers are the only managers who can be the integrators of internal and external messaging; nearly all other areas of management are internally focused. Traditional approaches separate external and internal communications, and that no longer works.

Marketers need to understand all audiences for communications; they must break away from a “customer-only” focus and understand insights for all constituents. They are key to transferring essential knowledge within their own companies, including that about the customer and that about the brand.

Deloitte experts spelled out this role of technology in a recent blog: “Cloud, mobile, social and analytics...have the potential to re-craft the employee experience so that they can learn faster on the job and in their day-to-day work environments—among the most powerful forms of talent development that one can imagine” (Hagel, Gandhi, Rodriguez, 2013).

Nokia created Blog Hub, an expert intranet directory that aggregates all Nokia employee blogs so they are searchable and ranked as to the most active, identifying the leading bloggers and what they are talking about.

Nokia also created Video Hub, an internal video-sharing site modeled after YouTube, where any employee can record and publish a video to the site. The videos are “culture and values in action,” according to the company (Meister, Willyerd).

Other examples include IBM’s Social Blue network for its employees to connect digitally. IT services firm Virtusa created its own social network that allows 2-way communication between employee and employer, and also developed an online platform that tracks productivity and the quality of work in order to provide feedback (Boston Globe, Jan. 2013).

Social media breaks down the walls between internal and external communications; firms must manage this carefully and have clear policies.

Skills needed:

- Marketers need to be the uber-communicators – this includes oral, written and increasingly “picture/video” messaging
- This aligns closely with leadership competencies

Bridging the gap with IT

What are a marketing department’s requirements for technology, data, analysis, and creative skills? In other words, what is the ideal right brain/left brain mix? This is cited as the most difficult challenge CMOs face.

Many CMOs let IT handle technology, data and analytics. This is a problem because those departments do not understand customers, brands and strategy.

Marketers need to be savvier with data, analytics and technology. They do not need to be analysts, but do need to understand how to guide analysis by asking the right questions and put results into action. Businesses must train marketers to do this. In addition, businesses should have career-long learning programs to help marketers keep up with technology.

While many senior executives focus on the overall financial metrics, the key to harnessing the power of available technology is to tie it to metrics that matter for the enterprise while also empowering the employee.

Skills:

- Ideally, the future marketer has technology and analytic skills and can either do them directly or effectively manage employees doing them
- Compare marketers (most of whom can't do analytics) to accountants, engineers or economists who understand both concepts and analytics
- The future marketers will have analytic skills and competencies

Bridging the gap with sales

Lead generation and managing is becoming more complex yet much more powerful because of access to data and real-time tracking. Sales forces do not have the skills for managing leads at these levels of sophistication and will rely on marketers to do so.

The traditional marketing funnel has to account for a new relationship with the customer and the non-linear paths to purchase. Antonio Lucio, Chief Brand Officer at Visa, believes the solution is to shift the focus from the transaction to the relationship itself. His team has developed what they call a Customer Engagement Journey. In this model, transactions occur in the context of the relationship rather than relationships in the context of the transaction (Bonchek and France, 2014).

In an internal study, marketing automation software company Marketo found that it generates 48% of all new business from lead nurturing.

Skills for lead generation and management:

- Marketers must have data and information management skills to identify prospects and monitor/influence their path to purchase
- These include database management and analysis skills to find prospects, as well as, on-going tracking through digital technologies
- They also must have strong interpersonal and communication skills to work with sales departments to collaborate towards mutual interests

Marketers as leaders

Marketers are positioned to become important strategic advisors for their CEOs and other department leaders. That empowerment comes in part from knowing how to suggest using technology throughout the organization.

Marketers need to be leaders — connecting across departments – driving sales leads and performance. This means that organizations need to have leadership development programs that go way beyond traditional marketing skills and develop interpersonal skills, strategic envisioning, and pathways to execution – all built around acquiring customers and maximizing the quality of customer experiences.

“(I)n the new world, technology may be required but it is not enough... (the new world) will not simply separate the tech haves from the tech have-nots. It will likely favor those who know what’s required in the new age of performance, and it will sideline those who do not” (Hagel, Gandhi and Rodriguez, 2014).

DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFT

Demographic shifts came in second only to technological advances in PwC’s CEO survey of top transformative trends, receiving mention by 60 percent of respondents.

B2B marketing departments are finding that their raised profile is intersecting with a significant shift in workplace demographics.

Appealing to Fresh Talent

The hot topic of baby boomers retiring is equaled by interest in the incoming generation of Millennials.

Millennials, a population that is both large in number and steeped in technology, are likely to change the practice of business in the coming decades.

Outnumbering Generation Xers by approximately 88 million to 50 million, their numbers are close to that of the Baby Boomer generation, which is in the process of leaving the workforce (Meister and Willyerd, 2010).

Numerous studies have provided valuable insights into their priorities. According to the research, today's 20-something is likely to be socially conscious, a seeker of authenticity, hyper-connected through technology, collaborative, and innovative.

Here is how a few companies are attempting to recruit the best of that incoming demographic:

- KPMG uses [YouTube](#) to get at millennials where they gather, and promote an engaging employer brand.
- BlackRock has a Human Capital Committee, composed of 35 senior line leaders, that is actively engaged in employer branding in order to tailor its appeal to a new breed of college and business school graduates (HBR, 2014).

Amid the entry of the millennials, marketing departments potentially have four generations actively engaged: traditionalists, baby boomers, generation Xers and millennials. (The great recession impacted the ability of traditionalists to retire as early as they might otherwise have done.)

When people differ so much from one generation to the next, the implications for talent management are profound.

Along with marketers who are now personalizing the customer experience, HR departments and CMOs have to manage this diverse workforce with an approach that speaks to the unique character of each population.

Businesses need to modify talent acquisition and development, compensation, workplace design, performance requirements, performance evaluation, career planning and a host of protocols for engaging and motivating employees.

Taking an inventory of which marketers are nearing viable retirement age over the next five years and which skill sets they will take with them can help prevent skill gaps and spur conversations about recruiting and training employees.

Hearty succession plans and training programs are as important as ever.

Sharing skills and knowledge

“Among the issues impacting the ‘next generation’ workforce, are impending skills shortages, an increasingly cross-generational and diverse workforce, the need for knowledge transfer from retiring baby boomers, and significant leadership gaps” (Hewitt, 2008).

With a more strategic role, B2B marketing departments now have to find ways to share information both within the marketing department and with other departments, including sales.

Training initiatives are being altered in some companies to take advantage of new ways to share information.

- Robert Campbell, CLO of Cerner Corporation, says his company is “allocating more dollars and people resources to create informal ways our associates can learn from each other” (Meister and Willyerd, 2010).
- AT&T is using technology in its mentoring initiatives, conducting group mentoring either face-to-face or over a technology platform. Mentoring occurs online with “leadership circles,” self-organizing, topic-based groups. One leader can work with several employees at once via community forums, document sharing spaces, group polling, and more (Meister and Willyerd).
- Carol Kruse, former head marketer at both ESPN and Tough Mudder, started a reverse mentoring program where young digital natives were linked up with senior managers. Kruse said, “many people in senior management really don't understand what is going on in the mobile/social world, because they are not users of these platforms.” The junior employee gave his or her own insights and mentoring in return (Kruse, 2014).

Being Meaningful

Avoiding talent gaps in B2B marketing departments today also means keeping employees satisfied on a level beyond the bi-weekly paycheck. The ability to be proud of a brand is figuring into employee satisfaction levels beyond the incoming Millennials. Marketing departments are collaborating with HR to make sure the brand is appealing externally and internally.

In its recent rebranding effort, USG, a leading building products company, activated its brand by highlighting its sponsorship of the Olympic and Paralympic programs. That effort was not simply an

external strategy, but also aimed at employees. (The company also was honored recently with the 2013 Alfred P. Sloan Award for Excellence in Workplace Effectiveness and Flexibility for its use of flexibility as a workplace strategy to increase business and employee success.)

A “new sense of community” is partly responsible for driving change, according to Brian Cook, USG’s Senior Vice President of Human Resources. “Employees like to do community service, and like to work for a company that does it.”

The Global, Mobile Shift

The shift to global markets also demands B2B marketing departments be prepared for the challenge. “Getting the talent equation right has never been easy for businesses, but as companies globalize, it is proving exceptionally difficult” (Ernst & Young, 2012).

The blossoming of new markets through mobile technology—the spread of mobile phones globally is unmatched in the history of technology--requires that B2B marketing departments interact with IT departments to realize those opportunities.

For many businesses, mobile technologies are likely to figure significantly into the overall marketing strategy, and in some cases might be the primary channel through which a company promotes its business.

Stepping into the Future

The way companies interact with their employees and their customers is changing amid remarkable technology and demographic shifts. B2B marketing departments need to get the talent and skills formula right in order to attract and retain the kind of employees ready to step up to the new leadership role and help their companies compete in the business climate of today and tomorrow.

Amid this challenge, B2B marketing departments need to use what it already does best and strategize into the future, while combining traditional competencies with an analytical framework that customizes, personalizes, analyzes, strategizes, and collaborates.

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