

# Capitalizing on Change: Skills for a New Era of B2B Marketing



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**B**usiness leaders face a new constant: Fast-paced changes in technology demand a strategic response. This represents a significant opportunity for B2B marketing professionals, who are uniquely poised to build corporate alliances and develop new approaches that drive success amid these changes.

Once seen as outposts to support sales, exemplary marketing departments now stand at the center of corporate strategy. Marketers, armed with data-rich customer insights and collaborative tools, can serve as strategic advisors for sales, IT, human resources, product development and customer service — not to mention the entire C-suite. They can collaborate internally and externally to create strong relationships with other departments and with the customer.

This new era holds great promise, but it also demands that marketers inte-

“Marketing is now so important that CMOs will make the best next-generation CEOs — thanks to their understanding of data and the customer.”

— Russell Glass, head of B2B product at LinkedIn<sup>1</sup>

grate traditional competencies with new skill sets. This paper, based on the FORUM's October 2014 research study *Is Your B2B Marketing Department Tapping the Right Talent?* by Northwestern University's Dr. Frank Mulhern, explores these new demands.

Mulhern identifies six key proficiencies that B2B marketing leaders need to cultivate within their departments. His research emphasizes the role that evolving technologies have played in repositioning the profession. It also demonstrates that marketers need to

leverage more than digital talents as their careers advance.

## A Promising Evolution

“The rising importance of data to companies (organizations in general and marketing departments in particular) is changing the perception of marketing's value,” writes Russell Glass, head of B2B product at LinkedIn. “In fact, marketing is now so important that CMOs will make the best next-generation CEOs — thanks to their understanding of data and the customer.”<sup>1</sup>

Global corporate leaders are looking for colleagues who can help them manage the digital learning curve. More than 80 percent of CEOs who participated in a PricewaterhouseCoopers survey earlier this year said new technologies — social, mobile, analytical, and the cloud — are transforming the way they operate. “For businesses, having a digital strategy will no longer be enough,” writes Bob Moritz, senior partner at PwC U.S. “Instead, they’ll need a business strategy fit for the digital age.”<sup>2</sup>

B2B marketers are uniquely qualified to design and advance these new strategies. The modern marketing department holds a talent mix that allows it not only to implement new technologies but also to place the gains of those systems in context. A well-designed department brings to the table traditional marketing competencies as well as technical, analytical, and leadership skills that allow organizations to benefit in a rapidly evolving digital environment.

## 1 **Competency 1: Become the Brain Trust**

B-to-B transactions involve a diverse array of constituents. Businesses must be prepared to communicate with entire teams of buyers and clients — and to tailor communications to suit each individual role in a purchase.

Moreover, the leaders of departments across the enterprise must collaborate to build a cohesive engagement strategy that spans the customer experience.

This represents an opportunity for marketers, who have the ability to extend their influence beyond their traditional functional silo and into sales, IT, and customer service. Marketers are increasingly being tapped to coordinate customer engagements.

Marketers must use automation platforms, social media listening programs, and other digital tools to interact with customers and build

and to define what that experience will be, how the brand will be distinctive in the way it delivers that experience, and then what requirements are needed across functions to make the whole thing work.”<sup>4</sup>

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### CRITICAL SKILLS

- **Strategic thinking:** Envision pathways to achieve broad organizational goals.
  - **Leadership:** Reach across silos. Work with HR, IT, and sales to drive results.
  - **Analytics:** Crunch the numbers, or manage analysts who provide that insight.
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## 2 **Competency 2: Develop Deep Customer Insights**

B2B marketers need to home in on the digital body language of buyers who increasingly delay interactions with the sales force. They need to track clicks and listen to social media channels to determine the most effective pieces of content to serve next. And, as they work to pull prospects further along the sales pipeline, they can gain much more than an understanding of marketing preferences.

Business marketers have become the stewards of the overall customer experience. This relationship requires a substantial upgrade of traditional market research skills. It also requires marketers to understand not only the new talents that they need to develop but also how those new talents can serve the entire customer experience. The customer insights that marketers build must be applied beyond the borders of marketing.

Marketing technologies can increase the potential for communication with audiences. Companies can develop

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“ [Marketers] have to find ways to orchestrate the experience.”

— David Edelman, principal, McKinsey & Co.<sup>4</sup>

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“In the new world, technology may be required, but it is not enough,” writes a team of Deloitte consultants in *Forbes*. 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.”<sup>3</sup>

Organizations should build leadership programs to help marketing departments build these competencies.

customer insights. Those insights then allow a company to construct an overarching strategy and tailor the customer experience. Marketers hold the potential to become the brain trust of the organization, pulling the levers that activate the best channels and strongest messages in order to create systems of engagement with audiences.

David Edelman, principal at McKinsey & Co., says marketers “have to find ways to orchestrate the experience

content to establish thought leadership or to gain new leads. Social media interactions can net new customers or reveal unmet needs that become opportunities for the product development team. New software can generate lists of potential customers based simply on social media behavior.

These examples demonstrate both the challenge and the opportunity of detailed customer insights. Marketers no longer control the progression of customer interactions, but they can tap into multiple channels to uncover insights that help them shape a unique approach to those customers.

Arjan Dijk, vice president for global small business marketing at Google, has said marketing is not about driving people to think or act in a desired way. “It’s about amplification, helping what’s already happening to grow faster.”<sup>5</sup>

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## CRITICAL SKILLS

- **Research:** Harness data that helps you understand and connect with customers.
- **Social media:** Monitor social chatter and leverage insights as you shape strategy.
- **Buyer journey:** Map the paths your buyers follow. Deliver quality experiences.
- **Leadership:** Share insights with other departments, and become a change agent.

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## Competency 3: Build a Social Brand

Buyers have lost faith in carefully crafted marketing messages, a fact that becomes more and more pronounced as millennial professionals gain influence. Millennials rely



instead on their own research, often entering the picture well into the marketing funnel.

To contend with this, B2B marketers must adapt their approach. They can no longer simply broadcast the brand message. They must embody it. Social channels offer the opportunity to communicate corporate purpose and culture and to build rapport with individual prospects and with customers.

“Companies need to think about how social media should play a role in customer management, brand management, sales management, and innovation management — the most important areas where marketing can contribute to the company,” says

Christine Moorman, director of The CMO Survey.<sup>6</sup>

Marketers must develop communication skills that allow them to genuinely participate in social media environments. Their communications must be perceived not as selling, but as helpful and relevant. They must be able to tap into customers’ interests and then gently shift communications to serve information that enhances the customer experience.

American Express, for example, has developed an advice-sharing platform for entrepreneurs called American Express OPEN. Its users share input, get advice, and collaborate with peers, building a positive brand experience.

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rience without ever encountering a hard sell.

As B2B marketers move away from product-based messages, they also must build personalized interactions that treat the customer as an individual. “Marketing and sales leaders need to develop complete pictures of their customers so they can create unique messages and products that are relevant to them,” write three partners at McKinsey & Co. in *Forbes*.<sup>7</sup>

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## CRITICAL SKILLS

- **Brand monitoring:** Listen to online channels to understand brand perception.
- **Communications:** Research marketplace needs and develop relevant content.

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## Competency 4: Carry Both Internal and External Messages

Marketers cannot simply focus on customers. They also need to build insights to help their organizations rally workers around the brand, recruit new talent, and better understand employee motivation. “As marketers, we have always owned the customer experience,” explains Kathy Button Bell, CMO of Emerson. “Now we have to inspire the employee experi-

ence as well and convince employees that we’re worth their personal investment.”<sup>8</sup>

Marketers will need to develop insights that allow them to understand both customer and colleague, increasing engagement on both fronts. Traditional approaches that separated these functions should instead be integrated, as the processes draw on similar marketing competencies.

“The same four emerging technologies — cloud, mobile, social, and analytics — have the potential to re-craft the employee experience so that they can learn faster on the job in their day-to-day work environments,” writes the Deloitte team in *Forbes*.<sup>3</sup>

Corporate blogs, intranets, and proprietary social networks can be places for collaboration. Marketers should take note: Social media breaks down the wall between internal and external communications. Organizations must develop clear policies to guide social sharing.

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## CRITICAL SKILLS

- **Communication:** Develop strong speaking and writing skills.
- **Leadership:** Be a role model. Share insights and set the tone of communications.

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— Kathy Button Bell, CMO, Emerson

## Competency 5: Bridge the Gap with IT

Marketers often point to the challenge of balancing left- and right-brain approaches. To be successful, they need to blend art with science. But too often they let technology, data, and analytics remain firmly in the domain of their colleagues in IT. This is a problem, because these departments simply do not hold deep knowledge of the customer or the brand.

Marketers do not necessarily need to become analysts, but they do need to be able to guide the work of analysts, understand data, and turn insights into strategy. Like engineers and economists, marketers need to be able to look at numbers and derive concepts.

“We can get experts to crunch the data,” says Linda McGovern, vice president of marketing at USG. “Marketers need to know what the data means.”<sup>9</sup>

B2B organizations need to support marketers and provide training as they develop analytical skills. The focus must be not only on financial metrics, but also on long-term strategy for the enterprise. In addition, companies should implement career-long learning programs that acknowledge a reality: The technology marketers use to do their jobs never will stop changing, and it’s unlikely that customers’ expectations will do anything but increase.

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### CRITICAL SKILLS

- **Management:** Learn to guide the experts. Collaborate with IT.
  - **Technology:** Explore new tools, and commit to a lifetime of learning.
  - **Analytics:** Extract insights from data. Build long- and short-term strategies.
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“The primary problem with the funnel is that the buying process is no longer linear.”

— Mark Bonchek, chief catalyst of ThinkORBIT, and Cara France, CEO of the Sage Group<sup>5</sup>

## Competency 6: Bridge the Gap with Sales

The arc of the customer relationship has changed. Lead generation and management have become increasingly complex, and access to data and real-time tracking are empowering deep insights. Sales forces have neither the skills nor the bandwidth to take advantage of this new sophistication. They will rely on marketers instead.

Changes brought on by the introduction of new technolo-

gies require marketers to rethink the concept of the funnel itself, write Mark Bonchek, chief catalyst of ThinkORBIT, and Cara France, CEO of the Sage Group, in the *Harvard Business Review*. “The primary problem with the funnel is that the buying process is no longer linear.”<sup>5</sup>

Bonchek and France look at new frameworks that marketers are building to define the customer experience. For example, Antonio Lucio, chief brand officer at Visa, discusses the model that his company created, called the Customer Engagement



Journey. In this model, “transactions occur in the context of the relationship rather than relationships occurring in the context of the transaction.”<sup>5</sup>

To lead this kind of transformation, B2B marketers must have data and information management skills that enable them to identify prospects and influence their path to purchase. They must be able to manage databases and use technology to track progress. And they must also be prepared to collaborate with sales.

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## CRITICAL SKILLS 6

- **Data management:** Identify prospects and monitor their paths to purchase.
- **Communication:** Collaborate with sales. Identify and ameliorate pain points.

## Marketers as Leaders

Marketers, out of necessity, have become experts at navigating change. The digital age brings with it tremendous new responsibilities and new opportunities.

Marketers must focus both on the mechanics of emerging technologies and on the strategic gains that these new tools make available. They must step into the leadership role that now organically presents itself and work with colleagues across silos to shape customer experiences and drive long-term growth.

Organizations need to build leadership programs that help marketers develop the competencies highlighted in this paper. The investment will support the health of the overall enterprise, allowing companies to move forward with marketers as key strategic advisors.



## The Forum

**The Forum: Business Results Through People**, affiliated with Northwestern University, is an organizational trust for thought leadership advocating that the most effective way business leaders can create and sustain organizational value is through their partnership with people. The Forum promotes a people-centered leadership approach by: providing relevant, provocative, and actionable academic research; creating a platform for leaders to dialog, network and benchmark practices; delivering ideas for practical action and experimentation; and building and supporting a community of champions for people-centered leadership.



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