

conversations on leadership

What CXOs think of marketing: Three essential lessons for CMOs

By Kristi Maynor, Amanda Roberts and Cynthia Soledad

At more and more organizations, marketing has become firmly established as a C-suite function. But this elevated stature is more than just an acknowledgement of the function's importance; it also places the chief marketing officer in a peer-to-peer network with the CEO, the CFO, the general counsel and the rest of the executive committee. This leads to an important question: What do these CXOs think of the marketing member in their midst?

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To find out, the Egon Zehnder Chief Marketing Officer Practice held in-depth interviews with C-suite leaders at global market-leading companies across five industries. We began by

giving them a few marketing terms and asking them what came to mind. The results were enlightening.

We said:	CMO	REPUTATION	BRAND
CXOs said:	Vision	Critical	Relevant
	Brand	Currency	Loyalty
	Creative	Brand	Our promise
	Analytical	Incredibly important	Core
	Sales	Fundamental	Public perception
	Style	Paramount	Overarching
	Leader	Everything	Trust

While “trust” was just one response, in our view, that quality underscores many of the concepts CXOs associate with the CMO and the marketing function. And trust is, in fact, the central pillar of marketing. Without it, a brand quickly becomes irrelevant, or worse, a punchline.

In order to probe deeper into CXO perspectives, we asked our interviewees five questions about the role of marketing in their organizations, and then asked the same questions of the CMOs and other marketing leaders at this year’s Kellogg Marketing Leadership Summit. The responses of the two groups present three key takeaways CMOs should keep in mind as they interact with their CXO peers.

Lesson 1: When it comes to data, guide rather than spin.

Marketers have long since learned that honesty is the best policy when dealing with the public; anyone not doing so will be quickly called out on social media. The same lesson holds when sharing marketing data within the C-suite. When we asked whether marketing data was used primarily to optimize marketing expenditures or to justify them, two thirds of the CMOs responded the former. CXOs, however, were evenly split. As one Chief Strategy Officer bluntly put it, “CMOs lose trust and credibility when trying to convince everyone their campaigns are great.”

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That CMOs feel they need to “sell” their impact came across when we asked what the biggest factor was that inhibits sharing marketing data across the C-Suite. While CXO responses were spread evenly across a variety of answers, more than half of the CMOs said the biggest problem was controlling the interpretation of the data. Here, too, what holds outside works on the inside. CMOs know that in today’s communications landscape, it’s the customer who controls the brand; the CMO is the guide who endeavors to bring the customer along the brand journey. Similarly, CMO’s need to see their role as bringing the rest of the C-suite along the intellectual journey of working with the marketing data. And in doing so, they shouldn’t be put off by contention or differing views. *Of course* the CFO or general manager may look at marketing data differently. That’s a good thing, because underlying a difference of opinion is engagement. The problem isn’t the CFO who pushes back on marketing’s data – it’s the CFO who doesn’t think the data is important enough to look at in the first place.

Lesson 2: The rest of the C-suite knows what you’re up against

There can be little doubt that CMOs play a more important role in most organizations than they did a decade ago. The question is whether or not the CMO is equipped to deliver against these higher expectations. When we asked what is most likely to make marketing leaders uneasy when making tough strategic choices, the CMO responses were spread across a number of options, including “organizational inertia” and “fear of choosing wrong.” Similarly when we asked, “What do CMOs need to be better

positioned to deliver results?” CXOs named a variety of possibilities, most of which had to do with marketing’s place in the organization. The good news is that CXOs have an acute appreciation for the challenge that CMOs face when serving marketing’s wide range of stakeholders. As one CEO we spoke with put it, “The CMO has the most difficult job in the building because everyone has an opinion and wants to share it. I need someone who has the intestinal fortitude to make them all feel heard but to also make the tough choices.”

CMOs, on the other hand, tend to view their challenge in terms of their remit; they’re focused on doing a better job articulating the brand vision and staying on top of the changing consumer landscape. This difference in perspective between CMOs and CXOs shouldn’t be surprising. What CMOs need to keep in mind, however, is that no one expects them to have all the answers – although it can feel that way at times!

Lesson 3: There’s no single roadmap going forward

The one question to which CXOs and CMOs responded similarly was the biggest one of all: Both groups were about evenly split as to whether or not marketing had enough power in their organization to deliver what was expected of it. We don’t think this reflects any ongoing debate about marketing as a C-level role; in our view that question was settled some time ago. Instead, the division of opinion points to the fact that there is no one-size-fits-all vision of how to best integrate marketing into the rest of the C-suite, and that organizations are at different points in the trajectory in making their own marketing vision a reality. We expect that this range of

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views will hold as tools like artificial intelligence and augmented reality continue to change the marketing landscape.

However the marketing function moves forward within each organization, the marketing leader's role in the C-suite will be increasingly pivotal. The CMO is the organization's main link to the external, consumer-centric world – and as

such, the CMO is in the best position to provide a common language and perspective that strengthens the bonds within the C-suite. CMOs who do so will find a ready audience for what they have to offer. As one chief human resources officer told us, “CMOs have more to offer than even they might realize. Their trade is all about understanding people – and that includes their peers.”

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