WHAT DOES YOUR CEO THINK OF YOU?

Meeting your CEO's expectations can be difficult if you're not sure what they are. **Lucy Fisher** asks chief executives how they feel about their marketing departments

The profile of the marketing department has undergone a profound shift in recent years. Indeed, research conducted by B2B Marketing finds that well over two thirds (69 per cent) of senior marketers believe the function has greater responsibility for the strategic direction of their respective organisations than it did five years ago.

This is also backed up by a study conducted by Stein IAS, in which 81 per cent of its 320 CEO respondents agreed marketing's importance has increased, while so, too, have CEO's expectations of this critical business function. The study puts this down to factors such as modern marketing complexity and the need to harness marketing technology and innovation, with some of the key imperatives highlighted by CEOs in their responses including the need to think and act more strategically; the need to gain a greater command of marketing, sales and customer experience technology; and the need to lead and to establish a shared sense of purpose across the entire organisation.

Identifying success and failure

Nicholas Green, founder and CEO of Printed.com, agrees that the marketing discipline has changed almost beyond recognition. His company is about to employ a commercial director and he says what he is looking for from its overall marketing effort these days is effective attribution.

"We want someone who can think in terms of lifetime value and revenue models, and to help us understand what is or isn't working," he says. To this end, Printed.com has just invested in an attribution platform developed by Shomei, which Green says is a really important tool as it should help his team prioritise which marketing strategies and tools to spend on.

"Marketing has changed an incredible amount," he says. "It's very data and math-heavy these days, whereas, traditionally, it was more about an idea." Green believes the catalyst for this change has been the growth of online, and he reiterates again that honing in on what has worked is the key challenge. "You've got a lot of different channels now and you've got to find a way to bring them together. It's not easy to attribute revenue. You can end up with so much data now that identifying what is or isn't working can be harder than it needs to be," he says.

An effective means of attributing marketing success or otherwise is also top of Ian Harris' wish list, as CEO of Search Laboratory. "We're keen to know what's feeding the pipeline, to know what we'll get in three months time," he says. "My biggest thing with marketing, what I want to know, is where should we spend our money. What has worked? I want the numbers and the recommendations.

"What you don't want is a department that is not measuring and is doing things because anecdotally they've heard it's a good idea," he adds. "You need figures and ROI. Marketing people tend to be creative but not so good on the numbers."

Mix online with offline

That said, many CEOs agree that this stereotype is no longer so prevalent and that, with the advent and the rise in importance of digital and social marketing, the discipline has become more integral to any business. "Marketing teams five years ago were seen as more of a cost centre. But it's become more strategic as a discipline. Where marketers become really valuable is when they become involved in the strategic shift of the organisation," says Shaun Gregory, CEO at outdoor advertising company Exterion Media and non-executive director at a number of other companies.

But Ross Fobian, the CEO and co-founder of ad tech company ResponseTap, warns that marketers mustn't get so focused on digital to the extent that the importance of offline marketing channels gets forgotten. He warns against what he refers to as an 'over-emphasis on the digital journey', pointing out that: "In truth, the digital journey may start and end online but the customer journey doesn't.

"The marketing strategy must incorporate a broad set of data that allows us to understand what drives the offline activity as well. Only then can we turn the data into insights that help us improve the experience," he says. And, in order to achieve this goal, it's important marketing teams do not operate in a silo.

Work with sales and customers

Phil Jones, CEO at Brother UK, agrees that the role of marketing is more important than ever. He believes what CEOs really want is teams that are 'number aligned' and 'intent aligned'. By this, he's referring to effective collaboration between marketing and sales in particular, with clear and agreed definitions of success and what constitutes a lead.

He also says that there is always a need to spend time with customers. "For me, that's the number one thing," he says. "The customer can wreck your reputation. You have to retain intimacy and relevance. The more we can derive from our own intelligence, not just through analytics, but also as a sales organisation selling through distributors, resellers, dealers, partners and end users, the better."

Be succinct

Jones points out, too, that CEOs are bombarded with information, and are therefore grateful to any marketer who can summarise information succinctly, while providing actionable insights.

"I like infographics," he says. "These can make my job easier but it's quite rare for information to be delivered clearly. People get caught up in spreadsheets or 50-page PowerPoint decks."

Jones admits that before he became CEO he was guilty, himself, of having what he calls a 'potential-based mindset'. "I thought in terms of possibilities, but it's important to hone down on facts and not to be woolly on the detail. I think often CMOs don't bridge to the top seat for this reason," he says.

Reggie Aggarwal, CEO and founder of events management technology company Cvent, which has grown from a two-person start up to a 1450-person company, is also a firm believer in the importance of marketing and he agrees that alignment between marketing and sales is critical. "If you don't give sales good leads or know what to say to prospects, that makes all the difference as to whether the company survives or not," he says.

And in a B2B context, this involves moving away from jargon and communicating in a way that is easily understood both internally and externally. Ben Hookway, CEO of Relative Insight, a technology company that helps brands and agencies analyse language in order to boost their communication efforts, points out that B2B marketing requires an understanding of – and an ability to

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CEO
SEARCH LABORATORY

communicate – complex product sets, and complex markets.

"It means being able to take complicated messages and boil them down with simplicity," he says. "If you have a marketing team that is not doing a good job of bringing along the rest of the business you pay the price as your brand is diluted by the different interpretations that customers get exposed to."

Marketers must measure

And, while they admit that measuring marketing effectiveness is no easy task, CEOs seem reluctant to accept the line that certain types of marketing are not always measurable. Daniel Kraft, CEO of marketing technology company Sitrion, says that, in order to boost the credibility of the entire department, marketing must not hide behind the phrase 'branding' when justifying budget spend.

"Marketing needs to deliver transparency of results, both about things that work and also about things that didn't work," he adds. This is of course true of all other business functions.

So, while the complexity may be greater than ever before, so, too are the potential rewards available for today's B2B marketers. Shafqat Islam, CEO of content marketing platform Newscred, is in a position to see first-hand how the role of marketing has shifted.

"Marketers are now equipped with the technology, data and responsibility to show the impact they are making on overall business growth and revenue. That's a significant power shift from just five years ago," he says. "Showing your worth with concrete, attributable ROI will go a long way in helping senior execs take marketing teams seriously."

ROD FAVARON
CEO OF SOCIAL MARKETING PLATFORM SPREDFAST

CEO viewpoint

What do you, as a CEO, think of marketing?
In the B2B world, the digital side of marketing is fundamental. You can't be successful without a focus on how you interact with customers and get your point of view across. What marketing does is fundamental; it's the lever of what makes businesses do well.

Has it changed for better or worse?
The opportunities are significantly better now. Fifteen years ago there weren't as many marketing channels that exist today. For example, website optimisation has greatly improved and all organisations, no matter the size, can build their own communities. While this makes navigating marketing more complex, there are so many more places to interact and touchpoints to directly reach customers or potential customers.

What's been the catalyst for the change?
Technology is definitely the catalyst. Everyone is now a publisher and every form of media has evolved thanks to the emerging technologies that have come to market in recent years.

What does your marketing team need to improve on?
Becoming more cost efficient with allocated budgets – unless it's a must-execute idea. We're always going to challenge teams to do more with their budgets. Some of our best ideas have come from pushing teams to think outside the box rather than just throwing money at it.

What can marketing do to ensure it is taken seriously as a department?
Marketing needs to connect with people and ensure it markets products they need. My advice to smaller marketing departments would be to show the company how you're connecting the business to its customers. Then they'll have no choice but to take you seriously.