



Building better connections between brands and technology: The right mix of skills for CMOs today

Companies looking for CMOs have swung from seeking branding gurus to seeking technological wizards. The right approach lies straight down the middle.

In a rush to make the most of digital, many organizations seeking chief marketing officers in recent years have been overlooking the importance of traditional branding expertise. Certainly, a CMO should know how to respond to real-time data, use predictive analytics to inform audience preferences, and evaluate a company's marketing technology stack. In the race for executive talent, however, too many CMOs are often evaluated first and foremost on their digital savvy.

That's a mistake, interviews with several top CMOs and our own experience suggest. Though the COVID-19 pandemic has proven that strength in digital marketing and e-commerce is crucial, building and nurturing meaningful connections to brands and their purpose is now more important than ever. Digital skills are an ante, but differentiating a brand in an ever more crowded and faster-moving marketplace requires a CMO with sharp skills in building trust, creating emotional engagement, and connecting with consumers—all core aspects of brand building since its earliest days. "If you ignore the brand completely, when you have a hiccup—and every brand does—the strength of your brand, not your performance marketing, is what will enable you to weather a storm," warns Carla Hassan, chief brand officer at Citi.

In fact, even before the crisis it was clear that traditional branding expertise could be a competitive differentiator as consumers, particularly the all-important younger generations, look for brands that are rooted in purpose and that reflect the values they as individuals hold important. "Brand is how a consumer understands who you are and what you stand for," says Melissa Grady, CMO at Cadillac.

Alexander Knigge, senior vice president of digital at The Emirates Group, sums up the dilemma: “Right now, to find the ideal 360-degree marketer is very difficult. Either you get digital marketers who are numerically driven or you get traditional advertising marketers.”

So what mix of skills should CEOs and other senior executives look for in their chief marketers to keep brands flourishing and the role relevant? First, the ability to use data effectively in the service of building lasting emotional—not just transactional—relationships with customers is critical. Second, CMOs must encourage and ensure that collaboration with technology leaders reflects the company’s marketing strategy and brand-building efforts, not only the latest technological innovations. And third, CMOs must be consistently curious, constant learners.

Data as context for storytelling

Today, marketing technologies have created a sea of sameness with everything from social media posts taking on the same tone to promotions echoing the same offers. The more brands’ digital tools are the same, it turns out, the more CMOs must develop breakthrough creative within branded content to ensure meaningful consumer experiences. These positive interactions will, in turn, drive brand success.

McDonald’s is a perfect example of making use of technology to enhance deep connection. According to The NPD Group, restaurant digital orders have increased at an average annual rate of 23% since 2013 and will triple in volume by the end of 2020.¹ Sixty percent of these orders are placed via mobile apps—a figure that’s only likely to grow as the number of smartphone users across the world tops 3.8 billion by 2021.

To stand out from the digital crowd, McDonald’s senior vice president and US chief marketing and digital customer experience officer, Morgan Flatley, says the marketing team worked hard to develop creative, compelling mobile content that engages customers in a personalized and meaningful way. For example, it recently executed a culturally relevant activation, Egg McMuffin Day, when the company offered a free iconic fan favorite at a time when everyone was talking about breakfast.²

With more than 50 million downloads of the mobile app to date, McDonald’s personalized approach to marketing high-volume products proves that even brands built on serving the masses can use digital to connect to individuals without losing the core operational benefits of standardization.

“In some ways, digital capabilities are becoming table stakes,” says Flatley. As a result, she says the question becomes, “How do we do digital in a way that truly differentiates McDonald’s? That’s where the creative comes in. The merging of digital and creative is how brands will win in the future.”

As they get creative, today’s CMOs have access to a valuable resource that their peers in the past lacked: huge amounts of data. By 2025, an estimated 463 exabytes of data will be generated each day globally, much of it ripe for parsing into customer segments and tailored content. Given today’s data deluge, CMOs can no longer “get away with not understanding technology,” warns Citi’s Hassan. And to be sure, many CMOs find comfort in the algorithmic accuracy data offers, with patterns enabling brands to predict purchasing decisions and market trends.

But, like tools, data alone in no way ensures marketing success. As Hassan adds, CMOs who have honed their data-mining expertise and ask the right questions, alongside traditional branding smarts, such as curiosity and risk taking, are significantly better equipped to “take the data they have and turn it into meaningful engagements.”

Patricia Corsi, chief marketing and digital officer for Bayer Consumer Health, explains, “We are all data rich, but most of us are insight poor. What makes the difference is having a great mind to connect the dots.” That’s where CMOs who also have traditional brand marketing expertise delve deeper, exploring the psychological, emotional, and cultural aspects of consumer behavior in the context of the data. This helps CMOs understand deeply why consumers fall in—or out of—love with a brand, and which messages are most likely to resonate with a consumer’s sense of self. Armed with this intelligence, a CMO can reach consumers not where they sit in the sales funnel but where they believe they fit in the world.

Take Cadillac Live, for example. This offering allows customers to have one-on-one conversations with trained product specialists via any mobile or desktop device. Consumers can ask agents product-related questions, view accessory options, and receive a 3-D tour of the online showroom for a truly interactive experience that appeals to luxury shoppers. “You start with the data,” says Grady of Cadillac. “Then you let data drive insight, and then you let that insight drive creative. That’s where the magic happens.”

“Brand is how a consumer understands who you are and what you stand for.”

Melissa Grady
Chief Marketing Officer, Cadillac

Given today’s data deluge, CMOs can no longer “get away with not understanding technology.”

Carla Hassan
Chief Brand Officer, Citi

“We are all data rich, but most of us are insight poor. What makes the difference is having a great mind to connect the dots.”

Patricia Corsi
Chief Marketing and Digital Officer,
Bayer Consumer Health

1 NPD Group, “While restaurant delivery gets all the buzz, digital orders overall grow by double digits,” June 12, 2019, npd.com.

2 McDonald’s, “I’m ready for Monday,” said nobody ever . . . until now—McDonald’s declares March 2 National Egg McMuffin Day, with free Egg McMuffin sandwiches,” February 28, 2020, news.mcdonalds.com.

Collaboration driven by marketing goals

The fact that successful digital transformation requires breaking down traditional corporate silos is well known. But brand-savvy CMOs are rethinking how they interact and collaborate across disparate business functions to find ways that aren't driven simply by technological imperatives. "Today's CMO needs to be a great conductor—someone who can communicate strategy and vision clearly across different groups of people with varying skill sets, capabilities, and ways of absorbing information," says Flatley. She adds, "That's the magic sauce: curiosity and collaboration." Collaboration ranges across the whole organization: understanding not only a product developer's pressure to innovate but also a board's responsibility to shareholders are exercises in empathy that can encourage greater collaboration and ultimately more cohesion around a brand.

On teams, Hassan adds, "It really is about vision setting, building the right team, and giving employees the opportunities and tools to do what they need to do," whether it's creating an ad, building a customer relationship management database, or working on affiliate marketing. The Emirates Group rethought collaboration as part of an organizational restructuring, during which it created a customer insights team. Although the team relies on some of the most innovative technology tools, its mandate is to help the airline become more customer-focused, not just data-driven. "Overall, we want to become more analytics-centric," says Knigge. "At the same time, we want to maintain all the strengths of our brand."

Marketers also often particularly benefit from engaging with technology colleagues to gain an understanding of new and innovative marketing technology solutions. "How I do things today versus two years ago is totally different," says Grady. She points to Google's plans to phase out support for third-party cookies and record-high levels of addressable television as prime examples of a rapidly changing industry that will affect marketers' options. She adds, "You have to understand how the world is changing and be ready to align resources and serve as an inspiration."

Continuous curiosity

Learning, though, must go beyond technology. Because both customer expectations and technology are changing almost daily, as CMOs and their teams find their balance between traditional marketing expertise and digital innovation, they are most successful when they themselves are constantly learning across the full spectrum of skills they need.

Indeed, Cadillac's Grady says, "One of the things that I look for the most in people is curiosity. If you are a curious person who wants to learn, then both brand marketing and digital are teachable." When she's seeking people for her team, McDonald's Flatley looks for "a genuine curiosity, an insatiable curiosity, around business transformation" and "a curiosity about how other businesses are transforming the way consumers shop and how consumers are engaging."

Emirates' Knigge particularly emphasizes the pace of change, noting, "There are a lot of people out there who are too stuck in their discipline and function, and they're not learning quick enough. As a CMO, you need to mandate that people self-learn all the time" and create a culture of learning "without discarding traditional capabilities."

In the end, it's crucial for CMOs and other senior leaders to remember that, as Knigge puts it, "It takes time to build a brand. And successes aren't always measurable in the short term." That can be a challenge for leadership teams increasingly accustomed to real-time customer data and an ever-shortening lag between a creative idea and its commercial results. But as any traditional brand strategist knows, the variables that bind a consumer to a brand—emotions, memory, purpose—are far more powerful than any algorithm, and ultimately longer lasting than any technology tool.

"Today's CMO needs to be a great conductor—someone who can communicate strategy and vision clearly across different groups of people with varying skill sets, capabilities, and ways of absorbing information."

Morgan Flatley

Senior Vice President and US Chief Marketing and Digital Customer Experience Officer, McDonald's

"There are a lot of people out there who are too stuck in their discipline and function, and they're not learning quick enough. As a CMO, you need to mandate that people self-learn all the time" and create a culture of learning "without discarding traditional capabilities."

Alexander Knigge

Senior Vice President of Digital, The Emirates Group

About the authors

Kristin Deutmeyer

is a partner in Heidrick & Struggles' Chicago office and a member of the Consumer Markets and Marketing, Sales, & Strategy Officers practices.

kdeutmeyer@heidrick.com

Anne Rockey

is a partner in the Chicago office and a member of the Consumer Markets and Marketing, Sales, & Strategy Officers practices.

arockey@heidrick.com

Richard Sumner

is a partner in the London office and a member of the Consumer Markets and Marketing, Sales, & Strategy Officers practices.

rsumner@heidrick.com

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank the executives who shared their insights. Their views are personal and do not necessarily represent the views of the companies they are affiliated with.

Patricia Corsi

Chief Marketing and Digital Officer
Bayer Consumer Health

Morgan Flatley

Senior Vice President and US Chief Marketing and Digital Customer Experience Officer
McDonald's

Melissa Grady

CMO
Cadillac

Carla Hassan

Chief Brand Officer
Citi

Alexander Knigge

Senior Vice President of Digital
The Emirates Group

Consumer Markets Practice

As consumers demand more transparency, brand engagement, and sustainability, Heidrick & Struggles' Consumer Markets Practice is at the forefront of industry trends to provide cutting-edge counsel to clients in a wide variety of consumer sectors.

Competition among consumer companies has never been fiercer. Customers are shopping in new and sometimes nontraditional ways, as mass market retailers offer designer goods, brick-and-mortar staples are available online, and venerable brands spin off agile brand extensions. Consumer companies are also keen to capitalize on the potential of emerging and high-growth markets. This means having the right leadership in place is critical. With broad global presence and deep sector expertise, we anticipate future needs to help clients successfully secure the right leaders who will enhance innovation within their organization.

Backed by a team of passionate experts, we counsel clients in a variety of consumer sectors to clearly assess and identify the competencies needed for success. From building powerful brands and streamlining supply chain operations to penetrating new markets and delivering financial objectives, we are focused on helping companies realize their investment in talent for today and the future.

Leaders of Heidrick & Struggles' Consumer Markets Practice

Global

Stephen Schwanhauser
Stamford
sschwanhauser@heidrick.com

Europe and Africa

Ben Twynam
London
btwynam@heidrick.com

Asia Pacific and Middle East

Alain Deniau
Singapore
adeniau@heidrick.com