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What is a CMO?

A recent Ad Age article used the term Cladogenesis to describe the changing role of the Chief Marketing Officer (CMO). Cladogenesis describes the radical evolution of a species into an altogether new species. This is an apt description of the CMO and the tectonic shifts taking place in marketing. We are watching firsthand as traditional marketing such as branding, promotion and product management attempts to mesh with new social channels, digital disciplines and big data analytics, including new reporting. As a “CMO to go”, I see the profound confusion this is having across the corporate landscape. Many CEOs are asking—what is the real role of my CMO? Where do business decisions end and marketing begin? How should the marketing function be structured and aligned across the company?

The CMO Role and “Magical Thinking”

When role and responsibility confusion reign often times false hope or “magical thinking” emerges.

This is natural because undefined roles hold immeasurable promise. As it relates to the changing CMO role, magical thinking is the false belief or hope, that somehow, someway the CMO as the white knight will solve all the business problems tangled in the web of how the company story and products are marketed.

Sometimes businesses faced with changing market dynamics neglect to work out business issues and instead go hunting for an easy fix—a bright, shiny, new CMO. These organizations suffer “magical thinking”. Many place their CMO on a precarious pedestal that will disappoint and crash.

Is your organization suffering from magical thinking around the CMO’s role? Here is how to identify the malady. Your company:

1. Does not have a clear vision, but believes a good CMO and marketing can fix the issue

2. Has not solved fundamental business model issues, but believes a CMO can deliver the answer
3. Lacks a customer orientation, but believes it can engage customers with the right marketing

Companies suffering from magical thinking share a similar pattern. They don’t put

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in the time and energy to deal with fundamental business issues. They live with a wish and prayer that a CMO will right their ship. As a CMO, I will tell you we’re a smart bunch. However, it takes a lot more than a smart marketer to set a company on the right course.

When companies dump responsibilities on marketing without a solid business foundation and then demand CMO performance, everyone loses. “Dump and demand” behavior arises in part because the CMO role is ill defined. Additionally, there is false hope that a rock star CMO, with all the new marketing tools available, can magically solve all problems.

CMO Role Considerations

Scientists comparing the CMO role today with the Mad Men era of the 1950’s might be accurate in describing a “Cladogenesis”. Times have changed. CMO roles have changed. There is a variety of CMO-types today with vastly different areas of expertise.

So how does a company make sense of it all? If your organization is thinking about hiring CMO talent, it is critical to ensure that your business model is sound and can be effectively marketed. Equally important is carefully setting marketing expectations. It’s unlikely that any CMO—even the very best—will fulfill all of your needs. Consider these questions and tradeoffs:

- Does your organization need an entrepreneurial trailblazer or a

sophisticated strategist? The answer will likely depend on if you’re in an emerging industry or mature market. New industries with less market data than mature markets need a CMO that can guide creatively and rely less on market insight strategy.

- What is the scope of the CMO role? New metrics available are driving the trend toward more broadly defining the CMO role. Armed with easy access to critical market metrics many CMOs are tasked with shaping business strategy. Is your leadership ready to integrate marketing in this way?
- Does your business need a CMO with broad industry expertise or deep sector specialization? Dependent on the mix of other executive talent it may be wise to hire someone with a fresh perspective that can integrate insights from other industries.
- Is it more important for marketing to drive sales today or innovation tomorrow? Although both are always needed, it’s important to understand whether delivering P & L today or a pipeline for tomorrow is more critical.
- Will your business grow faster with a digital expert or marketing traditionalist? Often this choice depends on what current talent exists within your organization because in the end it’s important to find a balance with both.

I say potato you say po-taa-to. The right flavor of CMO is there for your picking. To ensure the right fit, the first step is to do a deep dive into your business needs.

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