

A Digital Dozen: 12 Traits Of The Truly Creative CMO

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Date : August 31, 2016



The rise of data-driven marketing might seem to suggest a corresponding decline in the value of the [creative marketing leader](#).

However, the skills and capabilities that creative marketers possess can serve them well in new ways as they navigate today's highly competitive and quickly evolving marketplace.

"Nonlinear thinking is very useful at this point," said James McQuivey, Forrester vice president and principal analyst, in an interview with CMO.com. "Companies need to innovate in product development, in marketing, and in customer experience. That doesn't come from the linear thinking of someone who came up in marketing operations."

In fact, applied creativity—a unique way to interpret data, an innovative way to program a system, a different strategy for spending—can be a key differentiator. A recent report by the World Economic Forum found that [creativity will be the third most important skill](#) for workers in 2020, just below complex problem solving and critical thinking, and up significantly from its 10th place rank today.

"The explosion of digital—data, mobile, video—makes today's marketing landscape increasingly competitive as brands fight for consumers' attention," said Ann Lewnes, executive vice president and CMO of Adobe (CMO.com's parent company). "To stand out, marketers must go back to the basics—lead with creative, compelling content to engage customers in a personalized and meaningful way. What's old is new again, and creativity remains the heart of strong marketing."

But with so many new options for creating marketing value—at decreasing cost and with increasing ease—it can be difficult to figure out what to pursue. That's where data helps. But data married with creativity is the ideal. Kenni Driver, partner and CMO of Chief Outsiders and a veteran B2B marketer, calls it "informed creativity." GoodData CMO Blaine Mathieu said he prefers "connected insights."

"Data is only as good as the meaning we create from it," he told CMO.com. "We humans orchestrate all available data in innovative ways to create desirable customer experiences and business outcomes. The digital business landscape presents a canvas of sorts for people to be

truly creative.”

Of course, the thriving creative CMO of 2016 looks markedly different today than he or she did 20—or even two—years ago. CMO.com talked to marketing leaders across industries about the attributes the creative CMO must possess to succeed in the digital world. Read on of what they shared with us.

THE CREATIVE CMO... EMPATHIZES WITH THE CUSTOMER

Today’s creative CMO has the ability to understand the customer—and stands to become *the voice of the customer* in the enterprise. “[Empathy](#) is in short supply in the corporate world,” McQuivey said. “But if you’ve been responsible for crafting the brand, you’ve developed a deep understanding of the customer and may be the only one who can bring that customer to life.”

The creative CMO marries customer knowledge with business requirements and technology capabilities to innovate. For Deirdre MacCormack, CMO of 3D printing company Mcor, who markets 3-D printing technology to a creative audience, it’s vital to “sit in my customer’s shoes.” Because she understood the aesthetic requirements of the company’s customers, for example, MacCormack participated in product design as well. “I proposed having a customized skin and worked closely with the engineering team to have it implemented,” she said.

THE CREATIVE CMO... SURROUNDS HERSELF WITH EXPERTS

As marketing becomes an ever-broadened discipline, no single CMO can possess all the skills required to run the organization. “The secret,” McQuivey said, “is to have an [amazing team](#).”

Norm Yustin, a senior leader in the global retail, marketing, and digital transformation practices at Russell Reynolds Associates, has seen several [analytically minded CMOs](#) hire chief creative officers as their direct reports in recent years. “Conversely, it would behoove the more [creatively driven CMOs](#) to ensure they have a strong No. 2 who is data-driven,” Yustin said.

Otherwise, these CMOs may see their data gap being filled for them by new chief growth officers, chief revenue officers, and chief digital officers. “CMOs who surround themselves with people who can dig into this data and translate it so creative thinkers can make strategic decisions based on data points are going to rise to the top,” said Hank Summy, partner with LiquidHub.

Creative CMOs also will have to get imaginative in how they recruit, retain, and inspire their team of experts. “The skills that make someone a great PR leader capable of spinning up the next big story are entirely different from the visual designer who’s going to create a killer new website, which is different than the marketing ops ace who’s going to implement the latest

campaign attribution technology,” said Scott Holden, CMO for ThoughtSpot. “CMOs need to tailor their management styles to lead and inspire a diverse group of marketers to be their best.”

THE CREATIVE CMO... MAKES THE MOST OF DATA

Capturing consumers’ attention can be more difficult than ever before. “As a B2B marketer, I have to apply creativity to break through the noise. But it all hinges on data and the data insights to deliver the creative to the right people, in the right place, and at the right time,” said Avention CMO Victoria Godfrey, who previously ran her own research company and served as CMO of [Zipcar](#).

At CA Technologies, data is critical to CMO Lauren Flaherty’s marketing decisions. “Using technology, we can be much more targeted and creative in how we connect this message to our target audiences,” she said.

The company’s “app culture” marketing campaign, which highlighted how software powers everything from love to shopping, was certainly a creative work. “[But] what you don’t see is the analytics and volumes of data that factored into determining which creative resonates with our target audiences, fueling our strategy for where and how we make our ad buys,” Flaherty told CMO.com.

A creative CMO has to be willing to learn from the data rather than try to control it. “I think some marketers look away from the things they don’t want to see or don’t understand or that might be challenging,” said MediaMath CMO Joanna O’Connell. “Your data could be telling you some surprising things.”

THE CREATIVE CMO... MEASURES MARKETING’S IMPACT

CMOs must be approach data creatively. “But, more importantly, they should be able to measure creative success through data,” Godfrey said. “Whenever I create marketing or advertising programs, developing objectives and measuring results [is always] an essential part.” For a new product, that might be sales or market share. For a brand campaign, it’s awareness.

Added Lionbridge CMO Clint Poole: “There is this myth that traditional creative marketers were these black-turtleneck-clad hipsters locked in a conference room ideating. But the [marketing process has always been data-driven](#). The best traditional agencies were those that used all the insights at their disposal. All that has really changed is the volume of data at our disposal and the diversity among our buyers’ preferences.”

The most important skill a creative CMO needs today, said Markerly CEO Sarah Ware, “is the foresight that comes with predicting the long-term value when implementing campaigns that are not direct-response. Creative campaigns require patience as tracking conversions and social

impact is not always immediate.”

Creative CMOs must also think differently about what metrics matter to the business. “We’re in a period when many of the traditional measures that marketers have used [such as ad views or impressions] are being questioned,” said Jim Rudden, CMO of Spreadfast. “It takes creativity now to think, on one hand, why are they still valuable, or, given the new forms of interaction consumers have with us, what are our new systems of measure?”

THE CREATIVE CMO... DEVELOPS AND TESTS HYPOTHESES

Omaid Hiwaizi, president of global marketing at Blippar, studied mathematics in school—and then became an art director. “A mixture of instinct and analysis means you can come up with more interesting solutions quicker and be confident in their robustness,” he said. “The core creative step for a marketing executive is the development of a hypothesis around how to transform the marketing model.”

That means being able to look at the data, he added, yet rely on intuition to [ask “What if?”](#) The next step is to validate that question with a test. “While keeping the plates spinning for the marketing operation will still be core to the role, a relentless focus on spotting opportunities to innovate to create brand growth matters more and more,” Hiwaizi said.

THE CREATIVE CMO... REMAINS AGILE

CMOs are often asked to make decisions driven from performance metrics and data—“two traditionally noncreative sources,” said Will McInnes, CMO of social insights platform Brandwatch. “Creatively tackling [those] problems allows companies to differentiate themselves from their competitors. There is an agility and confidence in creativity. There is no question that can’t be answered because creative CMOs don’t recognize the same scope of solutions.”

During the 2013 Super Bowl power outage, for example, [Oreo acted quickly](#) and—more importantly—“supercreatively so their customers following on social media could see the brand positioning itself in a different, exciting way in a nontraditional venue,” said Mark Gally, CEO of behavioral marketing engine Zaius, in an interview with CMO.com. “Today’s creative CMO needs to be so on top of the possibilities in order to think big and get creative across all channels.”

At marketing platform vendor Springbot, internal marketing processes have been sped up considerably. “Agile [development] as a concept or process is not limited only to product teams, but can be utilized as a [marketing planning approach](#),” said Springbot CMO Erika Jolly Brookes, in an interview with CMO.com.

THE CREATIVE CMO... IS RESOURCEFUL

CMOs are expected to think like business managers and run the organization like a profit center. Working creatively within the bounds of limited resources is key. “Part of the challenge for me is the ability to scale our corporate marketing resources to match all the unique markets that we serve globally,” Lionbridge’s Poole said. “Instead of just traditionally scaling resources at significant cost, we have worked to identify existing in-market, customer-facing resources from other functions that [we can] leverage to gain local insights, review content concepts and plans, and engage in the overall process.”

At Mcor, MacCormack is a one-woman marketing team. “It’s important for me to be creative not only in execution, but also in how I wear all of the different hats that are usually split up among team members,” she said. “Tight deadlines, modest budget, and specific goals all inspire out-of-the-box thinking that has helped Mcor achieve strong brand recognition and bottom-line results.”

THE CREATIVE CMO... CREATES SPACE FOR INNOVATION

ThoughtSpot CMO Scott Holden was used to wading into the weeds as a product marketer, going deep into use cases, demos, and presentations. “I’m a bit of a perfectionist and love sweating the details,” Holden said. “However, creativity requires time to ideate, experiment, and refine. [As a CMO], I have a lot more responsibility, which means I don’t have the time to obsess over as many details.”

Instead, Holden must encourage and nurture the creative efforts of his team, staying close in thought, if not in deed. “If you’re not mindful of creativity,” he said, “it’s easy for CMOs to get removed from the day-to-day creative process and see projects as expense items on a spreadsheet instead of potential breakthroughs.”

THE CREATIVE CMO... PARTNERS FOR GROWTH

Solid relationships among CMOs and their C-suite counterparts—CEO, CFO, and CIO—are more important than ever.

“CMOs today are responsible for more functions than ever—advertising, operations, user experience, and more—but ultimately we are measured on overall business impact [and growth],” CA Technologies CMO Lauren Flaherty said. “And that really means we must draw on skill sets across all disciplines of business—from the tech-savvy of IT teams to the financial acumen from the CFO’s office—to not only do our day-to-day job, but, more importantly, be the adviser that the CEO needs to grow the business.”

The CTO is another CMO-must ally. “Robust brand-building strategy is now table stakes,” said Omaid Hiwazi, president of global marketing at Blippar, in an interview with CMO.com. “To build on this, the modern CMO needs to properly embrace the quickly emerging behaviors being enabled by technology. This involves understanding them and then innovating.”

THE CREATIVE CMO... BREAKS THE RULES

A creative CMO isn't bound by the ways things have been done in the past.

"In having previously worked in the B2B and B2C space, I've noted that within the B2B space there was something missing in the narrative and how people created content. It was missing this idea that everyone is a consumer," said Michael Mendenhall, CMO of Flex, who previously held CMO positions at Disney and HP. "You don't necessarily treat someone differently because they are buying something for a business. You still need an emotional connection with people."

That's why Mendenhall decided to jettison the research reports and whitepapers no one was reading and hire a full editorial and production team to produce a consumer-grade magazine.

"Great CMOs challenge the conventional wisdom and are always willing to ask why things have been done a certain way," added Mike Grandinetti, chief marketing and corporate strategy officer at Reduxio. "For the past decade I have worked in B2B in the advertising and media industry. I always noticed a lack of interest from these companies in building their brand identity or delivering warm experiences."

So Grandinetti went against the grain, selling leaders on a B2C approach. "It allowed us to immediately stand out in a crowded marketplace and accelerate revenue growth," he told CMO.com.

THE CREATIVE CMO... TELLS COMPELLING TALES

Customers today want singular experiences from brands. "[That] forces brands to become great storytellers, and not just great at acquiring a customer at the bottom of the funnel," said Scott Rayden, chief marketing and revenue officer at digital agency 3Q Digital. "CMOs today need to be able to pull away from pure performance KPIs."

Revenue is a by-product of an engaging or exciting customer experience. "The creative CMO is someone who can pull together the right storytellers, creative, copywriters, and content marketers to deliver something that creates a deeper relationship with the consumer," Rayden told CMO.com.

Veteran B2B marketer Lisa Joy Rosner, now CMO at Neustar, said she has always worked for companies where data was the most valuable asset. But, she told CMO.com, her most impactful strategies involved bringing the data to life through character and story.

"Data alone can't tell a story," agreed Peter Arvai, CEO of presentation software maker Prezi. "It takes the creative marketer to craft a message that will cause an emotional reaction."

THE CREATIVE CMO... KNOWS WHEN TO ACT

Robert Tas, CMO of Pegasystems, has a quarter-century's experience in marketing and operations, including a recent stint as head of digital marketing for JPMorgan Chase. But he estimated that 99% of his job involves creativity. Equally important, however, is to know when to stop coming up with ideas and make decisions.

"I think my biggest challenge is choosing where I spend my time. Yes, data is critical to doing the job, but, if not careful, it can also suck you down rat holes," Tas told CMO.com. "You need to know when there is enough data and act on what you have. In other cases, you need to know when you have to dig further. There is no shortage of things to focus on."

CMOs must apply discipline to their creativity "to ensure the energy is channeled into a way that drives business objectives," added Norm Yustin, a senior leader in the global retail, marketing, and digital transformation practices at Russell Reynolds Associates.

This article first appeared in www.cmo.com