



BRAND LEARNING

Why Marketing Leadership Matters



Michele McGrath, Partner & Operating Board Director at Brand Learning shares Brand Learning's pioneering point of view and latest thinking on the topic of Marketing Leadership.

At its heart, the role of Marketing is to enhance customer 'pull' i.e. to drive demand-led profitable growth by enabling the whole organisation to excel at delivering superior customer value. So great marketers can't just be functional specialists, they also have to be great leaders. And in our view, leadership does not only apply to those at senior levels in the organisation, but to people at all levels in Marketing.

If you look at any great business that has been successful over time—Tesco, Apple, Unilever, Virgin—this is what they have all managed to do; to inspire managers at all levels in marketing and across the business to create superior customer value in a way that beats that of their competitors.

Leadership has never been needed so much

Looking at the current economic climate and the lack of customer confidence and growth, we think there has never been a more crucial time for marketers to lead change. The main challenge, however, comes from the fact that it is one thing to generate customer insights and identify opportunities to create consumer value, but it is quite another to get the whole company aligned in developing and then delivering solutions that create customer-perceived value in practice.

The marketing skills involved in insight generation and brand development are of little value to the business if they are not allied with the leadership skills needed to engage the functions outside marketing and the many external suppliers, agencies and consultancies that play a role in creating products, services and brand experiences that engage customers, earn their respect and retain their loyalty.

So, to what extent do today's marketers possess the leadership capabilities needed to fulfil this role successfully and help the organisation achieve its commercial and other goals?

Brand Learning has been supporting global capability development initiatives in the area of marketing leadership for several years now. Our highly regarded Marketing Leadership Programme, which we run with the UK's premier professional Marketing body, The Marketing Society, has engaged many of the country's top marketers in sharing their insights on what it takes to be a great marketing leader.

Future, Engage, Deliver

Our key partner in this programme, the well known leadership coach Steve Radcliffe, distils the essence of leadership into three core skills; first, having a clear sense of what you want things to look like in the future; secondly, the ability to engage with people so they want to create that future with you, and thirdly the resolve and discipline to deliver your vision in practice.

These three leadership challenges provide the essential 'lenses' through which marketing leadership skills can be viewed, so let's now focus on each in turn.

Future Vision

First and foremost, Marketers need to excel at anticipating the 'future'. To be able to lead change, Marketers need to develop the skills needed to inspire people around them with a clear vision of future market opportunities and of what the organisation could and should be doing for its customers. The innovative propositions that result need to be translated into powerful brand ideas that bring to life promises to customers in ways that people, both inside and outside the company, can relate to.

Great brands like Tesco, Dove, Johnnie Walker and Virgin are all based on big ideas that bring energy and a sense of purpose to help release the energy needed to inspire big ideas and new thinking, as well as to deliver offers to customers that are relevant and differentiated.

Another future-oriented role of marketers, which they often find challenging, is to anticipate how customers' needs may evolve over time and to create a forward-looking market segmentation on that basis. Such strategic analysis is critical if marketers are to lead the company in making customer-focused choices about brand and product portfolios.

The recent success of our programme with ICI/Akzo Nobel, which was awarded the Marketing Society's Grand Prix for Marketing Excellence, was based on the leadership of Marketing Director, Kerris Bright, and her team, in leading the whole company to focus energy on a tighter more future-focussed portfolio with the Dulux brand at its heart.

Engaging others

The next core leadership skill marketers need is to excel at 'engaging' others. Marketing leaders need to develop the skills to lead the contributions of other functions and external suppliers, not for personal gain, but to build organisational alignment and commitment behind a customer-focused agenda.

Marketers have to be influential within any business, because without their input the company will be less successful in creating value for its customers. But equally, Marketers have to earn the right to have that influence by demonstrating the quality and tangible impact of the strategic insight they bring to the table.

There are inevitably many structural and process-related challenges in creating 'customer alignment' within any organisation and Marketers need to ensure that cross-functional roles and responsibilities are clear and that decision-making takes place at the right time with the right people involved.

Equally important are some less tangible considerations such as the quality of relationships that get built along the way! The quality of the personal relationships that marketers have with key stakeholders in other departments is a critical driver of their success as is the honesty and openness of debate that takes place between managers. Successful Marketing leaders involve and engage other people in the customer agenda, rather than simply communicating 'at' them about what they should or shouldn't be doing.

Delivering Results

The final leadership skill Marketers need is to excel at the successful 'delivery' of the brand propositions and initiatives needed to attract and retain customers.

There are two key dimensions here. The first is the central role of the marketer in ensuring the organisation pulls together to create enhanced 'customer-perceived' value; the second, equally important, is the effective allocation of marketing resources behind initiatives to drive demand-led growth creating enhanced value for the business. Only by successfully delivering both these dimensions will a marketing leader be perceived to be successful.

Great Marketing leaders are great 'strategists' with a clear eye on the future, as well as great 'activists', obsessive in their attention to detail about the design and delivery of every aspect of the customer experience—even those outside their immediate control. Marketing leaders must also link this customer orientation with an insightful understanding of the company's business model and the financial drivers of success.

They must relentlessly monitor and track the relationship between customer satisfaction and business performance to build a sharper commercial understanding of how and where value is added and by bringing such evidence to the attention of the board, marketing leaders have an outstanding and unique opportunity to put customers at the heart of strategic business decisions.

Top Marketing Leaders believe...

In recent interviews that Brand Learning has conducted with successful, senior marketing leaders, we have identified a number of essential leadership characteristics that great marketers tend to possess. These are:

- a) Their ability to create a compelling vision of the future; great Marketing leaders tend to be insightful, curious, inspiring, bold and driven
- b) Their power to engage other people; effective Marketing leaders have a willingness to listen, have empathy for others' feelings and points of view, behave in a spirit of honesty, integrity and humility, yet are intrinsically strong and not afraid to challenge.
- c) Their drive to deliver results; successful Marketing leaders are characterised by a purposeful determination, a focus on practical and commercial details and a resilience under pressure.

The main conclusion we draw from all our experience is that to be a great marketer demands outstanding functional excellence in what you 'do' but to be a great marketing leader also demands excellence in who it is you are actually 'being' and that will have the greatest impact on the ability of marketers to create value both for customers and for their organisation.

This point of view has been written with the kind permission of Steve Radcliffe and has been inspired by Steve's recent book '*Future, Engage, Deliver*'—details of which can be found on our website: brandlearning.com.

Copyright © Brand Learning 2000-2009

BRAND LEARNING are leading international specialists in building marketing excellence.

For further information:

Please contact us on +44(0) 20 8614 8150

Brand Learning
Burgoine Quay
8 Lower Teddington Road
Kingston Upon Thames
Surrey KT1 4ER

team@brandlearning.com