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Trends in Marketing and Revenue Operations

The Future of B2B Marketing According to Executives

Updated January 2025

Introduction

Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) tenure is consistently the shortest among executive leadership, and it continues to trend in the wrong direction, recently falling to its lowest level in more than a decade. The average CMO can expect to last just half the time as their CEO. While explanations vary, it's clear that somewhere along the road, marketing leaders are more likely than leadership in other departments to become disconnected from the rest of the business or fail to convince their peers of the value of their contributions. To understand why, we undertook a comprehensive survey to find out what executives are seeing.

Trends in Marketing and Revenue Operations surveyed more than 500 executives in marketing, sales, finance, revenue operations, and CEO roles. The goal was to uncover potential causes of the disconnect for marketing, by examining not just the approach marketers are taking, but also how executives in other departments think marketing is performing, and whether they feel they can successfully work together.

Our questions focused on three primary areas of interest:

1. Revealing the alignment between marketing teams and the rest of the organization when it comes to marketing initiatives and success metrics.
    - Are executives on the same page when it comes to the performance of marketing activities, and how they can help?
2. Uncovering insights about what tools and services companies are currently using to understand the impact of marketing initiatives on revenue.
    - What technology do executives use to determine the value of marketing?
3. Identifying how executives would like to improve marketing strategies.
    - Are executives seeing fundamental issues with marketing's approach?

The results indicate a significant gap in tools, terms, and success metrics across the business. Marketing teams are under serious pressure to demonstrate how they're contributing to growth, but across organizations, they're missing the technology, the numbers, and the overall strategy that would allow them to show how they're driving revenue. As a result, executives overwhelmingly would prefer a new approach for marketing that would more closely tie its efforts to the rest of the organization.

This report will examine the key results from the Trends in Marketing and Revenue Operations survey that describe both how executives think marketing became disconnected, and how they think a path forward can be found.

Key Result

85.3%

Of go-to-market teams can't consistently map the value of marketing spend to revenue.

"There used to be a time that I believe marketing was thought of as pretty pictures and storytelling," said Suzy Deering, Global CMO at Ford, in a recent interview with the Wall Street Journal. "Now the role is better viewed as an orchestrator for the business."

As Deering notes, marketing teams have become increasingly scientific in how they understand customers and generate demand. There is an abundance of data available about the customer journey and tools for optimizing every touchpoint. But a crucial area that marketing leaders have not yet succeeded in quantifying is in measuring their contribution to the bottom line. Our survey finds that 85.3% of go-to-market teams can't consistently map the value of marketing spend to revenue. Marketing leaders are struggling to explain how their initiatives directly affect growth, and their executive peers are noticing.

The CMO Survey has shown that, when asked to justify marketing spending, the three least common behaviors for CMOs are to build their case on financial returns, effect on KPIs, or data from experiments. Marketing leaders usually make their case about business priorities and then argue long-term impact qualitatively. In this way, they're playing right into the idea that marketing is just "pretty pictures and storytelling," without hard science driving its decisions.

Not every single element of marketing needs to be easily reduced to a metric. But justifying contribution to revenue, and thus future marketing investments, is a place where being measurable should be natural. So why can't CMOs, who've succeeded in quantifying so much of the rest of their practice, get there with revenue outcomes? Our survey findings suggest that it is today's predominant approach to marketing that is to blame. The vast majority of businesses (80.6%) employ lead-centric marketing strategies and tactics. And as a result, in a substantial majority (69%), departments have entirely different terms and metrics to describe the customer journey.

With success metrics, systems, and entire terminologies built around generating and converting leads, there are two primary consequences for marketing. First, by centering around lead-centric metrics, CMOs prevent themselves from connecting at the system level with the revenue-centric models used in the rest of the business. This stops CMOs from achieving unified operations with other revenue-facing teams, or gaining a unified view of the customer journey, and forces them to devote resources to building isolated marketing-specific systems. Second, CMOs who do try to quantify their impact using lead-centric metrics, are asking other executives to make a more abstract connection between their efforts and actual revenue results. CMOs may feel they're being data-driven, but without quantifying their impact on growth, other executives will walk away without definitive proof of what marketing does to affect the bottom line.

Key Result

73.5%

Of executives still use spreadsheets to create alignment on marketing initiatives

The science fiction author William Gibson once said that, “The future is already here, it’s just not evenly distributed.” In B2B marketing, it’s hard to think of a place where the future has so clearly not been distributed, as in the continued use of the spreadsheet.

The electronic spreadsheet was introduced in 1969 and originally operated on IBM mainframe computers. Today, there are over 8,000 marketing technology vendors, with 1,000 new entrants in 2020 alone. Meanwhile, cutting-edge cloud-native solutions have made powerful analytics easy across much of the rest of the business. With rapid development in marketing technology, better options for marketing insights should have arrived by now. And yet, our survey finds that 73.5% of marketing executives still primarily use spreadsheets to create alignment on their initiatives.

Comparing with other available choices for marketers gives a clue as to why. Alternatives cited by executives included CRM dashboards, marketing automation dashboards, business intelligence tools, or custom data warehouses. What these systems all have in common is extreme flexibility. They were designed for the utmost customization in order to accommodate as wide a variety of business models as possible. The downside, however, is that customization requires effort, and there isn’t a blueprint that marketing leaders can follow to set up best-in-class operational infrastructure for their team’s ever developing needs.

These current alternatives leave marketing leaders in a tough spot. They can devote significant time and resources to building their own analytics (62% of businesses spend over $100k), shifting focus away from marketing priorities like generating demand. They can burn their marketing budgets on an endless stream of consultants to constantly tinker with their tools. Or they can kick the problem over to an IT department that will ask for a pre-defined blueprint that marketers don't have, because their requirements are constantly evolving to meet a changing market. On the other hand, anybody can fire up a spreadsheet on their laptop and crunch a few numbers when needed. When there's so much else going on, it's easy to see why marketers land on the outdated but familiar choice.

The issue, however, is that spreadsheets aren't suited to the dynamic and multifaceted nature of modern marketing. From Hubspot and Salesforce to ZenDesk, Sprout Social, Outreach, and more, marketers rely on a legion of different systems to get a complete picture of the customer journey. Unifying data from diverse sources in spreadsheets is a nightmare, so the resulting picture is usually incomplete, and the full story of marketing's contribution is lost. In addition, because spreadsheets represent a snapshot of data from whenever it was extracted, they're also incomplete from a trend perspective and quickly become out-of-date. And even in web-based options, spreadsheets are a pain to collaborate with, making it difficult for marketers to pull together their insights with finance, sales, or customer success. While they're the apparent option, spreadsheets only exacerbate marketing's isolation.

Key Result

88.8%

Of executives think marketing and sales must align on common success metrics

The story of misalignment between marketing and sales is not new. Since the time when most advertising was done in print and salespeople went door-to-door, the two teams have bickered about whether the rollout plan was excellent and sales just couldn't execute, or whether the leads all lead nowhere and the messaging was all a mess.

Yet today the go-to-market operation has become increasingly scientific and in many cases excels at driving its activities with technology and data. With more opportunities to be data-driven, it should be more possible than ever for marketing and sales to establish a clear and objective formula for collaboration, rather than debating subjective points like which slide the pitch deck should lead with. **However, our survey finds that 76.3% of executives still think their business needs a better approach in order for marketing to generate quality opportunities for sales.** In spite of the more than 8,000 marketing technology solutions available, the right prescription has not been found.

Rather than bringing marketing and sales closer together, it's possible their current approach to data and technology is actually reinforcing the divide. Marketing centers its metrics and systems around leads, a departure from the revenue-centric model used by sales and the rest of the business. By building its systems around lead-centered success metrics, marketing ensures its separation from sales is cemented at the system level. This means that while users of these systems may know they have the same ultimate goal (generate revenue), their behaviors are shaped towards separate outcomes. Looking at the typical handoff between marketing and sales provides a clear example of this occurring.

On average, opportunities in CRM systems have just a single person associated with them, despite the fact that 80% of B2B buying decisions are made by at least three people. This suggests that in most cases, marketing is handing single qualified leads off to sales as the basis for opportunities. In theory, there is nothing stopping marketing from enhancing the quality of an opportunity by qualifying other relevant leads before the handoff. Single-lead opportunities aren't likely to represent an actual buying opportunity without significant sales attention. But when marketing systems are optimized around converting leads, marketers trying to do their job will end up flooding the funnel with disconnected individuals. This puts marketing at odds with sales and the more fleshed-out opportunities they would prefer to pursue.

This example shows why 88.8% of executives in our survey think marketing and sales must align on common success metrics. The more data-driven both teams become, the more their chosen metrics will shape not just overall strategies but daily user behaviors on their chosen platforms. The alignment of marketing and sales will not be achieved without alignment on the same measurable goals.

Key Result

74.9%

Of executives think marketing must become opportunity-centric, not lead-centric

If most marketing teams are centered around leads, and sales teams focus on pursuing opportunities, then how can sales and marketing come to agreement on going after the same goals and success metrics? The clear answer is that marketing must find a way to shift to an opportunity-centric model, making opportunities the common lens by which the entire customer journey can be viewed. Throughout sales, finance, revenue operations, and CEO roles, executives have largely come to the same conclusion, **with 74.9% telling our survey that they think marketing must become opportunity-centric, not-lead centric.**

Asked for their experience with the lead-centric approach to marketing, executives in our survey cited shortcomings including lead-centric metrics not resonating at the executive or board level, as well as making it difficult to understand marketing's revenue contributions and to align marketing and sales around the same goals. They also noticed that opportunities were typically created with just a single person associated to them, leaving sales to piece together who else would drive the buying decision.

The lead-centric model is the common thread tying together the marketing challenges covered in this report: difficulty quantifying revenue impacts, continued use of outdated tools for insights, and misalignment with sales. If marketing can become opportunity-centric, it then becomes possible to continuously trace the progression of an opportunity from the first ever marketing interaction to the day sales closes a new deal. With an unbroken view of where revenue comes from and the relevant touchpoints along the way, marketing should then be able to quantify how its different activities helped move an opportunity along, and put into numbers how its investments resulted in outcomes for the bottom line.

If marketers are turning to spreadsheets because their alternatives require too much investment and effort from the marketing team, this can also be seen as a consequence of the lead-centric model. It is because marketing systems are based around generating and converting leads, a separate model from the rest of the business, that marketing ends up responsible for building all of its own systems and getting its own insights. If marketing becomes opportunity-centric, then it becomes possible to connect its models with sales and finance, and depend more on revenue operations teams for infrastructure.

How can marketing accomplish a shift to being opportunity-centric? An approach known as Revenue Marketing is emerging as a contrast to lead-centric marketing. It provides a method by which marketing can center its operations around opportunities and revenue, and align marketing strategy with the rest of the organization. Leading analysts in the B2B space have also taken notice of this shift. Forrester’s 2021 B2B Revenue Waterfall argued that it’s no longer possible to optimize B2B performance around lead-centric processes and technologies. Forrester argues that the next generation of B2B will accelerate growth by unifying marketing and sales under the opportunity.

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Whitepaper:

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