



**Whitepaper:
Marketing Leaders at The
Studio, May 2023**



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The Studio brought together B2B CMOs and leaders in the technology sector to Abbey Road Studios in London for an afternoon of panel debates, executive networking and keen analysis on the world around them. Fresh observations on the role of technology, hybrid work, global economic shifts, AI innovation and more seasoned the filmed conversations and audience questions alike. This invite-only event for HotTopics' marketing leaders community brought together some of the most influential creative minds in the industry. Across these discussions five themes emerged as central to the future of the role and its function. Discover them below and what these leaders have to say about some of the most pressing challenges—and uplifting opportunities—for marketers today.

1. Technology Trends

Breaking the Bubble: 2023's Most Important Technology Trends for CMOs

2. Leadership

Leadership Triage: What Skills Should CMOs Prioritise in 2023? How (and Why) to Be Bold in a Downturn

3. Talent

The Definitive Guide to Tapping Marketing Talent Today

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How to Win Customer Attention in the Hybrid World

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Journey from CMO to NED

1. Technology Trends

In the future 2023 may be seen as a watershed year for the industry. Converging influences crystallised in the minds and habits of customers and businesses, all within mere months of one another.

Business platforms, data, digital skills and AI have each reared seismic shifts on the marketing function.

B2B CMOs in the technology sector are especially exposed to change. Their businesses spearhead, support and simplify innovation; it may be no surprise then that the roundtable debate centred largely on the effects of AI. The potential of the technology is not lost on these CMOs.

“I’m a big advocate for [AI]. It provides structure and is a starting point, and tool to aid in creativity, translation, time-saving,” said Louise Robertson of Pattern Insurance.

“Artificial intelligence is artificial but it can bring about huge amounts of insights from large data pools,” agreed Sarah Thomas of CapGemini. “It can spot patterns a human wouldn’t see, and it refines our campaigns.”

Jussi Wacklin, SVP CMO, T-Systems, is already using it to shape his go-to-market strategies.

“I’m learning every day,” he told his fellow panellists. “I build use cases and solution descriptions on ChatGPT, create the got-to-market framework then I put it under our product team to check and refine.” This smoother, sometimes faster process also connects business teams in new ways.

AI is exciting, but marketing leaders should proceed with caution.

This is still a nascent technology—OpenAI vastly underappreciated the public appetite for a LLM solution—and reports of AI ‘hallucinations’, bias and unoriginality will impact teams who over-rely on AI today. As Emma Acton said, “...as leaders we have to set the standard for teams and the organisation to use this ethically.”

“Think outside-in,” said Jason Hemingway. “Question the customer value first; the business value will follow.”

Perhaps the best way to spot a technology trend from a bubble is the former will ultimately help customers, the other pops.

2. Leadership

Leadership Triage: What Skills Should CMOs Prioritise in 2023?

When asked about the purpose of a B2B CMO, Nutanix's Steven Goddard wasted no time. "Drive growth; increase revenues or create new revenue streams; enable brand value."

Yet marketing has changed significantly over the last five years.

The marketing leader has had to become multi-hyphenate in their roles. From developing their core skills in brand and purpose, to re-learning events and field marketing techniques, to data-driven and sales-enhanced capabilities, the CMO has an array of muscles they can flex.

The last few months however have been challenging. Sally Croft of Ericsson agreed that "...it is an uncertain time but CMOs ought to prioritise being clear on the vision. Having a definitive goal is so important for the team.

"We have created a 'be more, do less' narrative", she continued. "We add impact but do less things and that has been enabled by prioritisation. It helps focus the team's energy on the activities that matter."

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"The best skill a CMO can possess is a growth mindset," said Sumeet Vermani, a global marketing leader, CMO and NED.

Is it impractical to demand this of the CMO? This is where the nature of prioritisation comes into play. B2B CMOs ought to challenge themselves not to be master of all things, but a generalist as much as possible, with specialisms that suit their personality and/or the business, leaving other key skills to trusted team members.

A business mindset goes a long way, too.

Sally alluded to this by challenging fellow marketers to “stay relevant in a changing world whilst recognising your own unique set of skills.” Later in the conversation, Steven advised “understanding the broader ecosystem and sector, and the higher order business challenges your customers are facing when using your products or services.”

Overall, the debate was optimistic about the future. “Exciting times lie ahead”, said Michelle Urdiales, CMO Latin America of AP Moeller, who phoned in from Sao Paulo. Just do not expect a period of relative calm.

“In five year’s time the marketing function will look very different”, said Sumeet. “Teams will be smaller, more agile and digitised. We will be using more tools to streamline our processes and spending more time being creative alongside those technologies.”

How (and Why) to Be Bold in a Downturn

Those sentiments complemented well an adjacent conversation about a key leadership attribute in times of flux: boldness.

The panel highlighted that this is not our first downturn, nor will it be our last. That clarity affords us some level of composure. It also encourages us to consider what we have learned in previous negative cycles: we cannot predict the future, but we can learn from the past.

Simonetta Riga of Evelyn Partners advised “...doubling down on customer value-add services, talent investment, R&D and product development precipitates growth.” It is also about facing headwinds with a face fully forward.

“Boldness means acknowledging the worst,” said James Burstall, CEO and Founder of Argonon Group. The business leader and author nearly lost his business during the pandemic and has since gone on to write about his experience. Boldness, for him, saved not just his business, but himself and his team. Taking action was his greatest lesson for the audience.

For marketing teams this can be difficult. Theirs is the first set of budgets to be slashed. Yet boldness is a mindset as well as a strategy—the CMO ought to use this time to be resourceful and experimental, keeping the wider executive team clued in as to what was, or wasn't working.

"It's a balance between conservatism and recklessness," said David Keene of Wipro.

Simonetta shared a truism she lives by: "If you're one step ahead you're a genius. If you're two, you're a fool."

3. Talent

I hire people better than me with the aim to create a succession plan for us all."

Talent is a hot topic for every C-suite executive in 2023. It isn't just about how and where to find new talent as market forces continually rife hiring budgets, but also how workforce demands are evolving post-pandemic and how new generations change the ratio of ages in teams. Now more than ever leaders, marketers included, need to understand and manage these very qualitative of forces.

For the former, marketing and creative teams have largely benefitted from the loosening of workplace policy. The CMOs in this roundtable noted how many team members felt empowered to work wherever and however they needed to, often with productivity gains alongside mental health improvements.

"New hires now don't just want a job, they want a journey."

Has this trend continued? Not exactly.

CMOs are now wrestling with tighter budgets and difficult retention decisions. Bringing teams back to the office sounds sensible, but resistance threatens team dynamic and morale.

Distinct generational expectations compound this headache: Gen Z, the youngest cohort in the workforce today, demand individualism, pragmatic working hours and further benefits. Leaders are worried however that working from home will have unintended consequences to how this generation learns from their managers—if at all.

Joanne Gilhooley of Adarma said her teams have signed a contract about how and when they work together. It means that trust is higher in members bound to the agreement and goes some way to addressing what she calls “...a lost generation; graduates who joined the workforce during Covid who need to address their people skills.’

Mandisa Ntloko-Pietersen, CMO, BXC, based in South Africa, is looking to different sectors for new talent, citing creativity comes in more forms than we know, whilst also addressing the diversity conundrum. “Be more accepting of different experiences.’

The uptake? Marketing teams today need to be brought together consciously and deliberately to make use of face-to-face time. Upskilling individuals will pay dividends for your best talent. Reskilling individuals is a more cost- and time-effective way to reorganise teams in difficult periods, whilst also addressing variable retention rates experienced by businesses.

As Oliver Pligerstorpher of IFS said, “We have an obligation to invest in young talent in particular early on. How else can we nurture the next generation of leaders?”

4. Winning Business

“How to Win Customer Attention in the Hybrid World”

If there was one group to have benefited within a post-pandemic working culture, it might be the customer—but their wins complicate marketing.

“Society habits have evolved so of course customer’s have, too,” said Sarah Whipp of CallSign. “We can no longer rely on 9-5 working, location defaults, long attention spans; content has to be consumable when and where customers want it.”

Compounding this freedom (for B2B marketing leaders), is that customer attention itself has morphed, as Sarah intimated. Social media engagement, event attendance, online webinar registrations, call times and in-person meetings now require AB testing, personalised communication and a longer run-up to ensure numbers remain high.

Relevance is the key word for 2023 and beyond.

“The industry is more noisy than ever,” said Simon X of IBM, “and the barrier to entry is low—technology has democratised offerings and products and services. The only way for customers to recognise your brand as different is how relevant your messaging becomes.”

It is a headache for marketers and a steep learning curve for sales teams, but it is also an opportunity to re-learn customer habits and reorganise oneself accordingly. Personalisation may be a term we have heard before, but it is crucial now in the B2B space where elsewhere it is ubiquitous.

For Isabelle Duarte, however, a balance must be struck.

“Too much personalisation can be creepy,” she warned. “The same data can be used to find a parking space or give you a parking ticket,” agreed Simon, bringing the discussion back to relevancy when trying to evaluate how individual one can make a campaign.

Winning customer attention is not the end of the story. It is the beginning. The next step is to build trust with transparency. That will help “clients understand how you do business and they can sell that back to the Board”—a new trend these CMOs are seeing when speaking with clients and prospects.

Of course, all of this in the context of a newly hybrid world. Is it here to stay? The panellists were split.

According to John Watton, this is a “transitional phase” and “the world is keeping us on our toes; be prepared to have to change strategies again soon.”

For Isabelle, however, who herself shielded for two years during the pandemic, hybrid is “absolutely here to stay.” One reason for her surety? “It is the first question I’m asked in an interview before salary.”

Team members who bring this expectation to work will no doubt expect it in their experiences as customers and clients. And to gain their attention in 2023, they will need relevant, relatable and transparent dealings with you, across many touch points. No-one said winning their attention would be easy.

5. Careers

A leader never stops learning. Marketers in particular have had to be both adaptable to evolutions in their responsibilities and resilient to market forces that impact everything, from its customers’ habits to its quarterly budgets. There comes a point, however, when the skills and experience a CMO acquires can be put to good use elsewhere; this is normally when the Non-Executive Director, or NED, role comes into view.

First, check what options are available. Catherine Gallacher recommends speaking to your employer first to “understand what boundaries exist between any new role and your current role in terms of conflicts.”

Competition for these influential roles is tough. The skills required in order to succeed are different to that of an executive position. The journey from CMO to NED can sometimes be the most difficult part of one’s career.

“One of the least known responsibilities is ensuring governance is in place,” said Ruth Rowan, “This is where it gets serious because you’re legally accountable for the performance of the company and if things go wrong, it’s jail time.”

A clear understanding of (the) business is critical because when becoming a NED, an executive sheds their functionality and steps into a neutral position, albeit with a specialism in whatever function from which they have emerged. Marketers typically have an excellent eye for brand, customer experience and new trends. These can and should be utilised as a NED when asking specific questions of the C-suite. Personal development, too, is often recognised.

For Ruth Rowan, “What are you going to learn and what can you give?”

Simonetta had a more playful approach: “Be keen to stick your nose in but your fingers out”, in reference to the balance a NED must tread as they get to know the business without running it. In fact, Simonetta recommends joining the risk committee of your new business as “that will be the quickest way to understand your new company.”

What’s more, leaders should also be patient. Applying for any NED position is the wrong strategy: take the time to find the right company, with the right values, and the passion will shine through in your application and interviews. Leor Franks called this “authentic applications”.

Not only will you be more successful in the position, you will enjoy it, too. That is another under-discussed element of the journey from CMO to NED: it is supposed to be fun.

Watch the roundtable debates in full by visiting the hottopics.ht website.

HotTopics’ marketing leaders community will next meet at Abbey Road Studios on October 4. To apply to join them, register your interest here and discover more about this exclusive event for the marketing C-suite.