



Phil Brown | November 2012

# How marketing can get the ear of the board

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Whether a business is overhauling a new branding proposition, rolling out an advertising campaign or getting stuck into social media marketing, most marketers will agree that getting the board 'on-board' with an idea is sometimes a bigger challenge than gaining brand buy-in from prospects and customers. Without backing from the board, the success of any campaign can be doomed from the start.

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So how can B2B marketing managers secure board level support in a business climate when funding for new projects isn't easy to come by?

## Broader understanding key

One of the common reasons marketing departments fail to get buy-in from the board is a lack of shared understanding about how marketing activities support and contribute to the company's broader goals. Unfortunately, it is often the failure of marketing to make these connections clear. The benefits of marketing initiatives are too often presented in terms that do not clearly map on to the metrics the CEO or CFO will be focused on.

When marketing is working well it's a hub which the business strategy revolves around. However, for this to happen effectively it means that marketing professionals must understand how the rest of the business operates, including the key business objectives and metrics driving other business departments including sales, operations and finance. Too often marketers take a far too narrow a view of their role and don't take the time to fully appreciate the broader business goals and objectives and how marketing could help attain these goals.

Clearly, this has always been a big challenge for marketers, but arguably in the current economic environment, when every area of a company's spend is being scrutinised more rigorously than ever, marketers need to work even harder to get the ear of the board. Naturally, boards are less inclined to allocate marketing budget and simply trust it will be spent wisely. They're also unlikely to approve significant marketing expenditures unless they can be persuaded that it will produce a significant return within a short to medium term time horizon.

## Align plans with business goals

To persuade a board of the merits of any new marketing ideas needs careful and well thought through plans that clearly align marketing objectives with strategic business goals. Therefore the starting point for any marketing plan should be a clearly defined set of business goals and objectives - the process should then be to

define the marketing objectives which support the higher level business goals and then identify the marketing activities to deliver against those marketing objectives.

If plans are built in this way then it's fairly straightforward to show the logic of how proposed marketing activities feed into supporting higher level objectives and goals. It's important that marketing teams can present not just the proposed activities, but the underlying logic of why those activities have been selected to help the business achieve its goals.

### Rigour required

Unfortunately doing it this way requires some rigorous thinking and is harder work than just coming up with a bunch of campaign ideas. Problems occur because marketers often approach the process in reverse, i.e. they first come up with a load of ideas for activities, and then try to 'retro-fit' objectives to them - this is a fundamentally flawed approach and often means there's a lack of intellectual rigour behind the plans. As a result they soon fall apart when senior managers start to probe and challenge.

In a B2B context, marketing only works as an integrated part of a go-to-market strategy which also includes sales, commercial management and product management. Problems often occur when marketing operates in a silo and the marketing plan is independent of the sales plan. I don't believe that a marketing director needs to necessarily sit on the board to get the businesses to achieve buy-in to marketing, however, it is important that a board member has responsibility for both marketing and sales to ensure alignment between these functions, e.g. a Sales & Marketing Director or Chief Commercial Officer.

In order to influence board members marketers must ensure they understand the goals, strategy and key metrics of the business, and ensure that every marketing initiative proposed will demonstrably impact the metrics that boards care about.

### Steer clear of jargon

Major pitfalls for marketers to avoid include using lots of marketing jargon and failing to link planned activity to business goals. Marketers need to realise that as technical experts it is their role to articulate how marketing techniques and tactics can be deployed to benefit the wider business.

To be truly effective, marketers need to make a real effort to understand how other departments work and what drives them. They need to spend time with sales, or sit in a product management meeting. This investment would enable them to understand the broader business context better and ensure the plans they then present reflect the needs of all departments within the business. At the end of the day, it comes back to basics - if you understand your audience properly you will be far more likely to be able to influence them.

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#### About OneGTM

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