

7 steps to clarify the role of marketing in the boardroom

By [Prof Marius Wait](#) and [Dr Beate Stiehler-Mulder](#)

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The role of marketing remains confusing for many organisations, with marketers and non-marketers expressing diverse understanding of the marketing function. In the middle of this, sits the struggling and often confused marketer, trying to figure out what he/she should do to make an impact and be taken seriously.



Source © Mark Bowden [123rf](#) Marketers need to clarify some of the misperceptions about the role of marketing in the boardroom

The many academic definitions that refer to the specific job roles and functions of marketing and sales, the confusion between marketing and sales, the reality of a new world filled with changes brought about by the 4IR and Covid-19, and boardroom arguments about whether marketing and sales play a strategic or an operational role all contribute to this.

Boardroom perception of marketing

Research conducted in Europe on executive management's view of the role of marketing reveals that marketing executives believe marketing should operate at a strategic level and contribute to corporate strategy, while non-marketing executives see marketing as enabling sales or supporting the sales function.

These different mindsets prompted research in South Africa to determine how executives here view marketing. Exploring what marketing is understood to be for South African executives, marketing and non-marketing executives had comparable views.

Both groups said that marketing, among other things, is about brand awareness, consumer relationships, products and service deliverables, enticing the customer, and paving the way for sales to close transactions. The executives were fully aware of the traditional definitions that encompass the 4Ps (Product, Price, Place and Promotion).

However, many current scholars have stated that a modern marketing definition must include the 4IR components that reflect technological change. When the executives were asked whether these agreed understandings were put into practice in their organisations, the responses were a resounding “No”...



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A clear-cut division

This dichotomy between theory and practice is nothing new. This is in part because of the different definitions, which result in misinterpretation and eventually have a negative impact on the organisation. There is a clear-cut division between marketing executives and non-marketing executives.

All non-marketing executives viewed marketing's role in the organisation as that of sales support, while marketing executives see marketing as a strategic function. Non-marketing executives believe that marketing is not complex enough to operate on a strategic level.

Marketing correlates with the sales efforts of the organisation, and its planning is short-term. Marketing executives believe that marketing's strategy should be aligned with the organisation's strategic goals – and this planning is long-term.

The executives also had opposing views on the marketing metrics used in the organisation. Non-marketing executives are of the opinion that marketing's success is difficult to measure, and that the only reliable measure is an increase in sales. There is no financial accountability, and marketing is usually obsessed with digital and social media page activity such as clicks and likes. It is difficult to report marketing success in financial terms.

In contrast, marketing executives feel that it is very easy to measure marketing's organisational contributions.



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What could be done?

1. Marketing's changed role should be meticulously evaluated along with the HR function to develop potential new roles and positions in the organisation. 4IR and Covid-19 have changed many things in the world, and it is important to take this into account to serve a changed consumer.
2. Educate non-marketing executives on the fact that marketing supports sales, and that together they are directly responsible for bringing in revenue. What other business functions can claim such direct responsibility for the bottom line?
3. Explain that marketing can support the ease with which a sale is made as well as the price at which it is made.
4. For non-marketing executives to see that marketing is a strategic long-term function in the organisation, marketing executives must show this to be tangibly true. This means, in part, that marketing executives must communicate in a business language that non-marketing executives understand; and that might require using financial jargon. This

includes the financial value of marketing and balancing aspirational initiatives with proven financially tangible projects.

5. Marketing executives can enhance their organisational accountability by enriching the traditional sales indicators (total sales revenue) with customer-demand-related indicators such as product price, customers' income, interest rates, and the consumer price index. This brings in other metrics to which the other executives can relate.
6. Demonstrate the strategic value of marketing and how it can generate future revenue. This is not always clear from only presenting sales metrics. Marketing executives must also demonstrate the impact and financial contributions of marketing initiatives. Managing evidence must be a core activity of the marketing executive.
7. Marketing executives must integrate marketing activities with other organisational departments, such as sales, product development (R&D), logistics, advertising, and finances. This integration must be seen as an organisational partnership. Working in silos has always been an organisational challenge; it is up to the marketing executives to build relationships with the managers of other business functions and to initiate task teams from all relevant functions to work together and review their efforts at least monthly.

There are probably another 201 aspects we could have added to this list – but for now, we believe that the list is a good start to bringing about some change, to encourage marketers, and to clear up some boardroom misperceptions about the power, importance, and role of marketing, sales and the role of marketing in the boardroom.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Prof Marius Wait and Dr Beate Stiehler-Mulder at part of the University of Johannesburg's marketing department.

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