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The paradox of erasing marketing silos

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Marketers being seen as replaceable
Filtering internal entrepreneurship and individual professional passion

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For many professional service firms (PSFs), erasing marketing and business development silos can be a tough nut to crack. Their less-than-optimal operational structures and negative cultural traditions can significantly hinder their efforts to integrate marketing and business development. And yet, when trying to integrate their marketing and business development functions, PSFs and B2Bs are quite capable of making progress. They've launched numerous noteworthy efforts to address their structural and cultural disconnectivity challenges.

'Doing things differently' is alive and well but could it actually hinder effectiveness? Unfortunately, yes - especially when laudable 'change' efforts cause even more structural silos and cultural barriers. This is a situation I've labelled 'the paradox of doing things differently'. Let's review some examples:

Limitations

The first is related to the variable scope and often limited responsibilities of the marketing and business development function in a professional firm. There is growing evidence that energetic, persistent marketing and business development leaders are pushing their firms

to let them define their functions. Who can blame them? Since the earliest days of the service marketing field, it has been largely up to marketers and business developers themselves to create their own functional purviews, forge their own growth avenues, and build their own skills.

Today, many marketers and business developers consider this effort a positive one for themselves and their firms. These 'doing things differently' pathfinders draw attention to their organisations' flexibility, willingness to evolve and marketplace savvy. Indeed, we really do want to see that our firms are living, breathing, malleable enterprises.

But consider what happens if the 'doing things differently' champion leaves the firm. Does the function they have created stick around, even if they don't? All too often, the individual leaves and the functional advances that the organisation had achieved leave too.

The champions

A second example is related to narrowly defined marketing and business development initiatives. Most are typically championed by professionally brave individual leaders or small groups. Many of these piecemeal initiatives begin as pilots endorsed by executive committees or special task forces, and are often implemented in only a limited way (at the geographic, line-of-business or industry level). In concept, pilots make a lot of sense. Internal entrepreneurship is good, right?

But consider what happens if a business unit manager is allowed to launch a region-specific positioning platform and it gets out of synch with the positioning of the rest of the firm. Did executive managers fully evaluate the integration potential of the platform as a whole for it to help the entire firm move ahead? All too often, because the pathway was paved by one individual or small team and accommodated on a situation-specific basis, the answer is no.

Integration as the goal

Despite the fact that these 'doing things differently' initiatives signify nimble enterprises and celebrate innovation, individual pathways and narrowly focused initiatives carry the risk of creating organisational barriers. Without a formal framework for cross-functional or enterprise-wide integration, they're in danger of creating more disconnectivity. Doing things differently, if managed with integration in mind, carries enormous potential to fulfill the organisation's ultimate goal of gaining market share, growing the right revenues and optimally serving clients.

Kate Kirkpatrick, whose elevation to the chief marketing officer position at the architectural firm **Gensler** serves as a classic example of doing things differently with integration as the goal, while driving successful marketplace gains for the entire firm.

Kirkpatrick related her story when she co-presented with me at **Society of Marketing Professional Services'** national conference in August 2007. Our topic was "enhancing the marketing function's leadership potential" in architecture, engineering and construction

firms. When she considered this challenge, she began by doing her homework about practitioners' general perceptions of her function. She reviewed the findings of a reputable organisation's survey of CEOs. In that survey, a full 75% of respondents agreed that marketing is more important than ever.

But when they were asked about their perception of marketing's priorities, less than 50% believed that what keeps them awake at night are at the top of marketing's agenda. They pointed out that "marketing is not aligned with the CEO's agenda" and that, instead, marketing focuses "on tactical issues such as maintaining branding guidelines, sharing best practices and counselling divisions." They wanted marketing to provide measurable outcomes and a clear return on investment, but they felt that marketing's metrics were not up to the task.

On the inside

Kirkpatrick then interviewed leading Gensler practitioners, whose comments echoed the CEO survey. When she asked Gensler marketers about the challenges they faced in becoming more strategically effective for their firm, she heard responses that were not about practice growth or strategic alignment but about other types of issues, including time management and workload.

"Marketers weren't perceived to have the right priorities and the right toolkits. We were seen as replaceable," said Kirkpatrick. "And we didn't see what the real problem was - that, as a group, we didn't have the practice knowledge to stand at the same level as our design and client leaders."

From there, Kirkpatrick embarked on one of many integration initiatives to simultaneously enhance her strategic contribution to her firm and advance professionally. By volunteering personal time, and with the support of an influential mentor within the firm, she built the knowledge base and relationships within the firm to eventually lead to a significant revenue-generating function. She understood the importance of developing personal expertise within her firm's core business services.

Kirkpatrick took on responsibilities that assimilated her into the company on both an individual level and functionally. Specifically, she became co-leader of Gensler's workplace practice - the top revenue line of business at the firm - for three years. With a team of principals, she led the development of new services, thought leadership initiatives, and a research programme that helped lead to significant growth of the practice - from 30 to 40% annual growth over the period.

Personal growth

Kirkpatrick's story and her appointment to CMO at Gensler could not have happened in an organisation that was not willing to allow this kind of professional growth to happen in the first place, or without a mentor who believed in her ability to contribute on a strategic level. The underlying engine was integration.

'Doing things differently' does not need to become a vexing paradox for professional firms. Professional and B2B executive managers should continue to welcome internal entrepreneurship and individual professional passion. But they should filter these and other narrowly-defined initiatives for their potential to foster marketing and business development integration.

Anything less leaves the organisation vulnerable to yet another layer of disconnectivity.

Suzanne Lowe is the president of **Expertise Marketing** and author of *The Integration Imperative: Erasing Marketing and Business Development Silos – Once and For All – in Professional Service Firms* and *Marketplace Masters - How Professional Service Firms Compete to Win*.