

The marketing director's first 100 days

By JONATHAN TURNER

The recent 'First 100 Days' (F100D) report by Oxford Strategic Marketing and Hunter-Miller, the executive search consultants, identified eight essential factors for success in the first 100 days. Here, one of the report's co-authors explores what makes F100D so hard for marketers, and explains what it really takes to succeed in this critical period

FOR ANY executive, the first 100 days (F100D) of a new role are fraught with anxiety. 'How bad are things really? What are the real expectations of me? Will I find what I expected to find? Will I fit the culture? Do I actually have what it takes to do the job? Can I establish a consensus to make the changes required?'

So much is par for the course. But for marketing directors, these superficial stresses of a new job mask substantive tensions, reflecting the changing role of marketing, the ways in which it supports the organisation, and what it takes to lead this complex function.

For a new marketing director, the usual tensions of the first 100 days are magnified. The fact that marketing directors last only an average of 22 months in the role is both a cause and an effect of the unique characteristics of marketing and marketers.

In this article, I will try to address the following five questions.

1. Why is F100D so hard for marketers?
2. What tensions does F100D create?
3. How can marketers resolve these tensions?
4. How should marketers plan for F100D before the job starts?
5. What should marketers do in F100D?

For any marketer wanting to make a big impact, success means balancing and connecting three tasks: the focusing of the marketing function; the development of its resources; and the successful attainment of key business

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objectives. This three-ball juggling act requires conscious mastery of the tensions and overlaps between the three challenges.

Based on depth interviews with 25 senior marketers, and quantitative interviews with another 50, Oxford Strategic Marketing has developed a universal F100D roadmap to increase marketers' chances of success.

1 Why are the first 100 days so hard for marketers?

All executives need to find the right balance between achieving short-term outcomes, and setting and embedding a long-term vision. However, the F100D challenge is particularly acute for marketing directors, for several reasons.

Marketing budget allocation is by no means automatic.

- There is rarely a linear causality between marketing inputs and business outcomes.
- There is minimal operational dependency upon the marketing budget, and marketing is thus often deemed to be 'discretionary spend'.
- Marketing often makes as great a contribution to long-term equity as it does to short-term sales, and thus cutting marketing budgets will always bring short-term gain.

The marketing function is increasingly diffuse.

- Many organisations now strive for marketing 'orientation', rather than a powerful department per se.
- As marketing has spread as an ethos, so the 'seven or more' Ps overseen by marketing are increasingly co-owned by other functions.

'Be consistent from day one. Don't take a honeymoon period'



- Marketing often exerts influence, rather than control, over critical elements of the user experience, and has increasingly become a collaborative rather than a controlling function.

The role of the function is unique to each corporation.

- The corporate prominence accorded to the function varies dramatically, depending upon its role within the corporation as a genuine growth champion, a service provider, or something in between.
- The spread of activities undertaken by marketers is increasingly vast, and each marketer has a unique portfolio across need assessment, product or service-design, through to promotions, channel management and even corporate social responsibility.
- Traditional distinctions between fmcg and B2B are no longer clear, as a focus on customer experience and the growing importance of corporate branding impact both segments.

The reputation of the function remains poor.

- Marketing as a profession retains an image of poor accountability and

low levels of rigour.

- The proliferation of marketing professionals has outstripped the capacity of the industry to train them within its traditional structures. New, more bespoke training approaches have only recently emerged to augment them.
- The showy elements of marketing (e.g. advertising awards) continue to dominate public perception above the graft of what OxfordSM calls 'hard marketing'.

The personality of marketers may conflict with fellow board members.

- Marketers tend to be more extrovert and intuitive than fellow directors. They may, in consequence, be poor listeners, leading to miscommunication, and susceptible to allegations of lax standards.
- Marketers tend towards inductive, rather than deductive, reasoning, founding strategy upon beliefs and inferences, rather than facts and observations.
- The desire to make stepwise changes within the business promise may conflict with operational realities for customers – actually destroying value.

Taken together, these factors mean that marketing job definitions are harder to get to grips with; expectations are more difficult to manage; and relationships are both more critical to build, and harder to cement, than for other functions.

2 What tensions do these conflicts create?

As Marketing Society chief executive Hugh Burkitt has commented: 'In theory, marketing directors have the opportunity to make themselves accountable for marketing strategy, marketing tactics, customer insight and marketing capabilities. But based on their own unique skill-sets they must find a balance, among the challenges they find, the resources in place, and the unique cultural

environment of the organisation.'

Our marketing directors endorsed this view. Interviewees were clearly concerned to optimise three distinct arenas: evaluating, building and then applying the marketing resources, while simultaneously developing and focusing the role of the marketing function, and trying to assess and also address the particular business situation. Each carries its own tensions.

In thinking about your resources, is the requirement to build on the existing infrastructure, and grow your resources, or are you having to reshape and reconfigure it to increase the effectiveness? The balance between reshaping and building is different in every role, but the building challenge is obviously more common in new media or service environments, and the reshaping is commonly an fmcg challenge.

In understanding the role of the marketing function, are marketers striving to be influencers (more typical in service industries) or controllers (in the archetypal fmcg guise)? Each carries its own implications.

'If you move to fmcg, you really have to understand the manufacturing and operational restrictions of your role,' said one director.

Equally, moving the other way can be



'Three months of your activism is not going to save the company'

just as tough: 'You may not so easily be able to measure your marketing performance in B2B. Adjusting can be difficult,' said another (B2B) director.

The truth, inevitably, is that marketers combine elements of both roles, and a directive/persuasive character is key to success.

In the third arena, the senior marketer must consider the nature of the business situation he/she is facing. Again, there will be a tension between the short-term fix, and the long-term gain.

As one interviewee said: 'It all depends on the mess you inherit. If it's a big mess, you have to make decisions quickly even if you know less. If all is basically well, you are crazy to make big decisions early.'

Into this volatile mix come two further factors: the marketer's own character, and the corporate culture they are entering into. While a director's character (experience, skills, personality and networks) is their greater asset, that asset can only be injected through the membrane of the existing corporate culture – which is much more resilient than any marketer.

The first task, well before the first 100 days, is an honest self-appraisal, and the second is to assess, understand and interpret the corporate culture. 'Anchor yourself to the corporate culture rather than running around trying to appear creative,' said one senior B2B marketer.

3 How can these tensions be resolved?

For all its peculiarities, the complex F100D juggling challenge is, in many ways, just a special (but more intense) case of any leadership situation. According to the founding father of action-centred leadership, John Adair, successful leadership depends upon juggling three balls: the task, the group and the individuals.

Within the first 100 days, marketing directors should strive to:

'Don't itch to change the ad agency. It's rare that the only source of the fault is there'



- understand each of the three areas (resources, role and situation) in as much detail as they can
- understand the connections and dependencies between the three areas
- understand their own role (and the cultural constraints) in optimising each area
- invest their attention in maximising the synergies between the three areas

If 'deep enough' understanding can be established in the first 30 days, so much the better. But in almost all cases, this learning process will take the full 100 days, and must move in lock-step with action-taking.

4 Before the job starts: How should marketers plan for the first 100 days?

It begins well before the new job starts. From the moment a marketing director secures a new role, a pre-plan should be in place to negotiate operating resources, gain maximum customer insight and start informally assessing the quality of

resources and operational effectiveness.

Going in, a new marketing director needs an operating hypothesis of their own 'fit' to the role, and a plan to gain early operational wins and team engagement.

From day one, marketing directors must validate and consciously balance their attention between the transformational and problem-fixing roles they are being handed, and identify key milestones and metrics along the way in terms of resource development, marketing strategy and operational delivery.

The first 100 days is undoubtedly a challenge, but with a clear approach and operational framework in place, it can be a chance to create lasting impact and goodwill across the organisation.

5 What should marketers do in their First 100 Days in the job?

From our quantitative and qualitative research, Oxford SM and Hunter-Miller set out to understand how successful marketing directors address these tensions in reality. We identified common success factors for a successful first 100 days. They are certainly not universally applicable, but they did appear with sufficient frequency to be recommended as valuable suggestions from our experts.

We summarise them in the following eight points.

Hit the ground running

The majority of our respondents agreed that the realities of a new job can be different from the initial job description, but this cannot be taken as an excuse for complacency. In the depth interviews, we heard consistent confirmation of the need to pre-plan, and to be ready to go on day one. 'Be consistent from day one. Don't take a honeymoon period,' said Andrew Mullins from News International.

Actions:

Develop a pre-plan. Do your own mystery shopping. Assimilate historic research. Meet colleagues. Learn everything possible about the brand and its customers.

Suppress the marketing psyche

In the words of one senior marketer, 'marketers can be vain, shallow and talk bollocks'. Suppressing marketing flamboyance is a must-do for F100D success. 'Don't try and be too clever, ramming marketing theory down other people's throats,' said Chris Harris, of Nokia.

Actions:

Recognise that marketers may be psychologically different from other board directors. Establish your personal fit for the role before you start.

Resist the 'quick wins itch'

Our senior marketers were clear that successful marketers hold their nerve and resist the pressure for a 'rapid but wrong' solution. A majority of respondents said that too many marketers pursue immediate change, rather than listening and learning. Humility and common sense are required. As Ian Ryder of Unisys said: 'Three months of your activism is not going to save the company.'

Actions:

Recognise the need to build a sustainable vision as well as fix problems. Consciously plan the balance of your efforts.

Build the role of the whole marketing function

The form that the function takes will be unique to each organisation but, for most, the ability to represent the value-desires of the customer internally was their core role. It is only in serving the customer better that marketing generates competitive advantage. 'It should not be "marketing" director, it should be "competition" director,' said Nick Fell of Cadbury Schweppes.



'You can't carry a model around. You must focus on what the problem is'

Actions:

Assess the health and role of the marketing function as an early priority. Your goal is to build a marketing function that's fit for customer purpose.

Recruit internal allies

With marketing activities increasingly dispersed across the enterprise, collaboration is acknowledged to be critical. A collaborative approach with the sales director was believed to be the single most important relationship. A passive approach will not hold water. 'Take control of how internal people understand what you are doing,' said Chris Thomas, marketing director of IT services provider, Impaq Group.

Actions:

Build alliances with those you need, and those who need you. Talk the language of commercial success that is understood by your new company.

Adapt your personal experience to the corporate culture

Whatever our interviewees' previous successes, they were very clear that

previous operational successes cannot simply be superimposed onto a new organisation. Tim Seager of Scottish Courage was typical: 'You can't carry a model around. You must focus on what the problem is.'

Actions:

Conduct rigorous business analysis to determine the requirements of the marketing function. Don't make assumptions.

Build your front bench rapidly

The critical nature of resources is acknowledged. Getting the team right should be the first priority for a new marketing director.

'Find your front bench quickly and then build the support on your back-benches. The quickest route to failure is not having the right resources,' said Andrew Blazye of Shell.

Actions:

Assess resources early, and address the shortfalls. Assess your own capabilities as a leader and teacher in plugging the skills gaps you have identified.

Treat your advisers as partners

While the internal resource should come first, it makes absolute sense to review your external resources. But this should be done with an aspiration to fully exploit their capabilities and link them to your objectives. It is a mistake to judge on past experience alone. 'Don't itch to change the ad agency. It's rare that the only source of the fault is there,' said one director, who wished to remain unnamed.

Actions:

Make sure you lead and 'own' the strategy development. But be man/woman-enough to accept whatever help you need to get the job done. ☺

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This is an edited version of the full report. For further detail regarding findings, references and implications for marketers, see www.first100days.co.uk.