Software-driven marketing ROI

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Marketers have always been quick to embrace new technologies. The Ancient Egyptians invented one of the first media technologies – papyrus – thousands of years ago and they were also the first to pioneer using it for advertising. Sales messages and wall posters have been discovered in the ruins of their civilization.

As technological innovation accelerated over the centuries, the speed at which new media were co-opted by marketers kept pace as well. Radio broadcasting began in the United States in 1920. By the beginning of 1922, the first paid radio commercial aired.

The first real web browser, Mosaic, was launched in 1993. One year later, the first banner ad, an advertisement for a Silicon Valley law firm, was sold on a commercial website. Given the anti-commercial nature of the early web, that was a bold move at the time. But by 2011, an estimated $25 billion worldwide was spent annually on web-based display advertising of that kind.

Nowadays, when a new web service emerges – such as Google+ or Pinterest – we end up hearing within a matter of days about some innovative marketer using it to get their message out.

Looking at these points on the curve, you'd reasonably conclude that marketers are evidently quite tech savvy. The technologies change, but marketers' relationship with them has remained the same. Or has it?

From communications to experiences

In truth, the relationship that marketing has had with technology up until now has actually been relatively narrow. Marketing has used new technologies primarily for communications.

Arguably, a marketer's main job has been to craft messages – to tell stories – that would resonate with their target audience. 'Marketing communications' became the majority of what marketing did, taking up the bulk of the marketing budget with advertising and promotion. It's certainly what most people picture in their minds when they hear the word 'marketing'.

Technological innovations have offered new ways to express and distribute those messages, but they didn't disrupt the marketer's job of storytelling. Whether you were expressing your brand through direct mail, TV spots, PR or new search engine-optimized content on the web, the marketer's main job ended with the distribution of such stories. But two major shifts in technology and customer behaviour over the past few years have disrupted the formerly insulated bubble of marketing communications.

First, digital has evolved rapidly from a place where people merely consume content to a place where they actively use products and services online. It's nice that a brand has a website where prospects can read about their offerings, but increasingly what matters is the actual experience customers have when they inquire, demo, purchase, use, troubleshoot, update, renew, extend and interact in all kinds of ways with those products and services via the web and mobile devices.

Second, social media has hacked the narrative that revolves around most brands. Marketing is no longer just what you say about yourself, but what other people say about you. Prospects are always one Google search away from a wealth of reviews and opinions published by your customers and a broad spectrum of other market influencers. Twitter, Facebook and community forums let them see first-hand the praise and criticism that people have for you – and how well (or not) you handle those interactions.

These two major shifts are intertwined. The experiences people have with you – good or bad – are echoed back into social media, where they influence others who are considering doing business with you. Delivering amazing experiences to your prospects and customers is the best way to build a stellar brand narrative in social media.

As a result, marketing has become about delivering compelling experiences, not merely telling compelling stories. And that's changed the relationship marketers have with the technology on which these experiences are built.

Architecting brand experiences

For marketers, moving from telling stories to delivering experiences is a big change. It's like switching careers from being a painter to being an architect. A painter's imagination and eye for design will be a valuable asset for a career as an architect. But that talent must now be augmented by an understanding of forces, materials, engineering and construction.

Likewise, a marketer's storytelling skills are still as important as ever – experiences are tangible incarnations of stories. But now marketers must understand how such experiences are designed, developed and deployed.

Instead of painting the image of a brand experience, marketing must architect the actual brand experience. It's important to recognize that 'experience' in this context is quite broad. It begins at the very first touch-point a prospective customer has with you.

For instance, think of a prospect who does a search on Google and sees one of your keyword ads. If they click on it, does the web landing page fulfil the expectations set by the ad? Is it telling a consistent story? That sounds simple at first, but remember, you conceivably have hundreds or thousands of different ads on Google at any one time. Making sure that the right ad is matched by the right, up-to-date landing page is a non-trivial challenge. If there's a disconnect, you can instantly lose people's interest and trust.

But that's just the start. Are the promises made by that first touch-point upheld throughout the rest of the purchase funnel? Does your e-commerce system honour the offer of that original ad until checkout is complete? What if the prospect drops out – say, to run to an appointment – and then comes back to your regular website later? Is it easy for them to pick up where they left off?

What is the experience like if they reach you using a mobile web browser? If they interact with your brand on Facebook or Twitter? If they call you or visit a physical store location? Do you maintain continuity in subsequent e-mail nurturing, website personalization, online ad re-targeting, even good, old-fashioned direct mail?

All of this is brand experience – each of these touch-points individually and the flow of all of them collectively. And this is even before the prospect's first purchase!

Ideally, the progression of these touch-points will appear graceful and connected in the eyes of your customer. The alternative is that an experience appears disjointed or sloppy, which can trigger feelings of annoyance, frustration, or mistrust.

Either way, such experiences will define your brand.

Software powers the modern brand experience

On the web, on mobile devices and increasingly in physical retail locations, software powers these brand experiences. From your website to your CRM, from your mobile apps to your e-mail platform, software either directly interfaces with your customers or enables your sales and customer service staff in their interactions with them.

Software determines what brand experiences are possible.

There are now many different kinds of software in marketing's ecosystem. There are commercial software packages that you buy – or, increasingly, rent in the cloud as software-as-a-service. These include web content management (WCM), marketing automation, social media management, campaign management, customer analytics, digital asset management, ad management, landing page management and more.

Today there are literally thousands of commercial marketing software offerings out there, from large public companies such as Adobe and IBM to innovative start-up ventures as small as a couple people with a brilliant idea. Reinventing marketing in the digital age has proven to be a fertile ground for software entrepreneurs.

In addition to all those commercial packages, there is another significant category: software that brands, or their agencies, build themselves. This can be as simple as an interactive feature on a web page or as advanced as a full-blown iPad app. In digital and interactive agencies, a whole new group of professionals known as 'creative technologists' produce such software, most visibly for big, splashy and hopefully viral digital promotions.

But the vast majority of internally developed marketing software is deployed quietly behind the scenes. Excel spreadsheets, custom databases, scripts to automate tasks on other software platforms, proprietary ways of analysing and mining customer data. A lot of this software simply serves as 'glue' to connect multiple commercial packages together and to integrate with a company's other IT systems or third-party services.

Although customers don't directly interact with such back-office software, it often has a significant effect on their experiences. It feeds data into many front-facing experiences, determining how useful or sophisticated those experiences can be. It also feeds data back from those customer experiences, filtering it and framing it to help inform marketing's tactical decisions and evolving strategic vision.

Look around: software is now ubiquitous in marketing and customer service.

In a very real sense, software has become marketing's eyes, ears and hands in the digital world. Monitoring and analytics software lets us 'see' and 'listen' to what people are doing and saying across mobile and web experiences. And the software that interfaces to customers – websites, mobile apps, landing pages, interactive ads, etc – is how we 'touch' them.

Even with in-person and over-the-phone interactions, customer-facing staff often serve as proxies for the software that supports them. It's software that gives them the ability to answer questions about an account, engage a loyalty programme, or take action to rectify a problem.

A great customer service representative can have a sympathetic tone of voice and a friendly demeanour, but if they're saying things such as, 'sorry, I don't have a way to do that on my computer' or 'please wait, our systems seem to be taking a really long time today', software is ruining that brand experience. It can make or break you. It gives you appreciation for a remark that Marc Andreessen made in a *Wall Street Journal* editorial about a year ago: 'Software is eating the world.'

Marketing's new role in software leadership

As soon as you recognize that marketing has become about delivering experiences, and that software drives those experiences, the conclusion is manifest: marketing must embrace software leadership as part of its modern identity.

That doesn't mean that everyone in marketing needs to become a software engineer. The CMO does not need to become the CIO. However, everyone in marketing, from the CMO on down, should become knowledgeable of the dynamics of software and be comfortable harnessing it to shape brand experiences.

Consider an analogy with graphic design. Not everyone in marketing needs to be a graphic designer. But an appreciation for graphic design, the knowledge of how to leverage it, is integrated deeply into marketing culture. Marketers work naturally with graphic designers and can easily share a common vision.

So must it be with software.

Whether working with a software vendor, a creative technologist at an agency or a project leader from the IT department, marketers must learn the language of their technical partners. They must willingly incorporate some of the DNA of technology culture into marketing culture.

But while not every marketer will be a software engineer, software engineers will, with increasing frequency, work directly in the marketing

department. Similar to the creative technologists in agencies, there is a grow-ing profession of 'marketing technologists' arising in marketing depart-ments. They select, configure and operate commercial marketing software platforms. They create and manage much of the glue that binds the disparate pieces of marketing's technology ecosystem together. And they design and build proprietary, technical components of brand experiences.

In some companies, these marketing technologists live organizationally in the IT department, while spending their days working with marketers. But more often, these marketing technologists are native to the marketing department.

The advantage of native marketing technologists is that they're true hybrids: they think of marketing and software holistically. They're con-stantly experimenting and learning about new technologies, but always with an eye towards how they can be applied in a marketing context. When a new marketing idea is raised, they're quick to brainstorm ways that soft-ware can help. They think laterally between the two domains. Nothing is lost in translation, as can sometimes happen when marketers and technolo-gists are separated into different departments.

But to manage technologists – even marketing technologists – it helps to have a technical background yourself. Since in most organizations that won't be the CMO, one solution is to create a new senior marketing role: a chief marketing technologist.

This person, a marketing–technology hybrid, can serve as the right-hand of the CMO for the technical facets of marketing's mission. This includes managing the team of marketing technologists, vetting technical products and services from vendors and agencies, coordinating software integra-tions with multiple parties (including the IT department), and implementing good marketing technology management practices around software security, reliability, maintainability and scalability.

Most importantly, this role serves as the CMO's technology *consigliere* – showing how software can achieve the CMO's strategic vision, and helping to inform that vision with the latest advancements in technology.

Software is the new fabric of marketing

Without doubt, marketing's new responsibilities for delivering experiences – and leading the software that makes those experiences possible – presents significant new challenges.

Marketing must have a much deeper relationship with technology than ever before. It requires new kinds of members on the team and new organizational structures and processes to incorporate their capabilities into marketing's expanded mission.

For most marketing groups, this evolution will take time. However, the market is moving quickly, and customer expectations have already shifted to judge brands by their digital experiences. Marketers are well advised to prioritize their adaptation to a software-powered discipline.

Although this mission is clearly a bigger challenge – experience design and delivery is far more complicated than marketing communications – this new responsibility vaults marketing into an even greater strategic role to the business as a whole. It opens up new opportunities for competitive advantage and marketing leadership.

Software is the new fabric of marketing. What will you create with it?