

The Five Superpowers of Marketing

by Mark Bonchek and Cara France

December 02, 2013

Customers are more connected and empowered than ever before. If you want to win their hearts and minds, you have to master the latest technology, assimilate vast quantities of data, engage and delight your customers, and deliver products and services that surpass expectations. Plus you have to attract the best talent to your own organization and align your team around a shared purpose.

It would seem a nearly impossible feat. And yet today's top marketers are combining technology and teamwork to generate extraordinary results.

As part of an awards program that one of us (Cara) created and the other (Mark) helped judge, we had the opportunity to talk with dozens of chief marketing officers (CMOs) in Silicon Valley about the qualities that define extraordinary marketing. Their insights and experience suggest five marketing capabilities that in their most refined form border on superpowers.

1. To hear what no one else can hear.

Extraordinary marketers are amazing listeners. The digital revolution has given everyone a voice and made everyone their own channel. Marketers accustomed to doing the talking are adjusting to doing the listening. The very top marketers are using technology and teamwork to listen at a scale that was unimaginable just a few years ago.

SAP, a leading maker of enterprise software, gets tens of thousands of requests every year for new product features. “Like most large companies, the product teams would usually base decisions on market opportunity or which customer spent the most, but that doesn’t maximize value for our customer base or for us,” says Jonathan Becher, SAP’s CMO. Instead, he and his team envisioned an entirely new process for prioritizing product enhancements based on customer collaboration and “the power of the crowd.” Jonathan’s team created Idea Place, where SAP’s community of over two million visitors per month can vote, rate, and rank suggested changes. The top ideas are shared with SAP’s product teams and partners. This listening engine has generated over 10,000 requests and led to over 600 product improvements. In addition, the openness and transparency has improved both customer engagement and satisfaction.

2. To be part of the conversation, even when you’re not in the room.

Thanks to social media, the number of conversations taking place about products and companies has exploded exponentially. Today’s tweet can easily be tomorrow’s headline. As a brand, how do you participate in thousands, or even millions, of conversations? Today’s top marketers have conversational skills that enable them to be part of the conversation even when they aren’t there. Like hosts of a great dinner party, they don’t spend time talking about themselves. Instead, they create the environment, make connections, and spark conversations that get everyone else talking.

Caroline Donahue, CMO of Intuit, knows how to get people talking. Her team launched Intuit’s Small Business Big Game, which gives away a Super Bowl commercial to a small business. The program is not a sweepstakes, but a social platform for engaging and empowering thousands of small business owners to share their stories and vote for their peers. As Caroline says, “The whole program is about putting small business at the center of the conversation. The party is not about us.” Small businesses seem to like the party. The program has generated record levels of social engagement with over eight billion impressions, tens of

thousands of stories, and 1,500 social mentions every day. These numbers are likely to go even higher as viewers enhance their television experience with Twitter and other social media.

3. To leap tall piles of data in a single bound.

Digital devices generate a lot of data. Billions of clicks, carts, posts, pins, likes, tweets, stars, and snaps every day. Spreadsheets and reports simply aren't up to handling this mountain of information. It takes superpower intelligence to find meaningful insights, make split-second decisions, and create truly relevant experiences.

At Williams-Sonoma, CMO Pat Connolly is using data to fulfill the true potential of omni-channel retail. Like many other companies, the team's first step was to make the data accessible, combining disparate sources into a single data warehouse available through the cloud. Next came a step that cause many companies to struggle: making the data meaningful, with algorithms and data models that see patterns and make recommendations in real-time. Where Williams-Sonoma leaves most others behind is in making the data actionable, improving both financial returns and customer experiences.

As an example, many companies send out promotional emails that vary slightly based on demographic characteristics. In contrast, Williams-Sonoma has a substantial personalized email program based on where customers are in the decision process. Furthermore, each email is personalized with imagery drawn from an immense library of lifestyle images. According to Pat, "these are hands-down the most productive emails that we send with open rates consistently above 50% and 2.5 times the average return of our regular emails."

4. To make silos disappear.

Every company has silos. On the executive team you have marketing, sales, technology, and service. Within marketing, you have brand, communications, advertising, and digital. Retailers have stores, call centers, and e-commerce. Some marketers work on building bridges between these silos, but that still leaves them

standing. Some use bulldozers and battering rams, but that can create resentment and rubble. Exceptional marketers make the silos disappear. They create a vision for an exceptional customer experience and connect everyone in the organization to the delivery of that seamless experience.

At Sephora, CMO Julie Bornstein has reimagined the customer experience in a way that transcends traditional silos. Marketing, IT, store operations, and loyalty programs are all connected. “Our customer is in a store, then she’s reading a magazine, then she’s online. We can’t think the traditional way by channel. Instead, the experience must be seamless.” Sephora customers can access past orders, create shopping lists, save offers, and view rewards on any device and in any channel. This requires “the whole team to think client-centric and 360 degrees instead of ‘I work on this.’” The results are impressive. Over 20 million customers are part of Sephora’s loyalty program, driving over 80% of both online and store purchases.

5. To bring out the superpowers in others.

It’s no coincidence that the highest grossing action movie of all time is *The Avengers*, which brought together four superheroes as a single team. Today’s top marketers recognize the importance of building great teams and cultivate a superpower of bringing out the superpowers in others.

Antonio Lucio, CBO of Visa, creates superpower teams by combining the best of the old and the new. According to Antonio, “the way to ‘create magic’ is by combining the experience and perspective of traditional brand builders with the energy and innovation of digital natives.” The combination led to a groundbreaking program for the 2012 London Olympics that leveraged both traditional and digital media to connect fans directly with their favorite athletes. The result was the most successful campaign in Visa’s 26 years of Olympic sponsorship.

To keep up with an increasingly connected and empowered consumer, today’s marketers need to acquire new superpowers. To hear what no one else can hear. To be part of the conversation even when you’re not in the room. To leap tall piles of data in a

single bound. To make silos disappear. To bring out the superpowers in others. The secret is not doing it yourself. Technology and teamwork — with your customers, staff, CEO, peers, and partners – will give you the superpowers you need to create extraordinary results. What's your superpower story?

Mark Bonchek is the Founder and CEO (Chief Epiphany Officer) of Shift Thinking. He works with leaders and organizations to update their thinking for a digital age. Sign up for the Shift newsletter and follow Mark on Twitter at @MarkBonchek.

Cara France is CEO of The Sage Group, a firm providing marketing and consulting talent to San Francisco Bay area companies, and founder of Marketers that Matter. Follow her on Twitter @SageCEO.