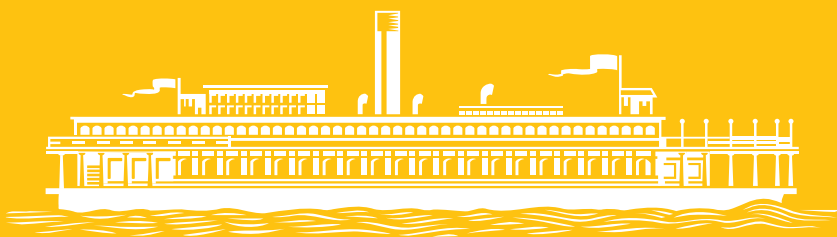


Who is the brand daddy?
Adding a chief brand
officer to your c-suite
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Who is the brand daddy? Adding a chief brand officer to your c-suite

Something is missing in the corporate suite—and it isn't the leather sofa. It's the brand. We all know that a relevant and differentiated experience builds a strong brand. Fact. A relevant and differentiated brand experience builds customer preference. Fact. Building customer preference generates strong business. Fact.

But there's a crisis brewing in the brand world. While brand differentiation typically hangs on a thread—an emotion, a stance, a belief—so does brand experience. Customers today choose their brand less on the product attributes and more on the offered experience. The problem is this: Brand experience may be driving customer preference, but it seems there's no one steering it end to end, inside and out.

So who's the "brand daddy" who needs to be in charge? Let's line up some suspects.

The first, and perhaps the most obvious, is the chief marketing officer. If we look at the diverse range of individual and specific marketing disciplines within

that job's remit—sales management, product development, distribution channel management, public relations, advertising, design, marketing communications, pricing, market research, customer service, and so on—it's clear that creating a cohesive brand experience isn't high on the agenda.

Any cmo worth their salt needs to be able to drive the brand consistently, and in some cases they simply don't get the chance. Just look at the now defunct cable brand NTL, where consumers went so far as to create ntl:hell, an independent online consumer lobby group designed to discuss issues with the brand's delivery to customers.

As Seth Godin, author of the book *All Marketers Are Liars*, wrote: "The myth of the cmo is the C part. They don't get to be the chief of the stuff that is really what marketing is about today. CAO (Chief Advertising Officer) but not cmo."

Too little time

Fashioning a brand's experience goes beyond deploying various channels and disciplines across

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The chief brand officers (CBOs) must walk in the customer's shoes. They must feel what the customer feels, see what they see, hear what they hear, everywhere, quite literally.

12-month marketing plans. If a CMO's average tenure is only 23 months, as was estimated in a Spencer Stuart survey last year, a CMO's not best placed to build and drive a long-term brand experience.

Perhaps you're thinking 23 months is, in today's world, a reasonably long time. But go through the list of your own top ten brands—hopefully they provide your favourite experiences—and ask yourself:

- Have they been around over 23 months?
- How would you feel if they changed drastically every 23 months?

Can you accept a little tactical tinkering at the edges? Certainly. Some necessary course-correction? Fine. Maybe even some welcome innovation to revitalise things. Yes. But if the core promise to customers is up for grabs every 23 months, then surely there never really was one.

It's also worth reappraising the very definition of "marketing" and the "marketing department." As media becomes more fragmented, marketing becomes more disparate, which means the vehicles attempting to deliver a cohesive brand experience are often driving in opposite lanes.

As Marc Sands, director of marketing for the U.K. newspaper the *Guardian*, says: "We are collectively in the process of killing our chances of developing effective brand ideas at the very moment when media fragmentation requires that we should be pulling our thinking and executions back together... Salami slices don't make for big ideas."

Add to this how marketing increasingly operates on a global scale, where its activities are decentralised (either by geography or region, business or business unit, product category, channel or customer segment), and the likelihood of delivering a consistent and coherent brand experience becomes increasingly remote.

The visionary CEO

So let's not forget who's still lurking in our "brand daddy" lineup. Of course there's the chief executive, and in a few instances he does hold down the brand corner. In exceptional cases, CEOs are visionaries—their views of the brand and the customer experience are so perfectly aligned with their own beliefs that they actually become the brand. You only have to look to Steve Jobs from Apple or the late Dame Anita Roddick of The Body Shop in her heyday to see how sweet the brand experience can be when it works.

By the same token, when you look at Bill Gates and the influence his departure as CEO has had on Microsoft, it is evident that if one person becomes bigger than the brand, it can be problematic. The CEO needs to be guiding the brand but not be such an integral part of it that the company cannot appear to move beyond him.

Jack-of-all-trades

There's also the small point of expertise. Today's chief executives run more complex organisations than ever before, under unprecedented competitive pressures, and across an increasingly global marketplace. Most CEOs also hail largely from non-marketing backgrounds, such as finance,

management consulting, or engineering. This makes the brand experience challenge ever greater.

Then there's the average CEO tenure, which, at just four and a half years, according to Spencer Stuart's research, makes CEOs unlikely candidates to deliver the staying power brands typically require.

This is not to say that CEOs cannot, or should not, become the brand's principal and, potentially, most powerful ambassador, but they cannot be responsible for all the processes and levels necessary to fashion the brand experience for customers.

Who is next? cco? cio? cdo? coo? cfo...? Let's be honest—it's unlikely. What about looking beyond the corporate executives? All company employees? Nice in theory, but while the employee community is instrumental in supporting and delivering the brand experience, it is unlikely to be responsible for conceiving it.

So then there's the marketing or advertising agency. Surely the outside experts can help guide the brand? Alas, no. For while the agency can, of course, help to build, guide, refresh, and reinvent a brand experience, if it ever becomes so powerful as to actually "own" it, you're in real trouble.

Who then, in today's highly competitive and demanding consumer environment, is actually responsible for the entire brand experience? Here's the irony: We all intuitively know brand is important in driving business success, and we glibly say that it must be aligned to business strategy. We are all quick to protest when we suspect the brand is not represented at the highest levels of the business. Yet when we look closely, this is exactly what's happening. Brand—and its all important experience—cannot be aligned to business strategy if it is not represented at the very level where that business strategy is being defined. Worse still: What use is a business strategy if it cannot be delivered through a differentiated brand experience?

Omniscient role

Enter the chief brand officer (cbo)—the uniquely assigned "owner of the brand experience." The cbo

should be rigour and creativity personified. Rigour, in that guidance comes from the CEO's business strategy. For this reason alone, cbos sit—deservedly—at the right-hand side of the CEO. They also have to be creative to transform this strategy into a preference-generating experience that taps into the emotional currents of customers.

The cbos must turn the mundane touchpoints of the brand experience into magical and memorable ones. They must be the engine of innovation to meet a customer's unmet needs. They must be courageous and intuitive. They must seek out the details that create difference, which, in turn, can create customer preference.

The cbos must walk in the customer's shoes. They must feel what the customer feels, see what they see, hear what they hear, everywhere, quite literally. They must witness the entire brand experience—not just outputs of isolated channels from the marketing department—but the whole business strategy to know how to affect that experience meaningfully.

The cbo should be the voice for brand synergy across the entire experience. Brand cohesion does not happen by serendipity. Most importantly, the cbo needs to be the voice for the customer within an organisation.

But this doesn't mean that marketing and its disciplines should become obsolete—entirely the opposite. The marketing disciplines should become the instruments of change under the joined-up world view of the cbo. Given that this is also a strategic long-term view, marketing stands to become more effective as part of an intelligent "grand plan," not just a tactically deployed discipline.

It's time to make way for a new brand leader. Companies need to be brave. Too many brand and business strategies are not aligned, and the losers are ultimately the corporations and shareholders. Customers are demanding more from their brand experiences than ever before. It's difference that creates preference. It's preference that builds businesses. It's time to find your cbo. ■

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