

CMO

A Seat at the Agency Table

The title of chief marketing officer or chief strategy officer has existed in other industries for years, and the position has been used with increasing frequency within larger consumer advertising agencies, but within the realm of pharmaceutical and healthcare advertising these titles are just starting to be embossed on the business cards of agency executives.



The greatest challenge facing an agency CMO is that the marketing mix for clients is continually shifting.

Judy Capano, Wishbone

One of the drivers for this trend is that as the marketplace becomes more fragmented and there are more messages and media to keep track of, the CMO becomes a key player in managing the consistency in the expression of multiple brands and multiple businesses.

The size of the budget and the size of the company are the most likely factors for determining whether an agency will be adding this role in the future. The decline in ad spending because of the global economic crisis is forcing layoffs in many key agencies across the country. This could create uncertainty about — or at least delay — the need for an industrywide expansion of the CMO role.

Just two years ago, Elisa Cooper-Broski was one of the first to blaze the trail for the full-time CMO role in a healthcare agency. Corbett Accel Healthcare Group hired Ms. Cooper-Broski in 2007 as its first chief marketing officer. Her responsibilities include developing business development strategy, leading the brand-building efforts for the company's six business units in conjunction with the business unit leaders, and reinforcing the network's competitive position in the marketplace.

"When I accepted this role, there were no CMO positions advertised in the healthcare agency field," she says. "I was deciding what to do next in my career, and I was looking for an opportunity that would round out the disciplines that I had cultivated throughout my career."

Those disciplines include a strong background in strategy, business building, branding, creative, and new business development.

"It is also very important to have a clear understanding of what happens daily in the market and the responsibilities of the day-to-day workload of both the agency and the clients," Ms. Cooper-Broski says.

According to Jeff Burkel, chief operating officer of MicroMass Communications, a full-time and dedicated agency CMO role is somewhat atypical since most agencies take the proverbial "shoemaker's-children-go-barefoot" approach.

"Historically, agencies have essentially divided this function among a combination of individuals, including the president, executive team members, and business development directors," Mr. Burkel says. "The more progressive agencies have come to realize that to be effective, this role must exist and function at the highest level of the organization and involve all marketing and business development activities. CMOs must act as the conscience for the agency so that precious resources are not squandered on opportunities that have little likelihood of success."

At Topin & Associates, President Alan Topin says he serves in the role of CMO, as well as that of president.

"At smaller to midsize independent agencies, it would be difficult to have one person devoted full time to doing this job," he says. "In terms of identifying who we are as an agency, our own communications strategy, and what types of investment we make in ourselves, this falls within my job description."



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Agencies historically have taken a shoemaker's-children-go-barefoot approach to the CMO role — outsourcing the function in some combination to the president, executive team, and business development director.

Jeff Burkel, MicroMass

Mr. Topin says the role of CMO at an agency his size requires about one-quarter of his time, and he can manage the roles of president and CMO because he has a lot of help from his directors.

"I am in charge of the function, but there are a number of other people who play a role: our creative directors, director of marketing, and head of account services, for example," he says. "They all make sure our messages line up with what we deliver to our clients."

Similar to Mr. Topin's organization, there is no one person who holds sole responsibility for the role of CMO at Sudler & Hennessey. According to Louisa Holland, co-CEO, the Americas, the CMO function is really a mindset held by all of the agency's senior staff members.

"While all of the disciplines are managed independently, we believe that our cross-departmental and cross-managerial day-to-day approach serves our current and future business needs more effectively than appointing one individual who serves as the CMO," Ms. Holland says.



The ability to innovate is an increasingly important quality needed in a CMO; markets are changing rapidly and just doing the same old thing is not going to get the job done.

Allen Stegall, Scout Marketing

Ken Ribotsky, president and founder of Core-Create, also believes the role depends less on the title and more on the execution of the function.

"At Core-Create, my most important role in the agency is to help clients define and guide marketing and brand strategy," he says. "In today's dynamic and constantly evolving environment, the role I play is especially important

when clients need to be on top of rapid change and take advantage of opportunities as they emerge. Having someone spearheading strategy is crucial, but it can be done under the guise of many titles; that's what's important."

Ms. Cooper-Broski says managing the expression of the multiple business units is a huge part of her job, and to do it well there has to be a well-established common goal among the different business strategies to provide a cohesive message relative to the Corbett Accel brand.

To aid in this objective, Corbett Accel has instituted what it calls a "supra-culture," which means there is a core set of shared values and expectations that every person in the corporation, from executive leadership to the youngest member of the organization, emulates daily. This unified thinking enables a consistency in messaging throughout the six business units, while respecting the individuality of each agency within the network.

Skills for the Job

The biggest challenge toward achieving a consistent and sustainable message for the agency is building consensus and sustaining a consistent vision for the business, Ms. Cooper-Broski says.

"We need to be sure that we are guiding our own brand stewardship — starting with our CEO Scott Cotherman and reaching consensus with all of the business unit leaders and the executive leadership team members — in a way that everybody is comfortable with before it is expressed to the outside world," she says.

A quality that can help with this process is the ability to assess and assemble talent and then secure alignment behind a core set of principles, which will be embraced by everyone on the team, says Allen Stegall, general manager and partner of Scout Marketing.

"Customer service is also a vital role for the CMO," he adds. "Agencies have to stay close to their clients and really listen to them. Some clients operate in very fluid environments and are in constant need of strategic reevaluation and rapid tactical response. Serving these clients in a way that meets their immediate needs while remaining true to the longer-term strategic plan can be very difficult. It's often the CMO's job to find this balance while avoiding sinking into a totally reactionary role."

Mr. Burkel agrees that a CMO must have a steadfast focus.

"It is best for an agency to have a laser-like focus on what makes it unique, which guides everything from proprietary research initiatives to marketing material development to its Web presence and PR outreach efforts," he says. "Ultimately, having this singular focus will produce productive internal marketing meetings, because there are no competing camps that

want the agency to be something else."

Successful CMOs must be able to work through and around the ebbs and flows of agency workloads and resource availability, Mr. Burkel adds.

"They must be able to function at the highest strategic levels while being able to follow through on myriad tactical programs," he

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The CMO responsibility is often given to someone in senior management, such as the president, who defines the culture of the agency, identifies how it behaves, and positions what it delivers and how it communicates to the world.

Alan Topin, Topin & Associates

says. “CMOs are one part visionary, two parts cajoler, and three parts cheerleader/project manager.”

Mr. Topin says a CMO has to be able to balance two things that might seem counterintuitive: orchestrating and maintaining a consistent message throughout all of the appropriate channels while being flexible enough to adapt the message and the strategy to meet both market needs and clients’ perceptions.

Mr. Stegall says the part of a CMO’s job that involves business development has become more difficult in today’s competitive environment and requires a new mindset from the agency side.

“Competition for new accounts is perhaps fiercer than it has ever been, and the rewards of success are often not as significant as they were in years past,” he says. “This is because our clients are being asked to do more with less.”

Ms. Holland adds any leader in this current business environment needs a managerial skill set that can embrace strategic oversight beyond the borders of independent departments and multiple communication channels within and across disciplines. The end goal must be to provide and build the reputation for client satisfaction — no matter how this is defined by a client or in the marketplace.



A CMO needs to have his or her finger on the pulse of the market and the day-to-day challenges as well as the long-term objectives.

Elisa Cooper-Broski,
Corbett Accel Healthcare Group

Challenges a CMO Faces

The greatest challenge facing an agency chief marketing officer or chief strategy officer is that the marketing mix for clients keeps shifting, says Judy Capano, partner and chief strategic officer of Wishbone/ITP.

“Pharmaceutical marketing to healthcare professionals, which was once dominated by a salesforce-centric model, is now increasing its use of the online space,” she says.

“Online marketing offers the potential for greater cost-effectiveness, but its effectiveness as a prescription driver has yet to be fully demonstrated with this audience,” Ms. Capano adds. “In the traditional model, prescribers and pharmaceutical companies were linked through the sales rep in a very direct way. By contrast, in the online space prescribers, patients, and payers can converge as a single audience, which makes message segmentation a challenge. Moving forward, we need to help clients better understand how to exploit the unique properties of this channel while understanding that success will still largely depend on delivering the right message to the right audiences.”

According to Mr. Burkel, the single biggest challenge for the agency CMO is to get his or her agency to commit to a truly differentiated position in the marketplace.

“Too many agencies fall into the trap of attempting to be all things to all clients or focusing on the same differentiators as their competitors,” he says. “This leads to competing messaging platforms, unfocused product and service development activities, and scattered promotion and PR tactics.”

Paying attention to the continuity of the message inside the agency is just as important as what is communicated outside; this is a challenge in and of itself, according to Mr. Topin.

“Staff at the management level are aware of how we’re positioning the agency and communicating the brand externally,” he says. “But, often we all get caught up in day-to-day client and agency activities and our message gets off-track further down the ladder.”

CMOs must get their agencies to commit to developing a truly differentiated position in the marketplace.

To keep personnel up to speed, Mr. Topin suggests explaining why each role in the agency is important to keeping clients satisfied and what it takes to get a new lead or solicit additional business to keep the agency growing.

“It’s important to make sure that our staff is aware that there is an overarching program in place to market the agency,” he adds.

According to Ms. Holland, this type of internal education is an ongoing challenge no matter how a company is structured.

“Departmental teams now work 24/7 to meet client needs, timelines, and goals,” she says. “We have regularly scheduled cross-functional communication meetings that enable all employees to learn from team and divisional leaders. We have a number of training and communication methodologies to facilitate marketing growth. These include everything from regularly scheduled employee breakfast discussions with the co-CEOs to Town Hall meetings to new business initiatives that begin at the ground level.”

The CMO of the Future

Mr. Topin tells PharmaVOICE that he thinks the function of a chief marketing officer will always be critical to the success of any agency, no matter the size of the company or the state of the economy.

“We need to practice what we preach to clients; whether the preacher is called a CMO, a CSO, or another title, someone has to pay attention to the messages the agency is sending,” he says. “We tell clients to keep spending in down times, so we have to do the same thing. In the future, we have every reason to believe that the role of the CMO will continue to grow.”

Ms. Cooper-Broski concludes that the president of an organization sets the course in terms of where the business needs to go, and the CMO emulates that course through the marketing expression.

“Whereas the president steers the ship, the



Having someone responsible for spearheading the agency's strategy is crucial, but it can be done under the guise of many titles.

Ken Ribotsky, Core-Create

CMO has to understand where the ship is going and be intuitive and flexible to change course if needed, depending on the market," she says. ♦

PharmaVOICE welcomes comments about this article. E-mail us at feedback@pharmavoice.com.

Experts on this topic

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