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CEOs, EXPAND YOUR DEFINITION OF 'CMO'

Two recent studies focused on the chief marketing officer's job should force management to rethink how future marketing leadership is both recruited and cultivated.

The latest round of the oft-quoted Spencer Stuart study on CMO tenure showed a continuing and alarming downward trend in the lifespan of the most senior marketing officer: down to 23.2 months this year, from 23.5 months in 2005 and 23.6 months in 2004.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Spencer Stuart also uncovered that the CMO's job is a position that a minority of marketers aspire to hold. The executive-search firm surveyed 500 marketing executives to find that 70% of respondents held long-term career goals of being general managers or CEOs. Only 30% want to be CMOs.



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Turning such trends around is going to take some changes in how senior-level marketing talent is grown. And it wouldn't hurt if more businesses expanded the scope and influence of the CMO's position to make it more attractive.

On the talent front, it's a given that CMOs require a firm grasp of the fundamentals. Marketing's four Ps—product, price, place and promotion—are as valid and critical today as they ever were, and the ability to uncover insights into customer wants and needs is an increasingly crucial source of competitive advantage.

And yet a career track composed entirely of traditional marketing roles is starting to become passé. Along these lines, we're beginning to see the

rise of a different kind of CMO, one who brings to the position not merely the marketing credentials, but solid experience in the other realms that drive the business as a whole—namely sales, operations, customer service and strategy.

Dan Henson is one of them. The GE CMO is an 18-year veteran of the business who cut his teeth in business-unit marketing but moved into various sales, business-development and management roles for GE's finance units. They included non-U.S. stints and serving as chief quality officer for GE Finance, chief commercial officer for the commercial-finance unit and CEO of Vendor Financial Services.

Another is Cathy Lyons, exec VP-CMO of Hewlett-Packard. After beginning there in marketing

communications, she spent the majority of her career in general management and operations for consumer-facing business units before advancing to the top marketing slot.

Then there's John Fleming of Wal-Mart, who leveraged deep retail and merchandising experience to ascend to the role of CMO.

All belong to the growing group of "nontraditional CMOs" whose experiences outside marketing expand the thinking and focus they bring to the CMO role. It's people like them, with broad bases of expertise and experience, that senior management should start seeking out and cultivating internally if they want the kind of leadership that will make marketing a true partner in driving

not merely sales but overall growth. There are also several recent signs that these more operationally oriented CMOs may have a more direct line into the CEO position. The recent promotions of Yvonne La Penotiere to president of Carlson Hotels and of Tom Long to CEO of Miller—both were CMOs—shows that past operational success integrated with strong success in the newly defined marketing role could be just the right recipe for a company looking for a truly well-rounded CEO.

The kind of executive who has multidisciplinary and multifunctional training will likely be reluctant to play in organizations that still have a limited view of marketing's role. If we don't start to make the role broader and more empowered, we may actually start to witness more moves like those of Steve Wilhite—who was VP-global marketing at Nissan Motor Corp. and is now joining Hyundai Motor America as its chief operating officer.

Expanding the pool of marketers who will succeed in this evolving environment requires companies to rethink the way they recruit, train and develop their employees. And it requires companies to empower and equip these talented marketers to achieve their mandates for growth. Taking this direction promises to increase the allure and the longevity of this C-level position.