The Change Agent Agenda: Lessons Learned in the Trenches

Wanted: Change agents.

We hear it all the time among clients, within companies and at meetings. Everyone understands that if you stand still in today's rapidly changing environment, then you'll be choking on the other guy's dust as you fade into irrelevance. The ability to get ahead, much less to transform, is today's business imperative. But it takes change agents to lead the charge.

All too often, though, stuff gets in the way. The barriers of silos. Resistance to change. A shortage of the right skills for the challenges. The fact is that transforming a business is really hard work.

In recent months, Prophet has held several webinars featuring senior-level marketers and executives who have taken on the mantle of change agent for their businesses. In sharing their stories, several common themes emerged. We have heard from leaders from companies as diverse as Scholastic and WellPoint, Universal Studios and GE, all with similar themes around what it takes to successfully help your organization transform. Among the most noteworthy themes, in the words of our esteemed panelists:

Make your case for change

It's not always widely understood that change – and often, significant change – is in order for the business to continue to grow and succeed. Organization inertia can be very difficult to overcome. Build a facts-based case and a call to action to help garner the buy-in that’s necessary. John Coyle, former senior director of innovation and long-term strategy, U.S. Cellular, recounted: "I moved into a new role involving research and analytics, and the writing was clearly on the wall in terms of receding margins and slowing growth in the cellular industry. We really got a seat at the table by translating those trends into a dialogue with critical functional areas– finance, ops, sales and the broader senior executive team– to help them really understand what the data was saying, which was: 'Oh, my god, this industry is changing, the bar is getting higher and the opportunities, if not addressed by one of us, will disappear quickly. We needed to change or die, as they say.'"

Enlist others to the cause

Transformation is too big a charge to be led by a single person. Similar to making a case for change, the importance of bringing allies in from unexpected places – both inside and outside the organization – cannot be overstated if you are truly trying to drive big change.

"The first tenet to remember is that if you want to go fast, go alone – but if you want to go far, go together," according to Mike Dubois, senior vice president of NBC Universal. "So we've really had to work to bring more people in, and created a cross-functional internal team from different disciplines – from marketing, brand, strategic planning, finance, ops – on our core team. That gave us early momentum across the enterprise. But what really helped us was engaging our retail partners so that we all worked on solutions that already had buy-in that we could take to our senior management. Also, searching for both big wins along with the low-hanging fruit, smaller wins was critical in showing how the investment can, in effect, pay for itself."

Establish expectations

I've often talked about the importance of transparency in this column, and it's a particularly critical success factor in driving the change agenda forward. As Kate Quinn, SVP and CMO of WellPoint, put it: "It's important to make it clear what the expectations are. We've been explicit about it throughout our organization; we've put it in our mission and in our guiding principles that we are expected to be change agents, starting with the consumer and working our way back inside. This is a big change for us. So whether you’re in ops, a designer or a VP of a certain area or geography, you are expected to be a change agent. And then not only do what we say we are going to do, but provide our team with the tools to go do it."

Metrics matter – and accountability, too

Metrics and analytics must be incorporated into the change process from the outset, not just to inform the strategies being undertaken, but to gauge progress being made. As a recent Accenture study highlighted, by 2017, marketing will be spending more on data than will I/T. It's
been key to the transformation underway at Nationwide Insurance. Says Paul Ballew, former SVP and Chief Economist: “We believe on the marketing side from [a perspective of] traditional advertising spending that the discipline we have in place in terms of marketing ROI is a core best practice. We track ourselves, we measure ourselves, and we hold ourselves accountable. We also think that the analytic process we put in place in evaluating and measuring what we do throughout the entire customer experience matters a lot. Therefore, we are embedding and lining up incentives through the change process to make sure everybody is tied together.” By the way, as I have discussed earlier, analytics without insights is like research without analytics—it just doesn’t fly in today’s progressive Big M marketing organization.

Prioritize the future

It’s hard to justify change when the business is chugging along nicely and meeting or surpassing its goals. It takes visionaries to understand the need to strike the balance between the short and long terms. I particularly like the way Kate Quinn expresses it:

“Probably our biggest challenge has been prioritizing the future. We’re still very successful at doing what we’ve been doing, and we need to invest to continue to do that. But we also need to figure out the right balance between investing in what will be (especially with Reform around the corner) versus what it is today.”

If you’re interested in tuning in to our next change agent webinar, tweet me @ScottDavisShift. I’ll put you on our list for an invitation.

Scott Davis (sdavis@prophet.com) is Chief Growth Officer at Prophet, a strategic brand and marketing consultancy.