

What is marketing leadership?

By Thomas Barta & Patrick Barwise

***Doing* marketing isn't the same as *leading* marketing. In the world's largest-ever study on senior marketers' business impact and career success, we found that those who *lead* marketing outperform those who just *do* it. There's a case for a new school in marketing: leadership.**

The main ideas

- For business impact, marketing leadership skills trump technical skills.
- Successful marketing leaders maximize the overlap between customer needs and company needs.
- Marketing leadership skills can be learned.

The new PlayStation is just out. It's the world's best-selling gaming console and Sony's most important product. What many people don't know is that when Nintendo pioneered the gaming market, almost everyone in Sony's top team was against the idea. It took almost ten years for young executive Ken Kutaragi to convince his skeptical bosses that gaming was a real customer need—and a big long-term opportunity for the company. Without his leadership, the PlayStation—and perhaps even Sony—would not exist today.

What makes for an impactful marketer? People might typically point to a memorable Coke, Adidas, or Google marketing campaign. Marketers' success, it appears, is all about *doing* marketing well: product, place, price, and promotion. But as Sony and

other cases show, success also requires something else: bold internal marketing leadership.

Today, frustration is widespread among senior marketers. All too often, a skilled marketer joins a firm, understands what customers want, has a brilliant business idea, makes a plan, hits a wall of rejection—and gives up. In our data, 71 percent of senior marketers believed their business impact was high (in many cases, optimistically) but just 44 percent were satisfied with their careers. No other C-suite member gets fired faster than the Chief Marketing Officer (CMO). Researcher Kimberly A. Whitler has found company leaders often [don't know what to expect](#) from a marketer (and many CMOs don't help clarify). Bosses, peers, and team members agree: being a marketer inside a firm can be tough. *Doing* better marketing is only part of the answer.

Marketing is uniquely challenging—and personally risky—for three reasons. First, much of it is about an uncertain future—the exact opposite of accounting—giving marketers an intrinsic *trust gap* within the top team. Second, for a firm to deliver a market-leading customer experience, most of its functions—way beyond marketing—will need to get involved, giving marketers an inherent *power gap*. Third, almost every day brings a new—tactical—marketing tool, making it hard for marketers to keep up to date, leaving them with a permanent *skills gap*.

We know how challenging marketing—and perhaps all future-focused work—can be, both from our research data and from personal experience. In particular, as a McKinsey partner, Thomas often spent as much time supporting CMOs in their C-suite battles as helping them develop their actual strategies (the latter was typically easier).

The Case for Marketing Leadership

What makes a marketer effective and successful? To find out, we conducted the world's largest-ever marketing leadership study (*The Marketers' DNA*). We surveyed 1,232 senior executives from over 80 countries. With the help of INSEAD Business School, we also analyzed data from one of the world's largest 360-degree databases, covering both marketing and non-marketing leaders. In total, our study involved over 68,000

executive assessments (all details are in our book [The 12 Powers of a Marketing Leader](#)).

What we found was stunning. Over 55% of marketing executives’ business impact could be explained by their marketing leadership skills. Only about 15% by their technical marketing skills. As you might expect, the most successful CMOs knew marketing well. However, they also excelled at convincing people, changing minds, and making the case for transformation. Great marketers know *how to make things happen*. There is a strong case for a new school in marketing: leadership.

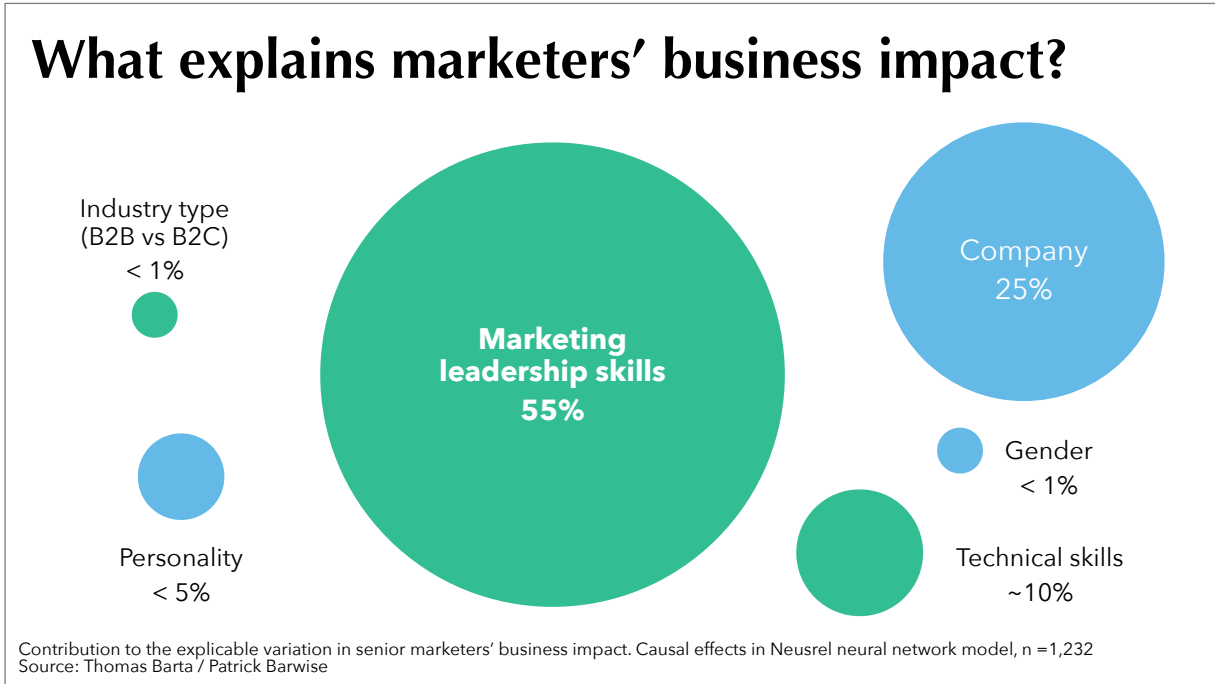


Exhibit 1: Contribution to the explicable variation in senior marketers’ business impact

Marketing Leadership: Maximizing the Value Creation Zone

In our research, we found a remarkable pattern: The most successful marketers worked constantly with colleagues across the business to increase the extent to which marketing activities met both the customers’ needs *and* the company’s needs. We call the overlap between customer needs and company needs the Value Creation Zone (V Zone for short). On the customer side, the most successful leaders were continuously figuring out what customers needed and made the case that the company’s products and services were better than the competitors’ offers. On the company side, the most

successful executives also knew what the organization needed—in the CEO’s view—and mobilized everyone across the company to create great customer experiences.

For sustainable profit growth, firms need to maximize the V Zone. Marketing’s specific role is to understand customers so well that the company’s product and service innovation and delivery efforts enable it to meet customers’ needs better than the competition does. Marketing must also help prioritize cost reduction efforts to maximize savings, while minimizing any reduction in customer value. If innovation simplifies things for the customer and the company, it can often both reduce cost *and* increase customer value—a double whammy.

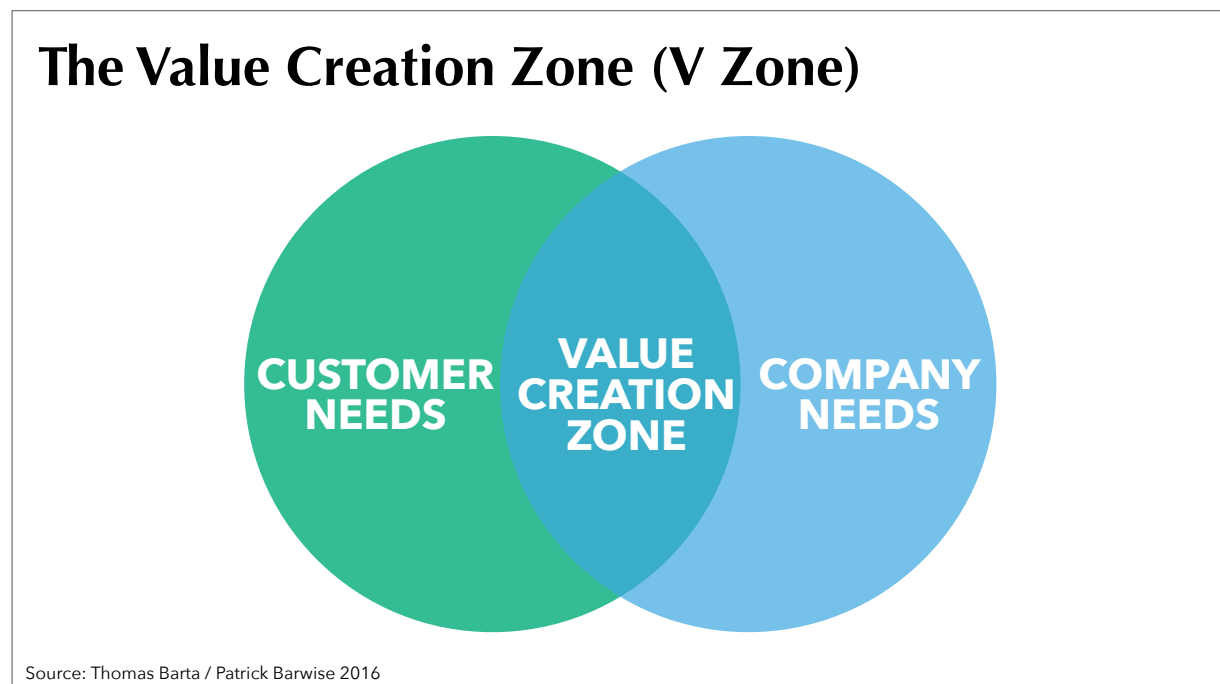


Exhibit 2: The Value Creation Zone

The V Zone is a moving target, especially in markets with fast-changing customer needs, competitive pressures, and technologies. No executive can maximize the V Zone on their own, and neither can anyone else: it’s a constant, creative, collaborative task. The most successful marketers deeply understand both the customers’ priorities *and* those of the CEO and top team—and enable the company to continuously enlarge its V Zone. Expanding the V Zone is at the center of successful marketing leadership and long-term business performance.

Marketing Leadership is a 360-Degree Task

Marketing leadership differs from generic leadership. The V Zone isn't the only reason. Many leadership books and seminars are concerned with building and leading a great *team*. Many of the best ones also talk about understanding and managing *yourself*. Both of these are important. But leading marketing is also about two other crucial—and often overlooked—roles: understanding and leading *bosses* and *colleagues*. In fact, mobilizing bosses and colleagues combined is even more important for business impact than leading teams (our [McKinsey Quarterly article](#) has more, including our hunch that much the same applies to leaders in other functions like operations, IT, finance, and so on). Interested executives can take our [online marketing leadership test](#) to better understand their own strengths, weaknesses, and preferences.

Marketing Leadership Can Be Learned

Are marketing leaders born or made? One of the most striking—and encouraging—findings in our study was that differences in senior marketers' personalities¹ accounted for surprisingly little of the variation in their business impact and career success—less than 5%. The key implication is that *marketing leadership skills can be learned*. And they should be. Very few leaders are naturally equipped to bridge the power gap, the trust gap, and the skills gap—while creating a powerful V Zone. Companies need to ensure their marketers develop the leadership skills that drive both individual and organizational success. Sony was lucky that Ken Kutaragi had these skills.

Thomas Barta is an organizational psychologist and a former marketing director and partner of McKinsey. Thomas researches, speaks, and writes about marketing leadership. He has founded the Marketing Leadership Masterclass. Thomasbarta.com

Patrick Barwise is Emeritus Professor of Management and Marketing at London Business School. Patrickbarwise.com

Their book [The 12 Powers of a Marketing Leader](#) was published by McGraw-Hill in 2016.

¹ The Big Five personality traits, also known as the OCEAN model.