

# ***WHAT IS MARKETING LEADERSHIP***

Insights from the world's  
largest ever study on  
marketers' success

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## INTRODUCTION

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***For impact and success, many Chief Marketing Officers (CMOs) hone in on their technical marketing skills. They might be missing the mark. Our data reveals a profound truth: it's leadership that truly move the needle. This is an invitation to a fresh paradigm: marketing leadership.***

***Doing marketing isn't the same as leading marketing.*** Most discerning CEOs would agree: lasting, profitable growth requires marketing done right. If that's the case, marketers should be front and center, integral to every pivotal company decision. The CMO voice should resonate loud and clear throughout the organization.

Reality paints a different picture. Many companies talk a big game about being customer-centric but don't even have a marketer at the helm. Few CMOs graduate to the role of CEO, and often, the rapport between marketers and CEOs is, well, complicated. From our conversations, it's evident: CMOs worldwide yearn for a more influential seat at the table, a platform to relay vital customer insights and game-changing growth plans.

However, this struggle for influence isn't ubiquitous. There are those trailblazing marketing leaders who've carved out a formidable voice within their organizations, creating ripple effects that benefit both the customer and the enterprise. The upcoming case is testament to that.

**Mark Sandys, Diageo's global head of beer,** anticipated thriving St. Patrick's Day sales for Guinness, when the Covid pandemic hit abruptly.

Global pub closures led to millions of liters of unsold Guinness beer. The business faced a dire situation with evaporating revenue. Mark could have resorted to common fixes like extending beer due dates or offering pub loans. But together with his team he chose a bolder approach—investing hundreds of millions to repurchase beer from pubs and provide reopening support with cleaning teams. After internal debates, the strategy got approved. Upon pub reopening, Guinness sales skyrocketed. Despite a second Covid wave in the fall, Mark's team persisted. They convinced Diageo to reapply the buyback and cleaning investment. Ultimately, this resilience paid off, with pubs eventually reopening and propelling Guinness to market leadership, achieving record-breaking sales and unprecedented brand success.

Mark Sandys and his team understood precisely where the needs of the customer and company converged. The sweet spot. We've dubbed it the "Value Creation Zone." Beyond crafting a stellar marketing strategy, the team also wielded their leadership skills, rallying an impressive assembly of internal players to champion its execution. They weren't just *doing* marketing; they were *steering* the ship.

# THE MARKETING GAPS

## IT'S COMPLICATED

*The struggle for influence among marketers stems largely from three pervasive marketing gaps*

Before exploring marketing leadership, let's examine the unique challenges intrinsic to the role of marketing. Conversations with CMOs have revealed gaps that many other leaders don't face in the same manner. We've labeled these as the marketing gaps.

### **The Trust Gap**

Marketers strive to anticipate future customer behaviors and sales. However, the unpredictable nature of the future often makes colleagues and managers second-guess their forecasts. When a CMO presents next to a finance head, their projections might appear less concrete—because they are. No one can guarantee the future. Yet, a CMO's duty involves shaping that future and earning the trust of others.

### **The Power Gap**

Creating an unparalleled customer experience demands collaboration across multiple departments. In many firms, however, these departments don't report to the marketing team. Simply put, some organizational silos might ignore marketing's suggestions. Consider the digital transformation: Achieving a unified view of the customer often means connecting data from varied company corners. Who's leading this? Who makes the decisions? It's often a delicate task.

### **The Skills Gap**

With marketing technology evolving rapidly, marketers constantly race to stay updated. But here's the twist: even as advancements offer CMOs unparalleled marketing opportunities, the sheer volume of information can shake their confidence, echoing the sentiment, "I can't keep up with everything."

Few leaders naturally possess the skills to span the trust, power, and skills gaps. Universities seldom include navigating such complex terrains in their syllabus. Given these challenges, it's no surprise that many marketers wrestle with their roles, struggling to bridge these gaps—and sometimes falling short.

## CMO SUCCESS FACTORS

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*The world's largest study on marketers' business impact and career success*

### LEARNING FROM

- 1,232 CMO assessments
- Over 67,000 360-degree surveys
- Over 100 interviews
- Executives from over 80 countries

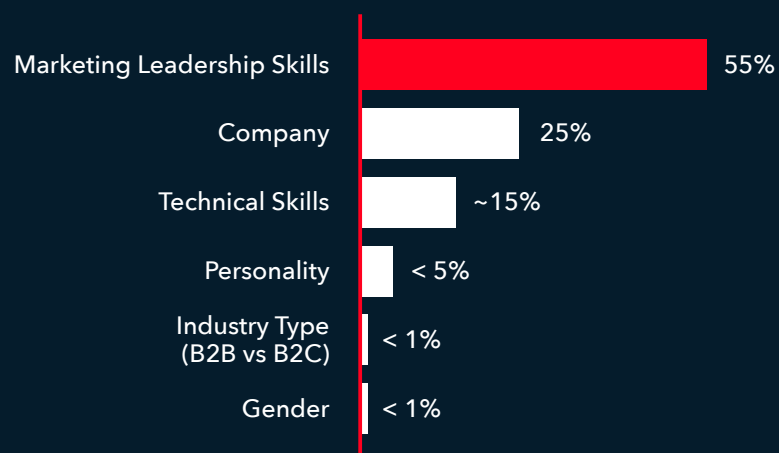
**What really makes for a successful Chief Marketing Officer?** In pursuit of clarity, we have spearheaded - the best of our knowledge - the most extensive global study on CMO success to date. First, we evaluated how well the leadership behaviors and personality traits of 1,232 senior marketers from over 80 countries could explain their business impact and career success, Using an advanced Neural Network model developed by expert Dr. Frank Buckler. For a more nuanced understanding of CMO success determinants, we partnered with INSEAD Business School Professors Roger Lehman and Manfred Kets de Vries. The latter also provided us invaluable access to his vast 360-degree feedback database. With this resource, we dissected over 67,000 assessments to discern how board members perceive CMOs compared to other leadership roles. Moreover, insights from over 100 CMOs, business leaders, and leadership experts enriched and contextualized our data.

When people think of successful marketers, they often picture a famous Coca Cola, Samsung, or Mercedes marketing campaign. The prevailing view suggests marketing success hinges on technical proficiency: launching impactful campaigns, exploring new distribution avenues, optimizing pricing. While these factors are critical, our research uncovered: purely technical marketing skills, though valuable, aren't sufficient for success. In fact, our research findings have revolutionized our perspective on CMO success:

- **Only about 15% of marketing executives' business impact could be explained by their technical marketing skills.** The most successful people in our study were "good enough" technical marketers-but not always the best.

## WHAT DRIVES CMO BUSINESS IMPACT?

Contribution to the explicable variation in senior marketers' business impact.



CMO DNA study, neural network model, n = 1,232  
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*The #1 CMO success factor is marketing leadership*

- **Far and away the biggest factor for CMO success: marketing leadership skills (55%).**

The most successful leaders in our study were able to find the overlap between what customers need and what the company needs. However, their standout quality lay in actualizing marketing strategies. They were able to mobilize superiors, colleagues, teams, and themselves to make the critical growth strategies actually happen.

For generations, books, schools and universities have taught marketers the skills of branding, pricing, distribution, digital—hoping this would be enough. As our research shows, these skills are useful but only the beginning. We suggest marketers treat technical skills as the entry ticket; the permission to play. Once a marketer masters the basics, it's all about adding the skills to bridge the marketing gaps, and to make marketing strategies inside an organization actually happen.

Put simply: for success as a CMO, leadership trumps technical skills.

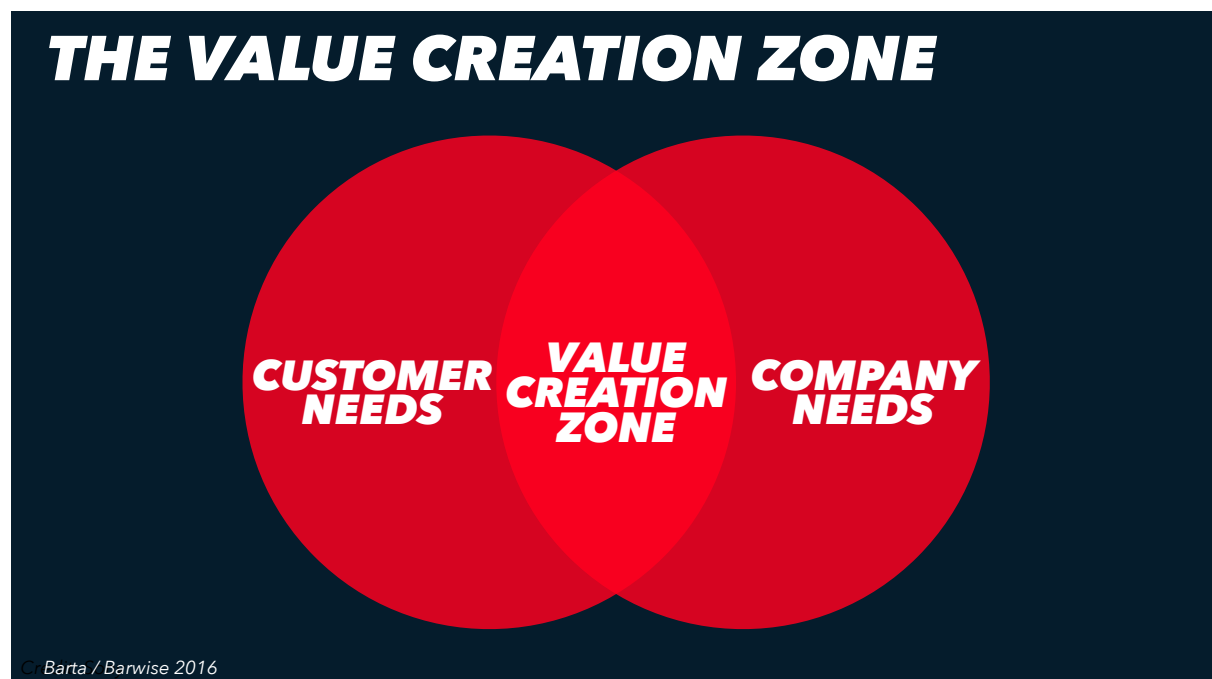
## **THE VALUE CRATION ZONE**

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*At the heart of  
marketing leadership:  
enlarging the Value  
Creation Zone*

In our extensive research, a clear pattern emerged: The most effective marketers actively collaborated across their organizations, ensuring that marketing strategies align with both customer needs and company objectives. We've named this vital intersection, where the needs of the customer and the needs of the company converge, the "Value Creation Zone" or "V Zone". Marketing leadership is all about finding Value Creation Zones—and enlarging them.

Take the PlayStation, for instance, now recognized as the global leader among gaming consoles and Sony's hallmark product. The lesser-known narrative behind its inception is instructive. During a period when Nintendo was setting the foundations of the gaming world, a significant portion of Sony's leadership expressed reservations. However, Ken Kutaragi, an assertive executive of that era, spent nearly a decade vigorously advocating that gaming is both a customer and a company need: a Value Creation Zone. Without Kutaragi's proactive leadership, the PlayStation might never have materialized (and Sony's corporate trajectory could have been starkly different).



## LEADING IN 360 DEGREE

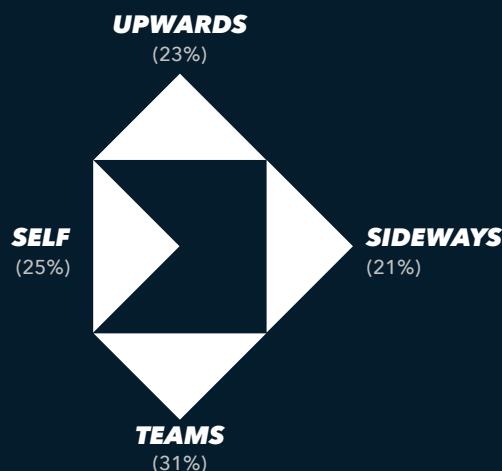
You might be wondering: what exactly does it take to enlarge the Value Creation Zone? A deeper dive into our data provides clarity. Our analysis identified four crucial elements that explain the leadership prowess of marketers.

(% = contribution to the explicable variation in senior marketers' business success):

- **Leading Upwards (23%).** The most successful marketers bring important customer needs into the boardroom, work on issues that really matter for the top management, create and prove returns, and work with the best external partners to create the highest possible impact. In other words, for success, marketers must know how to help their bosses make better decisions—and see the V Zones.
- **Leading Sideways (22%).** We spoke earlier about the Power Gap, and that marketing often has to influence other departments. So it's no surprise successful marketers know how to mobilize colleagues, give hope through an inspiring narrative, create movements—to make V Zone-projects actually happen.
- **Leading Teams (30%).** Unsurprisingly, great marketers are great team leaders. Even the best CMOs can't make change happen alone. They need skilled teams that have the trust and confidence to help the organization become even more customer-minded.
- **Leading Self (25%).** Marketing is an important and very exciting role. But it's also hard work. That's why, for success, marketers must be very clear about their own purpose, do work that matters to them personally, so they have the energy to get up each day and lead change—even when things get tough.

### MARKETING LEADERSHIP: A 360-DEGREE TASK

Contribution to the explicable variation in senior marketers' business impact and career success—among leadership factors



CMO DNA study, neural network model, n = 1,232  
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## THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADING UPWARDS AND SIDEWAYS

*For CMO success, mobilizing bosses and colleagues - combined - is more important than leading teams*

Modern leadership books often focus on guiding executives in team leadership or in discovering personal purpose. Unsurprisingly, these elements are also pivotal for marketing leaders.

However, as we have shown before, for marketers, mobilizing superiors (upwards) and colleagues (sideways) were even more important. Taken together, these upward and horizontal actions were about 50 percent more important than managing subordinates for business success (45 percent versus 31 percent)—and well over twice as important for career success (47 percent versus 19 percent).

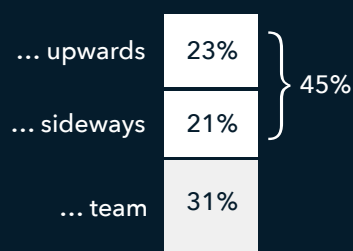
This isn't to undermine the importance of team management – quite the opposite. But as the trajectory of Guinness leader Mark Sandys illustrates, exemplary marketers know how to engage both upwards and sideways within an organization.

Given their importance in marketing, we will delve into the components of upward and sideways leadership next.

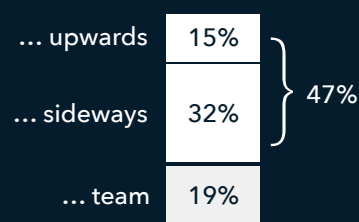
### FOR CMOS, LEADING UPWARDS & SIDEWAYS MATTERS

Contribution to the explicable variation in senior marketers' business impact and career success—among leadership factors

#### CMO business impact of mobilizing ...



#### CMO career success from mobilizing ...



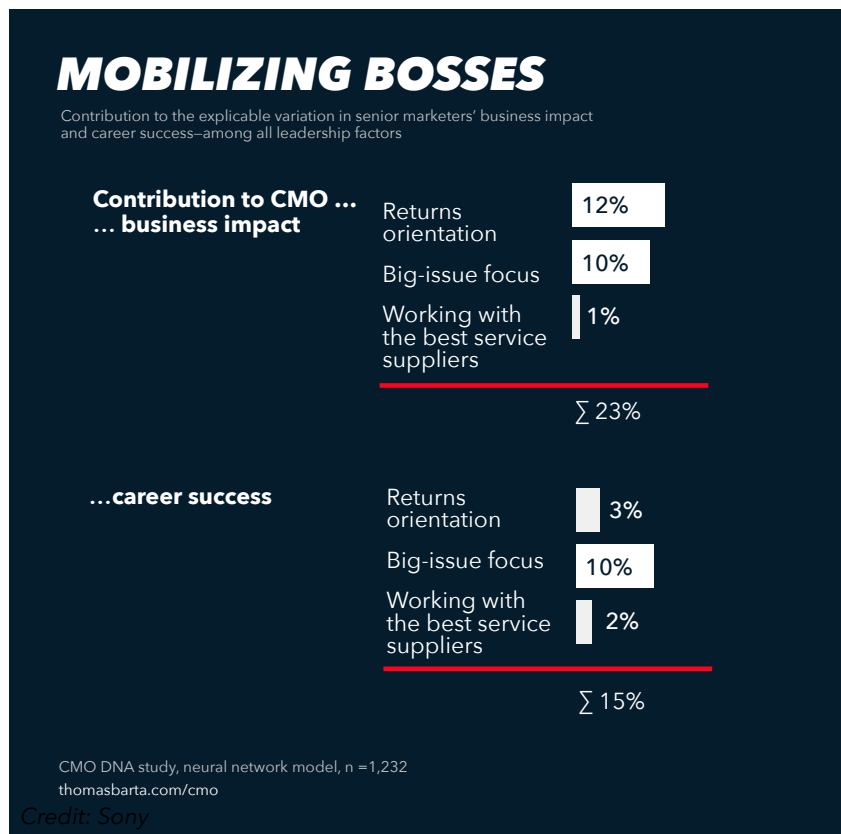
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## MOBILIZING UPWARDS

*Helping the C-suite  
make better  
decisions*

When we asked Chief Marketing Officers about their main responsibilities, many highlighted roles like "overseeing the marketing department" or "leading the company's ad and branding campaigns." We suspect that other functional leaders might echo such department-centric perspectives.

However, the standout leaders in our study characterized their principal duty differently, emphasizing goals like "boosting company growth" or "enhancing customer outreach to bolster performance." These leaders keenly addressed the "big issues," aligning their priorities with both the CEO's vision and the overarching company goals. This alignment with the CEO's goals accounted for 10% of the CMOs' business impact and another 10% of their career success.



But how well do marketers align with the CEO's vision? A significant 76% of our surveyed CMOs believed they were in sync. However, only 46% of superiors in our 360-degree assessment felt that their marketing heads truly grasped the

company's direction. This suggests a potential alignment gap at the functional leadership level.

Being perceived as a judicious manager of resources also bolstered a CMO's rapport with the CEO. In our research, visible returns orientation accounted for 12% of CMO business impact and 3% of career success. Yet, another disparity surfaced: 67% of our CMOs believed they were return-driven, but a separate study indicated that only 39% of C-suite executives felt their marketing leaders were consistently yielding measurable ROI for their expenditures.

Mobilizing upwards is among the most important skills every marketer must learn—the earlier the better.

## MOBILIZING SIDEWAYS

### *Spanning the silos*

For impactful change within an organization, it's pivotal to lead assertively and share a compelling narrative. Capturing the attention and support of colleagues, even those outside your immediate team, can create a cascading effect. A well-articulated action plan that yields results can foster an environment where colleagues become advocates for the cause. As we have said earlier, the customer experience is generated by the entire organization, and few of the leaders responsible for this experience report directly to marketing. That's why, for marketers, mobilizing colleagues to become these advocates is crucial.

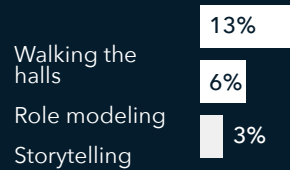
The most critical sideways skill marketers need to master is what we call "walking the halls." This involves engaging with leaders from departments outside of marketing to create a better customer experience. This skill alone accounts for 13% in terms of both business influence and career growth.

Role modeling and effective storytelling are the other two important skills. Combined, they account for roughly 10% of business impact and around 20% of career success. However, our research revealed that only 56% of CEOs perceive their marketing chiefs as exemplary leaders who champion causes, and a mere 61% of CMOs admit to acting as role models within the organization.

# MOBILIZING COLLEAGUES

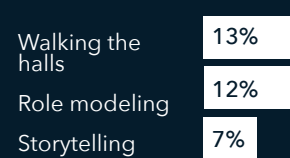
Contribution to the explicable variation in senior marketers' business impact and career success—among all leadership factors

## Contribution to CMO ... ... business impact



∑ 22%

## ... career success



∑ 32%

CMO DNA study, neural network model, n = 1,232  
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Credit: Sony

Intriguingly, while many CMOs excel at crafting stories that entice customers to buy, they often overlook using this talent for internal engagement, even though its benefits are clear.

Mobilizing peers requires more than just digital communication. Although one might assume that video interactions suffice in today's age, they rarely inspire. Stellar leaders prioritize face-to-face interactions. They engage in town hall meetings during regional visits and collaborate in person to address pressing challenges.

The silver lining? Strategies to engage both CEOs and fellow colleagues often align. For instance, when functional leaders actively foster collaboration with other departments, they are often also creating tangible outcomes and promoting the broader organizational strategy.

## LEARNING TO LEAD MARKETING

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*Gender and personality play little roles for CMO success. Leading marketing can be learned*

We found something quite uplifting in our research: for business impact, gender hardly makes a difference (we're talking less than 1%). While firms could benefit from more women in leadership roles, our study suggests that when in the spotlight, both women and men shine equally.

Now, speaking of personality: It's not the be-all and end-all! We dove into the widely-used Five Personality Traits model, considering things like how open, diligent, or extroverted someone might be. But all these traits together? They explained less than 5% of what makes a marketer successful. The big takeaway? Not many are born ready to leap over those big hurdles like trust and power gaps. Marketing leadership skills aren't just innate—they can be learned and polished.

To all marketers: it's imperative not to solely rely on your technical marketing expertise. Embrace the essential task of adding even more marketing leadership skills, to engage and collaborate with your superiors and colleagues. This collaborative approach is the catalyst for genuine change. We believe Mark Sandys and Ken Kutaragi would endorse.

For more details and to learn these skills, please turn to:

- The Marketing Leadership Masterclass
- Thomas's and Patrick's book, *The 12 Powers of a Marketing Leader*
- The Marketing Leadership Test
- Thomas's and Patrick's McKinsey Quarterly article on upwards and sideways leadership
- [thomasbarta.com/marketingleader](https://thomasbarta.com/marketingleader)

## ABOUT

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Thomas Barta

**Thomas Barta** is a global CMO expert, advisor, and keynote speaker. A former CMO and former partner of McKinsey, leads the Marketing Leadership Institute as CEO. His research includes the world's largest ever studies on CMO success, impact and courage. Thomas is the Global Dean of CMO Fellowship and an Honorary Fellow of The Marketing Society.



Prof. Patrick Barwise

**Patrick Barwise** is emeritus professor of management and marketing at London Business School. He has published widely on management, marketing, and media, including his prize-winning 2004 book with Seán Meehan, *Simply Better: Winning and Keeping Customers by Delivering What Matters Most*. He also served for many years as a trustee and then chairman of Which?, the world's second-largest consumer organization.