

WHERE HAVE ALL THE INNOVATIVE AND ENTREPRENEURIAL MARKETERS GONE?

Is today's culture of playing it safe suppressing the innovative and entrepreneurial marketers? Asks Stephen Rogers

Without these 'positive deviants' an organisation is left bereft of catalysts for change and a passion for continual innovation

There is a real dearth of dynamic, innovative and entrepreneurial senior marketing professionals at the moment – or so it seems.

Today there is a culture of 'playing it safe' of 'doing the same as we did last year because it sort of worked' and of consciously thinking 'If I keep my head down and carry on doing the same things I'll be safe'. However, this approach is suppressing fresh & original thinking and intelligent & creative strategic development. The nett result of which is a marketing landscape that is becoming evermore bland and uninspiring.

Is this the fault though of the marketers or the companies that they are working for?

The last five years have seen considerable budget pressures on many marketing departments. This has certainly impacted levels/scale of campaign activities, but it's been more fundamental than just expenditure cuts, it has reduced departmental head counts so there are fewer and in many cases more junior staff left in charge. It has either forced out senior marketers and/or Directors, either as part of this downsizing or out of personal frustration and career limitations.

Companies also naturally target, either overtly or through a conformist policy, the innovators, the mavericks, those people who think differently, challenge the status quo and therefore rock the boat and question strategies. These are the very people that contracting organisations get rid of in the belief that what they need in times of belt tightening is conformists, 'line tow-ers' and 'no-questions-asked-get-on-and-doers'.

It is a form of economic natural selection – but these are the very people that actually help drive a business forward and where do most of these people tend to reside inside corporations? Yes, the marketing departments.

So companies loose twice over. They loose their natural innovators, but they also loose their challengers and their voices of 'what if'.

No wonder then that in the US, many companies having realised their mistakes are now actively seeking to bring this capability, insight and expertise back into their organisations. A long term advocate of this is Jerry Sternin who calls these type of people 'positive deviants'. They are, according to him, individuals who are doing things differently but successfully. Yet within a heavily structured and process controlled corporate environment they are also the people that can frustrate, exasperate and even infuriate. In other words they need to be managed!

However they are lost to the detriment of the corporation and without them an organisation is left bereft of catalysts for change, new ideas, creative thinking and a passion for continual innovation.

This is why cries of frustration can be heard from entrepreneurs and innovative organisations alike who are trying to convince corporate marketing teams that there is a really exciting and ground-breaking idea, concept, or opportunity that would fundamentally help drive their brand or enhance target audience engagement. (Many of whom have come out of the corporate marketing environment themselves).

It is perhaps financial market pressure that has had one of the most profound impacts on marketing over the last few years

It is about re-energising the internal culture to openly promote innovation and different ways of doing things

Economic reality does of course dictate how much and at what level marketing activities can be carried out. But it doesn't automatically preclude from doing something differently. There is risk, there is always risk as there is always competitive pressure, Board pressure and financial market pressure.

It is perhaps the latter that has had one of the most profound impacts on marketing over the last 24-36 months. The explosion of private equity investment takeovers has hit first and hardest on the marketing teams within those organisations. The drive for immediate cost savings and margin improvement giving rise to the wholesale slaughter of marketing departments - witness when The AA was taken over by CVC and Permira – with over 30 marketing professionals going.

This situation is being replicated many times over as marketing is a soft target for cost savings (short term of course). However there are signs that the value of branding is beginning to register with Private Equity firms. In true fashion if it can drive the future valuation of the new acquired business upwards, then they are interested – although proving and demonstrating this is another challenge.

So what is the solution?

Companies need to look at the resource they have and re-engage with the mavericks or original innovative thinkers. They must welcome them back into the fold and actively encourage their participation in the strategic development of the business.

It is also about re-energising the internal culture that has been down trodden over the last two to three years to openly promote innovation and different ways of doing things, the everyday tasks as well as the future growth strategy deliverables.

It is important that the company is confident enough with its own corporate structure so that they can adequately support these individuals who will then be able to positively contribute to the organisation. This may require greater flexibility, a higher degree of tolerance and understanding, but the rewards will potentially be considerable.

Business has always thrived on innovation, the best innovation has always been conceived from original thought and the most original thought has almost always come from mavericks.