

# Disruption in the c- suite



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Seeking a quick bite in the terminal before catching my next flight on a business trip, I recently found myself stopping at a place I wouldn't have considered a year ago -- McDonald's. I scanned the menu and ordered a grilled chicken sandwich. A tasty meal and probably better for me than a hamburger or many of the other selections in the airport food court.

My marketing mind then kicked in and I realized I had literally bought into the improved brand appeal resulting from the fast-food chain's focus on new menu items and better food quality. And that the architect of this repositioning is , who took over as CEO after two years as the company's lead marketer.

Easterbrook is a poster child for an interesting change in corporate America: the emergence of chief marketing officers (CMOs) as CEO candidates. Other large companies where marketers have assumed the top job the last few years include Audi USA, Campbell's Soup, Jive Software, Mercedes-Benz USA and Royal Dutch Shell.

Not long ago, CMOs were generally stuck too far in a corner to be considered for the corner office. Sure, the CMO has always been responsible for important items on the corporate agenda -- brand awareness, product marketing, demand generation, etc. However, many found themselves boxed into narrowly defined roles and were thought to lack the diverse skills needed for a higher position.

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How the world has changed. The CMO job description has dramatically shifted in recent years as companies focus on digital transformation, top-line growth and customer engagement. Today's CMO typically has more responsibility and influence than ever and is likely to have stronger ties across the organization beyond marketing to sales, product marketing, corporate strategy and IT.

As Gartner's Kirsten Newbold-Knipp put in an interesting , " In the B2C world, marketing's responsibility has grown from brand awareness to market share to end-to-end customer experience in short order. While this same trend is playing out in B2B, it's even more poignant a shift. The customer buying journey for B2B brands is growing increasingly marketing heavy with buyers doing more research and getting further down their decision path before they engage with sales. That's manifested itself in a shift of responsibility with CMOs who once owned a simple lead count now measured on pipeline or even shared revenue targets."

Contrast that with 10 or 20 years ago, when the number-one factor in evaluating a company's success seemed to be its operational efficiency rather than better understanding and engaging with the customer. In that climate, left-brain leaders like the CFO ended up in the catbird seat. The CMO was a chief marketing officer in the most fixed sense, leading siloed branding and communications efforts. Put another way, companies were run more from the back of the house by the Excel spreadsheet jockeys than from the front by the creative PowerPoint types.

Changing customer behavior, though, now requires the CMO to better understand the entire customer lifecycle, how to use data to drive measurable business results and work across functions to explore opportunities company wide.

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The overriding strategic imperative for every company today is " brand, demand, expand." 1. Grow brand awareness. 2. Generate leads and impact the bottom line. 3. Retain customers and make them your biggest advocates. This reality has made CMOs more attractive to companies looking for creative CEOs who " get" that brand, always important, is now a full-throttle, all-consuming endeavor on which a company's future rides.

It also doesn't hurt that other aspects of today's CEO role play well to CMOs' strengths. Communicationskills, for example. The days are long gone when the CEO was a Wizard of Oz-like presence on the top floor, whom shareholders or employees heard from in an end-of-the-year letter, quarterly email or occasional mediainterview. The model now is the highly visible CEO, doing frequent webcasts or live Q&A sessions with employees, present onsocial media, etc.

In this new corporateenvironment, it's no surprise that more CMOs see themselves as future CEOs. According to a 2014 Forrester , approximately 40 percent of B2B marketers and 41 percent of B2C marketers viewed themselves on a path to CEO roles. When the analyst firm performed a similar survey in 2011, most of the marketing executives wanted to become

consultants or get a job at a larger company instead of rising to a higher position.

To be sure, CMOs eyeing the top spot still face some bias. They must convince corporate boards that they have the broad strategic chops, management experience and cross-organization breakthrough thinking to run a company.

In my mind, many of today's CMOs can safely check off these boxes. They usually run organizations of several hundred or thousand people and are responsible for big budgets (often the largest P&L in the company). They may have never managed sales, but have owned demand generation targets and work closely with sales. They are data-driven in a time when marketing has become as much science as creative endeavor. The best have hit home runs that truly have changed the game for their companies. They have gained more diverse skills than CMOs at any other time in history.

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Again, look no farther than McDonald's. The company used to focus mostly on supply chain efficiency -- it was pretty much like any large manufacturing company in that way. Then, consumers' tastes changed and McDonald's was caught flat-footed because it wasn't sufficiently in touch with its customers. With a marketer at the helm, the chain has had success recasting its brand.

Every CMO ought to be lovin' it.