

## **Wanted: Intimate Marketing Relationship**

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Sit in on your average Fortune 500 company executive offsite and you'll doubtless hear somebody spouting about why it's so critical to build relationships with customers. By now, everyone knows that strong relationships with clients, prospects, partners and suppliers power the growth of a business. After all, people don't buy from companies, they buy from other people, right?

Why is it, then, that so few organizations dedicate the time and resources to actually building those all-important relationships? A corporation will spend millions on broadcasting to a huge pool of prospects. It'll busy itself with building some amazing customer database or tracking software.

Yet somehow, despite all this effort, management never quite gets around to creating the kind of unique and substantive relationships with customers that will ultimately propel their business forward. Instead, they leave it to fate: Relationships happen by accident, serendipitously, rather than being strategically planned.

### **Who's in Charge?**

There are several reasons why this ironic oversight happens, but the principal one is that there's often no one person dedicated to managing a systematic process. Even at companies where relationship management is taken seriously, it tends to be decentralized, with its pieces spread across three or four different departments. As we've all seen, when something is everybody's job, eventually it's nobody's job. Companies that want to get serious about developing and extracting the lifetime value from their most critical business connections need to dedicate a portion of their marketing budgets to learning about their stakeholders. That, in turn, means having a strategy, and someone whose chief responsibility it is to manage it.

But that's the CMO's job, right? Actually, no. Given all the CMO has to do today, it's just not realistic to add another task—certainly not one as important as this. Therefore, I propose we create a new position: the vice president of High-Touch Marketing.

The vp of HTM, reporting to the CMO, is a new corporate hybrid—part relationship-management strategist, part sales-support executive, part events planner and part administrative coordinator. Overall, he (or, increasingly, she) has only one job, engendering communication between executives within the company and their most valuable constituents outside of it: clients, media,

analysts, partners and prospects. Nurturing these relationships—deliberately, methodically—can generate a higher return on investment than a 30-second Super Bowl spot.

### **The High-Touch Agenda**

The new vp's first task is to compile a list of the company's 250 most important stakeholders—those integral to the bottom line; those who will drive the company's growth over the next five years. Why 250? British anthropologist Robin Dunbar has found 150 to be the cognitive limit to the number of relationships one person can have. But in this exercise, 250 allows not only for the CEO's relationships, but also those of other top executives.

Selecting the members of this coterie is key: How many of the 250 are from which customer segments? How many are analysts, media, key influencers and partners? These are the questions to be worked through. Historically, companies don't apply enough thought when assembling this group; partnerships are often formed reactively, depending on with whom the CEO had dinner recently.

Instead, a formal "partnership road map" is needed. During the early stages, the new vp of HTM should be sitting down with members of the corporate suite, interviewing them to find out who they believe are the company's most prized relationships today and in the future. He or she should then strategically prioritize those people.

Once the top 250's been finalized, management should confront how to build the actual relationships. All intimate relationships have generosity at their foundation, but in this case a company should be offering more than just its product. Take our experience with supermarket/Safeway as an example. One of the chain's long-term goals was to position its brand within the health and wellness category. A key way of doing that was through joint ventures and partnerships. And once management selected the right partners, it sought to get closer to them.

Giving away groceries wasn't going to cut it, of course. Instead, Safeway held an executive retreat it called "Big Task Weekend," which convened the company's executives and representatives of its chosen partners at a resort where they could discuss trends and opportunities associated with health and wellness. Guests were invited to bring their spouses, and speakers like Dr. Dean Ornish shared health-related stories. Ultimately, the executives at Safeway were able to bond with their key partners over a mutually held set of personal values of living well and staying healthy and helping others do the same, while at the same time positioning their own brand as a leader in health and wellness. Since the summit, and thanks to subsequent efforts of the leadership team, Safeway sales have increased sharply.

This kind of weekend gathering may seem like the job of an event planner or pr firm. Because of its importance, however, the retreat should be directed by the vp of HTM. The vp will serve not only as the liaison between the company and its partners, but the coach and facilitator who encourages participants to let their guards down and allow personal relationships to develop within a business context. At the core of any relationship (and business ones are no exception) are three components: intimacy, generosity and accountability. The vp should be thinking about those things constantly; they will guide the gestures—such as attendees finding a welcome gift in their rooms—that will help build the relationships.

The vp of HTM should also be mandating the right kind of communication at an event. Most companies have dumped buckets of cash on gala affairs for their A-List to mingle and be merry. But if the right people don't communicate in a meaningful way, the money's wasted. I was recently speaking with a friend of mine, the CFO of a major bank, who "gets dragged" to many VIP vendor events. He told me about a gathering he recently attended for a big software firm where the sales folks didn't even approach him to see who he was. Instead, "they all stood along the sidelines, talking amongst themselves, like the wallflowers at a high school prom. "It was shocking," he said. "But it happens all the time."

It's now up to the vp of HTM to play what I call the "conference commando." If a company's going to spend serious money on an event, it had better be prepared to plan and coach the interpersonal outcomes that it needs to make sure the right people are talking—and I don't mean small talk, but conversation that will make a meaningful and lasting impression. Not everyone in the organization will be naturally adept at doing this with a relative stranger. That means some will need training. It's the new vp's job to recognize that and make sure those people get that training. This, I call Instant "intimacy training." You may not be able to change a wallflower's DNA, but you can get everyone to be a little more outgoing than they may be naturally.

Many professionals, despite years on the job, need support to move from their old insular habits to an active process of relationship development. It's best done through a community approach. When training programs are supported by follow-up coaching, learners can improve their productivity gains. The results endure all the longer if the coaching is peer-to-peer. Therefore, companies can create real sustainable change by creating "accountability groups" that will help members break through their individual relationship barriers and attain true outreach. How to create those accountability groups? You guessed it: It is yet another job of the new vp of HTM.

**See the Relationship Counselor**

By creating this new position, you're putting somebody in charge of your key relationship road map as well as the maintenance of all of your outreach, from major events to a simple congratulatory e-mail for a new job. Perhaps the vp of HTM's role is common sense, and it goes without saying that whomever holds the post should have the strength of character necessary to both look senior sales execs in the eye and manage the kind of cultural resistance among the ranks that can crop up when any new initiative debuts within a company.

The downsides are slight. It's clearly time for businesses to create a methodical approach to relationship building, instead of just leaving it all to happenstance. Consider this, too: As companies evolve, strategies change. A company should have a dedicated executive that keeps pace with the evolution, someone who can ask: What are our goals, and are our current partners still the most important people relative to those goals?

At a time when CMOs struggle simply to justify their budgets, it may sound heretical to suggest creating a new, top-level post in the marketing department. But I argue that the vp of HTM is actually one of the easier line items to justify. How? Just ask your CEO what he'd pay to be thick as thieves with the company's 250 most important constituents. In an age in which the chief executive knows the value of loyal friends and customers in all corners, you'll be placing that "Help Wanted" ad in no time.