



Future Look:

5 Essential Skills for the New Marketing Department

BY MICHAEL J. REILLY, FSMPS

Changes in client preferences, competition, communication channels, and technology are reshaping the modern marketing department. While traditional skills are still needed, a new set of essentials is upending the status quo and redefining value. Are you ready?

Mike Wagner was hired by Alan Plummer Associates in 2006 with no job title and a mandate to help his new employer improve rainmaking. The Texas-based civil and environmental firm was structured around separate departments. Client relationships were tightly held by a small group of principals tasked with business development for their individual disciplines.

Inspired by the Malcolm Baldrige process improvement models, Wagner saw a strategic opportunity to do things differently. “The company was already using a seller-doer model, but its success relied on only a handful of individuals selling within a specific service area,” he said. “I knew that if we could adopt a team process, one that could move across all the silos, reward collaboration, and educate more seller-doers, we would be much better at this.”

Change didn’t come overnight. But with Wagner’s counsel and persistent oversight, the firm developed a successful program based on clear expectations, practical incentives, and shared rewards.

Wagner’s willingness to take on his firm’s business-as-usual behaviors exemplifies a contrarian variety of marketing leadership emerging in successful professional service firms. It also offers a view of the future, where nothing is assumed and old marketing rules are fraying. To help win over the best clients, marketing pros will need to apply a fusion of new and traditional skills. Here are five in growing demand.

Every marketing department is composed differently, with good reason. Each is a unique expression of the priorities, past experiences, and future aspirations of the firm’s leadership.



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10 1. Strategy

The pace of mergers, acquisitions, and competitor aggression is disrupting the rules of the past. Consider three post-recession realities.

1. As the economy and volume of work are improving, margins are shrinking for many firms.
2. Clients and projects of any size (or past loyalty) are up for grabs by larger, sophisticated sellers and by smaller niche specialists.
3. Alternative project delivery methods and a wave of owner's reps and PMs are gaining traction with clients seeking high value and lower cost.

We are responding to a client marketplace without precedent. The old playbook called for recognizing a problem or threat and calling up a prescribed remedy that worked in the past. But familiar business patterns were splintered beyond recognition in the past six years. Firm leaders today are relying less on business convention and more on internal resolve to overcome adversity. Increasingly, that strategic vigor and creativity are coming from marketing leaders like Mike Wagner and countless other like him.

Al Potter, a senior vice president of Gilbane Building Company and the 2011 winner of the SMPS Weld Coxe Marketing Achievement Award, suggests that marketers seek forgiveness and not permission. "Don't wait for someone to assign strategic marketing in your firm. You need to just take it on, do your homework, and use SMPS and other sources to glean best practices," he said.



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Potter's advice applies to newly-hired marketing team members as well. "I am constantly amazed at the impact newcomers have in an organization, since they can see things objectively. Don't wait for permission to work on the most important areas that will improve your firm's performance."

Fear may be holding back decisive action in some organizations, especially those beaten up by the recession and forced into a passive or defensive strategy. "The recession made bold leadership more rare," said Frank Lippert, founder of Go! Strategies and immediate past president of SMPS. "Our industry is risk averse by nature, which to me is an opportunity for marketing and business development leaders. We are the risk-takers."

But Lippert cautions aspiring strategists to improve on an all-important skill: priority setting. "To be effective, you can't do everything. Marketers allow themselves to fall into the 'all-things-to-all-people' approach. It's not a weakness to outsource work that can be done more efficiently by outside specialists. Delegation is strength, since it frees you to work on more strategic areas and outcomes for your firm."

2. Digital Media

Exchanging ideas and earning a reputation built around *what we know* instead of *what we do* is what marketing is all about. With digital media and inbound marketing advancing as a means to achieve this, we are experiencing the benefits of adding online communities to extend the reach of traditional relationship marketing.

Social business channels such as LinkedIn, Twitter, and YouTube, combined with client preferences to access business information when and where it works for them, are altering communication strategy and tactics. These changes also are upping the need for digital communication specialists and writers able to create engaging online content.

The one remaining objection to digital is that clients—especially top decision-makers and CEOs—are not using social communications. That argument is eroding fast as successful companies on the client side invest in digital tools as a way to communicate and elicit feedback from their customers and clients.

How close are we to a tipping point in this investment shift? Closer than you think. In a recent survey of CEOs in 50 top companies, global PR firm Weber Shandwick reported that use of social media in the corner office has improved significantly since a similar survey two years ago. Published in the *MIT Sloan Management Review* in April, the survey concludes, "Social business is no longer the wave of the future. It is already a state-of-the-art leadership tool that surpasses many traditional approaches to listening and communicating with stakeholders."

Ryan Farias, director of marketing for SMMA, confirms the shift. "Clients are looking for, finding, and qualifying potential partners



in a much different way than they did 10 and even 5 years ago. If you are not providing a clear message and tangible value through digital media, by way of expertise and strong content, you are definitely missing out.”

Why are so many firms—and their marketing staff—still in the tire-kicking stage with social channels? “The hard part of this change is shifting the resources,” said Farias. “Digital and inbound lack the years of data to support the ROI, so taking time and money away from the traditional model and putting it towards an inbound strategy is perceived by some as risky.” He sees the real risk as becoming overly invested in proposal and business development activities with low odds of return.

So what are employers looking for? “Skills with social media should include not only technical know-how but a broader understanding of the appropriate voice and content for each channel,” said Jim Kent, chief marketing and communications officer of Thornton Tomasetti. “Can you write a 300-word blog post and Tweet effectively on the same topic?”

Perhaps the most important skill in translating a firm’s knowledge and distinction to digital media is harder to find on a resume. According to Kent, “Simply being intellectually curious and engaging, knowing how to stimulate and cultivate a conversation, is so important. Consultants know how to do this. It is a rarer skill among communications staff.”

3. Information Management

You know the joke by now. The CEO complains that half his marketing budget is wasted, but he can’t tell which half. The joke still works today because so little of what marketing departments do is ever measured. Fortunately, the move to digital marketing, combined with sophisticated information management and measurement tools, means we can figure out which half to stick with. We also are able to manage the sales pipeline, client and competitor intelligence, and market research data more effectively than ever before.

The problem? Since data management and technology are outside the traditional skill strengths of marketing professionals, there is a lot of catching up needed. Marketers able to apply critical-thinking skills across both disciplines are hard to find.

According to Christopher Parsons, founder and CEO of Knowledge Architecture, the stakes are much higher now than when he started in the A/E/C business 13 years ago. “Marketing teams are working across dozens of information systems today including project databases, CRM systems, web sites, and social channels,” he said. “It requires a new type of staff specialist who is comfortable with technology, someone who enjoys working with data but also understands the marketing mission and application.”

Parsons sees a new job title emerging, a position that goes beyond keeper of the leads and client contacts. “In mid-size and larger

firms, we are seeing marketing information managers becoming a priority hire. These are marketing specialists who bring instinctive knowledge, who are fearless when it comes to technology.”

This hybrid marketing and technology role can become the connection point and soul mate to the firm’s IT group. In the past, marketing would create the content or ask for a report and hand it off to IT. The technical experts took over from there, fulfilling the distribution, program development, or data retrieval. Today, the marketing group needs overlap with the technology specialists to examine critically all options and guide the client-side strategy.

However staffed, information management is the tide that keeps rising within a busy marketing department. Linda Koch, director of marketing and business development at Pfluger Architects, sees this gap as a growing dilemma for many firms. “Finding and integrating data from six to seven different silos within the firm is daunting. But it’s worth the time and effort to master this skill because producing the right data in the heat of a competition is crucial.”

“Larger companies can fill in the blanks by hiring or contracting for outside help,” Koch said. “Marketing staff in smaller to mid-size firms like ours needs to be more self-reliant and entrepreneurial. Technology is a big part of our responsibility now.”

4. Research

Architecture and planning firm Ayers Saint Gross is known for its Comparing Campuses Poster, an infographic drawn from the firm’s statistical database of more than 170 campus plans collected over the years. Another research initiative, the Campus Kit of Parts, is a free interactive resource on the firm’s web site. It contains thousands of photos showing side-by-side variations of campus design elements, from iconic quadrangles to trash receptacles. Clients can view a series of sourced photos in each category and sign in to provide feedback or rate the aesthetic appeal of each example.

Array Architects is a healthcare design firm with a significant reputation for research and knowledge exchange. Visitors to Array Architects’ Knowledge Community can share their own thoughts and experiences in response to the newsroom-style topics and research published on the site. A recent post by senior interior designer Laura Morris cites a dozen research sources consulted.

To initiate and sustain research programs takes time and strategic marketing skill. Professionals with the experience and talent to advance research for their companies will be essential as the competition to differentiate through research extends in the years ahead.

Chris Parsons notes the advantages for marketers who can build a research reputation for their firms. “After the recession, many

12 Contributors



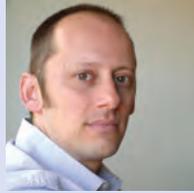
Mary Barry
Manager of Strategic Programs,
CDM Smith,
Cambridge, MA



Francis J. Lippert, FSMPS, CPSM
Founder,
Go! Strategies,
Portland, OR



Ryan Farias
Director of Marketing,
SMMA,
Cambridge, MA



Christopher Parsons
Founder and CEO,
Knowledge Architecture,
San Francisco, CA



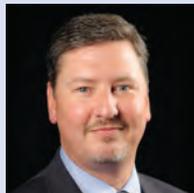
James M. Kent
Chief Marketing and
Communications Officer,
Thornton Tomasetti,
New York, NY



Alfred K. Potter, II, FSMPS
Senior Vice President
and Director of Business
Development, Federal Sector,
Gilbane Building Company,
Providence, RI



Linda M. Koch, FSMPS, CPSM
Director of Marketing and
Business Development,
Pfluger Architects,
San Antonio, TX



John M. Wagner, Jr., CPSM
Chief Marketing Officer,
Alan Plummer Associates, Inc.,
Fort Worth, TX



David Koren, FSMPS, CPSM
Associate Principal and
Director of Marketing,
Perkins Eastman,
New York, NY



Fred White
Principal,
Practice Lab,
Boston, MA

firms find they are defending turf that was formerly safe from competition. New players, differentiated by research programs and a willingness to share knowledge, are taking work and clients away from them.”

He notes, “Clients now demand evidence to back up a firm’s claims and promises. These clients are data-driven and want tangible proof showing how value is being delivered. Within evidence-based sectors such as healthcare, higher education, and retail, it comes down to earning the right to win.”

Yet many small and mid-sized firms see research as either unaffordable or unsustainable. A marketing professional with a background in research methods and strategy can be the ideal partner for technical staff in these firms. Understanding the range of options, and knowing how to document available secondary research, can overcome the resource challenges.

Fred White, principal of Practice Lab and co-founder of Zweig White, sees an opportunity waiting to be seized. “I do think the term *research* probably scares off management in a lot of cases. It sounds like non-billable time for something theoretical. So they can’t really commit to the idea. A lot of times, it is the young people who really get into this, because they are still excited about learning and care about the future.”

5. Content

Clients are just like the rest of us: overloaded by business information, busy every day, and bored by promotional messages. One clear lesson of the age we are in, and we know it based on our own tolerance limit, is that the days of communicating via one-way, all-about-us content are over.

Business content in the digital age needs to provide a reason for being. To survive the delete button, it has to stand out visually, entertain, contribute to problem-solving, and make complex things easy to understand. Like the Array Knowledge Community, it needs to be more about the clients than us.

Standards for client consumption have changed enormously, with marketing teams relying more on mixed media, video, photography, and infographics.

“As our clients require more from their A/E/C professionals and have less time to qualify firms, creating the media and visuals that engage the client is critical to successful selling,” said Mary Barry, manager of strategic programs at CDM Smith. “Clients have less time to read and are living, like we all are, in a sound-bite society.”

In a world where Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn are business search engines, the content challenge is to produce material matched to each specific channel and audience. The emergence of visual content sites—Pinterest, SlideShare, and Flickr—offers companies new ways to showcase creativity and establish brand appeal.

“There is a sea change underway in the way people get information,” said David Koren, associate principal and director of marketing for Perkins Eastman. “We’ve entered the ‘marketing-as-news-desk’ age. It’s a long-term transition we are making, moving towards more specialized marketing talent and a more defined career path based on these specialties.”

What qualities are most important to Koren when hiring new marketing staff? “I look for young marketers who are inquisitive, who are talented at seeing the potential and digging out an interesting story. They might have a journalism degree or experience understanding the different needs of different audiences.”

Telling the company story is a big responsibility. Frequently, successful execution requires abandoning the conventional narrative presented in project sheets, firm web sites, and case studies. To be effective with storytelling in business, marketing writers need to dig deeper, as Koren suggests. Finding that one controversial element, and building a story arc based on conflict and resolution, is a classic technique of the craft.

Marketers can learn these skills through formal classroom training or self-study. Effective storytelling creates interest, cuts through the noise of mediocre communications, and sparks the kind of

response that inspires audiences to repost, retweet, forward, comment, and remember.

Every marketing department is composed differently, with good reason. Each is a unique expression of the priorities, past experiences, and future aspirations of the firm’s leadership.

Today, successful marketing teams are more entrepreneurial, less prescriptive, and increasingly contrarian in thinking. The talents required to harness the technological and behavioral changes in play demand both a generalist perspective and a specialist command of technology, research, digital media, and content creation. ■

About the Author



Contributing Editor Michael J. Reilly, FSMPS, is principal consultant of Reilly Communications (www.reillycommunications.com) and an adjunct professor of public relations at Boston University’s College of Communication. A past president of SMPS, he was the 2010 recipient of the Weld Coxe Marketing Achievement Award. Mike can be reached at 617.464.1717 or mreilly@reillycommunications.com.

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