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Marketing is a Balancing Act - Inside Indiana Business

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As a marketing and advertising agency, it makes sense that our primary contact at most clients is the individual who oversees marketing. But we usually find ourselves navigating around many masters.

When a company draws upon outside accounting expertise, that firm normally works with the controller or the CFO. If legal help is what's needed, the general counsel or CEO is usually the contact. And if the company hires expertise in the technology sector, the internal conduit is nearly always the CTO or an IT director. All those relationships are completely logical.

Yet, the working relationships with firms providing marketing, advertising, and similar services tend to be anything but direct and logical. It seems that every department and every department head wants to have a direct say in the development and implementation of the company's marketing efforts.

One reason is a perception that marketing really isn't a specialized discipline and is something any businessperson is capable of handling. Even savvy executives may be intimidated by accounting, or legal matters, or what really goes on in the company's server rooms, so they readily defer to the recommendations of experts in those fields. How tough is marketing? We just need to get the company name out there and sell what customers want to buy. How complicated is advertising? Put a nice photo, our logo, and some details together, and you have an ad. Anyone can do that, right?

As a result, we often find ourselves sitting in meetings with representatives of half a dozen departments who believe they should have an equal stake in every decision. Because top management shares that view, whoever is ostensibly in charge of the marketing effort may lack the clout needed to drive things in the right direction. Some would suggest that this level of collaboration would result in more well-rounded thinking and comprehensive strategies. In a perfect world, perhaps, but in the real-world environment, it all too often leads to muddled messages and committee-style thinking.

I'm not suggesting any of the participants are villains deliberately trying to sabotage one another. Instead, I think there are two primary factors that lead this approach to derail well-intentioned efforts. The first is a lack of understanding about the nature and the role of marketing, and how it fits into the larger picture. People outside the marketing sphere often share two common misconceptions about what's involved: that marketing is easy and that it's a form of magic.

The second is a lack of recognizing the value of expertise -- at least, expertise outside the individual's own field. You probably wouldn't put a product engineer in charge of the accounting department, nor would you ask your facilities manager to take over the IT team. Why? Because they'd be the proverbial fishes out of water, not knowing enough about those fields to make the right decisions, and potentially creating lasting damage to your company. At the same time, if you suggested to one of your product engineers that a non-engineer could be a capable leader in his department, you'd either get laughed out of his office or spark a revolt.

Unfortunately, internal politics and power dynamics tend to overshadow what's logical and sensible, and marketing professionals often find themselves having to achieve objectives while navigating a chaotic mix of personalities and desires. In addition to marketers, the table may include engineers, salespeople, distributors -- all speaking different languages and bringing varied demands to every project.

While that can be a challenge, it also underscores the value of bringing external marketing professionals to projects. Because a marketing agency is somewhat detached from the internal political struggles, their team is generally able to speak more frankly than internal people would be comfortable doing. Often, I've found myself in the position of negotiating peace treaties between departments, or of getting to the core of conflict between two executives and identifying a solution that addresses both of their concerns.

Our ultimate goal may be to increase a client's sales, boost awareness of their products, set the stage for in-person demonstrations, drive traffic to their website, improve their relationships with existing customers, or any one of dozens of other objectives. Navigating our way among the many masters

may be difficult and frustrating, but in the end, getting everyone around the table on the same page usually makes our work more effective and increases the perception of our value among all the departments.

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