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MARKETING AGILITY: THE MISSING METRIC?

WHY AND HOW MARKETERS SHOULD CONSIDER MEASURING ADAPTABILITY

By Shelly Lucas

In most cases, agility can't be achieved with a minor team tune-up. Usually, it requires nothing short of a transformation.

The buyer's path is uncomfortable terrain for many marketers, simply because it wanders off linear campaign trails. It's tough to keep up with the modern buyer's fickle itinerary, let alone be prepared to act on it. Let's be honest. Most marketing departments simply aren't engineered to cater to customers' spur-of-the-moment, off-road adventures.

But our readiness doesn't matter to buyers. To deliver the [real-time, hyper-personalized, responsive content customers expect](#), marketing organizations have no choice but to become more agile. In most cases, this level of agility can't be achieved with a minor team tune-up. Usually, it requires nothing short of a transformation. Still, CMOs who initiate changes to amplify their nimbleness don't get a break; they're on the hook for delivering results. CEOs will continue to eye [marketing's revenue contributions](#), even as CMOs are venturing into murkier measurement territory as [owners of the all-important customer experience](#).

Naturally, marketing agility is a chief enabler of the customer experience. Why, then, don't CMOs have a metric for agility? The infrastructure and operational changes required to become more adaptable and action-oriented are significant. Surely marketing leaders would want to measure this somehow. The case for charting agility progress becomes more compelling, considering efforts to become more nimble may not immediately positively impact the balance sheet. Actually, dips in marketing performance are fairly common during times of radical change.

For all these reasons, CMOs need a way to chart their progress as they transform into a more modern, nimble marketing organization.

Not Just About Speed

Before we delve into how we might measure agility, it's important to clarify what we intend to measure.



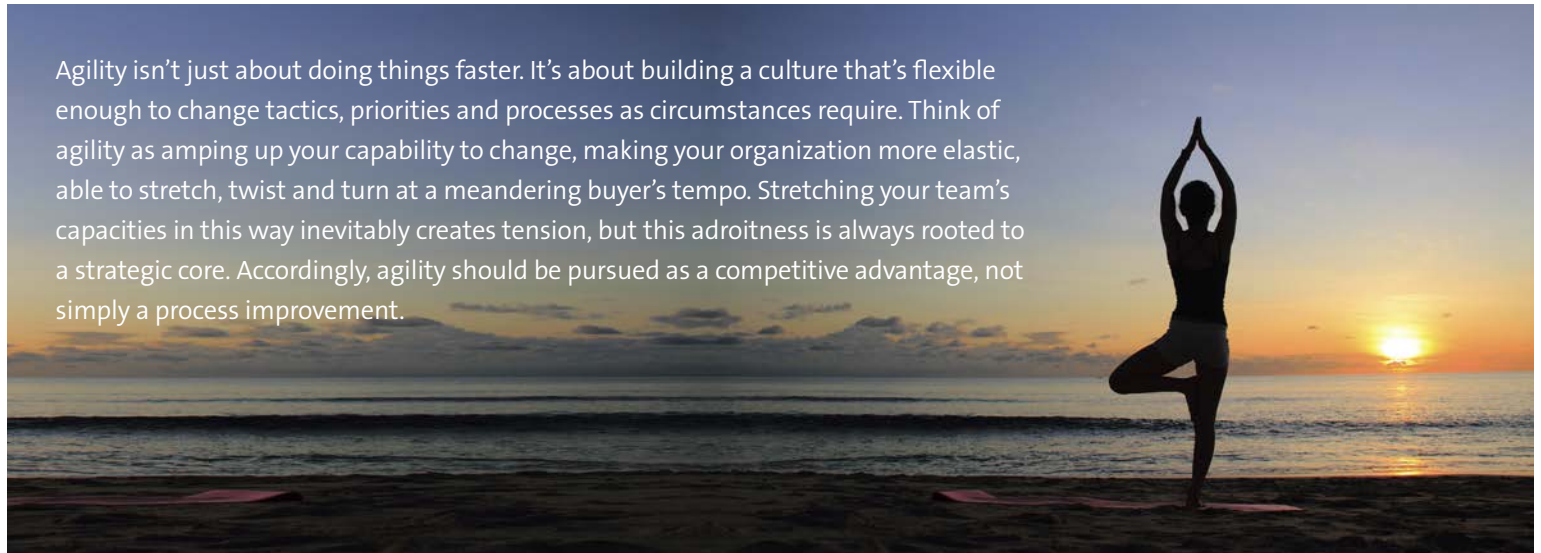
Firms with high scores on agility routines are six times as likely to outperform in their industry.

*“The Agility Factor,”
strategy & business*

AGILITY IS NOT...	AGILITY IS...
Change for the sake of change	Adapting ways of working, but sticking to the strategic core
About speed and process only	About being faster and quicker to market
A set of rigid plans	Rapid iterations and small experiments
An inside-out initiative	Customer-centric; dynamic, sense-and-respond capability
Managed in silos	A culturally different way of handling marketing

Sources: [IPA ADAPT, Marketing Magazine](#); [“The Agility Factor,” strategy & business](#); [“Agility, the Crucible of Modern Marketing,” Direct Marketing News](#)

Agility isn’t just about doing things faster. It’s about building a culture that’s flexible enough to change tactics, priorities and processes as circumstances require. Think of agility as amping up your capability to change, making your organization more elastic, able to stretch, twist and turn at a meandering buyer’s tempo. Stretching your team’s capacities in this way inevitably creates tension, but this adroitness is always rooted to a strategic core. Accordingly, agility should be pursued as a competitive advantage, not simply a process improvement.



Your activities may be humming along, but if your culture is stuck in time warp, your marketing impact may nevertheless be withering.

Signs of Agility Atrophy

How do you know if you need to improve your agility? Your marketing productivity can be optimized to the max, but deep grooves of routine can make your team unready to switch gears. Enterprise marketing organizations have been built on principles of scale and efficiency that no longer serve modern customers. Teams that stick to working rituals established in the heyday of mass marketing will have an arthritic range of motion in today's fast-changing marketplace.

Is your organization a good candidate for an agility audit (or overhaul)? The answer is “yes” if you see any of these seven signs.

1 The needs of internal “clients” take precedence over those of buyers. Are you setting up a booth and snagging a speaking gig at a conference because a business partner asked for it—or because your ideal prospects will be there? Put your customer first. Just because someone in sales asked for a white paper doesn't mean that content type is what your prospect is looking for at that moment.

2 A disproportionate amount of deliverables is produced by agencies, contractors and consultants. Nimble marketers are ready to step outside their comfort zones, roll up their sleeves and do what needs to be done. If your enterprise has relied heavily on outsourcing projects, you risk turning your team into a cluster of project managers. Make sure you have a solid core of doers with a wide array of marketing skills, because your employees already know the business

(no onboarding necessary) and probably can move faster than outside help. That said, becoming too fixed on execution has its dangers as well...

3 Procedures are heavy, incorporating multiple layers, some of which have lost their meanings.

If your team's “doing” is set on autopilot, they're likely to miss opportunistic marketing plays. Even if they spot an ideal moment to answer a question about their company in a Twitter conversation, will they be able to find relevant content to keep the Tweeter engaged? Marketers must have the strategic focus, know-how and autonomy to act in serendipitous moments.

“As the CMO role shifts and expands... marketing leaders must increase their capability to operate within a fluid and dynamic environment, with tolerance for ambiguity and a high level of learning agility.”

*Caren Fleit,
Senior Client Partner,
Korn Ferry*


4 A perfectionist mindset prevents marketing from being responsive and experimental. This one is often an outgrowth of heavy procedures—i.e., “We’re not ready; we haven’t finished steps three and four of our campaign process.” The market won’t stop moving because you haven’t finished your checklist. Sometimes to maximize marketing impact, you have to deliver within a tighter time window. Do you really need a pull-out-all-the-stops campaign launch or can you tell an engaging story in a smaller, iterative, equally cohesive way?

5 Employee talent doesn’t flex and evolve to support the agile culture. Marketers who have made do with a decent Microsoft Office aptitude will need to up their game. In the future, as more of the IT budget moves over to the CMO, marketers will be called upon to lead the selection, activation and management of technology solutions. Not only will marketers need to boost their [technology proficiency](#), but they’ll also be expected to have solid knowledge of how their specialization works with other areas and contributes to the bigger business picture. Increased collaboration is already fueling integrated planning and execution, making cross-functional knowledge a must for marketers. Even copywriters will need to learn about marketing automation and data analytics. As the CMO role shifts and expands, with additional

responsibilities such as customer experience, commercial and strategy, marketing leaders must increase their capability to operate within a fluid and dynamic environment, with tolerance for ambiguity, and a high level of learning agility.

6 Decision by committee is alive and well. Please note: “decision by committee” is much different from collaborating to evaluate courses of action during the decision-making process. I’m not lambasting teamwork here. The “committee” huddle becomes problematic when an informal group gathers to make a decision without distinct and definitive roles and responsibilities—including the identification of a final decision maker. When this ambiguity exists, you can imagine how fast accountability fades and inertia settles in.

7 The focus is on performance today vs. success tomorrow. If your employees keep their eyes glued to a routine task list, they’re not working with an [agile](#) mindset. Checking off to-do’s may be gratifying in the moment, but what good is it if the team doesn’t do something every day to lay a foundation for future competitive advantage?



Changing How We Work

If you want to boost your marketing agility, you must first recognize the value of continuous change. This is a tough one. As the time-worn (but nevertheless true) observation says, nobody likes it, but here's the merciless truth: marketing organizations have to do it, otherwise they'll never be truly customer-centric. The Digital Age moves at lightning speed. Marketers must stay in lockstep with always-on customers. It's adapt or die.

CMOs and their leadership teams must walk and talk the agility gospel daily, encouraging this behavior with performance incentives and strategic investments. Bring in new talent that exhibits the nimbleness and can-do attitude you hope to foster. Challenge your leaders to develop sense-and-respond mentalities among their teams. Are there linear processes that can be broken up into simultaneous work streams? Even something as simple as encouraging your team to handle email differently for a week (via a new tool or process) can nudge thinking in a fresh direction. Urge your employees to focus beyond improving what exists—to reframe initial ideas and solutions and think on their feet. Soon, you'll start to see a productivity chasm between the trailblazers and status quo workers.

While we want to be quick to market and briskly responsive to customers, sometimes it pays to pause. Typically, knee-jerk reactions aren't agile—because they're not strategic. I'm not cautioning against rapid experimentation or spontaneous content creation here, but rather, rapid-fire, reflexive responses to customer complaints on social media channels (and similar situations with PR/social crisis potential). Don't race forward without checking the state of the state. What is the data telling you? Does the conversation raise another question that should be investigated before taking action? Be sure you're clear about the issue or problem from the complainant's perspective.

Is all this information-gathering starting to sound anti-agile? It shouldn't run against the take-action bias of nimble marketing—not if you've assembled a responsive network of internal experts. As we've said before, marketing agility is not just about speed. It's about making informed decisions, maintaining focus, assessing data in a real-time context. Responding to questions and complaints via social media may require considerable investigation, but it can be done dexterously, tapping internal experts who are on the hook to help answer social inquiries.

“The ability to be focused and agile at the same time sometimes doesn’t always work hand in hand. If you know what your brand stands for, you can respond to changing conditions.”

Joan Chow, EVP and CMO, ConAgra Foods

Let’s say a customer sounds off on Twitter, complaining about your company’s “offensive” sponsorship of an opinionated radio show. More Tweeters start to chime in, echoing the original complaint. Before you respond, check the facts. This is critical, because any response you make has the potential of misleading followers and lurkers, which can set off another set of Tweeted outbursts. So gather your information, but do it nimbly, tapping your internal expert network. Did your advertising folks, in fact, buy a sponsorship for that specific show? Or are they running news show spots during show breaks? Perhaps your brand association wasn’t deliberate. Consider whether the placement runs contrary to your brand values. In the meantime, measure the noise level—how socially influential the complainers are, the activity level, shifts in language and sentiment. If the negative activity is reaching a fever pitch before you can make an informed response, feel free to thank your community for the heads up and say you’re investigating the issue and will let your followers know what you find out.

Another reason knee-jerk reactions don’t make the grade: agile marketers value outcomes over outputs. Aim to stay perpetually connected to customers. Note: “staying connected” doesn’t mean flooding customer inboxes with outbound emails. Valuable conversations and idea exchanges are what you’re

shooting for, but they won’t sprout up without being nurtured. Listening and observing customer behavior is the first step to a two-way connection. Don’t miss out on valuable insights because you think you need to be busy “producing” to be opportunistic. As [Ardath Albee says](#), few things sever customer ties faster than irrelevant content production and distribution.





Measuring Agility

Presumably, as marketing organizations become more agile, their performance improves. But this may take time—and improvement may depend on how you define “performance.” In the short term, marketing teams implementing an agility initiative may fall short of meeting traditional marketing metrics. As marketing invests time and effort adapting to [cater to more buyer touch points](#), qualified prospects may become more engaged and soft conversions may increase, but the number of “ready-to-buy” opportunities may not immediately follow suit. (In fact, as marketers gain more insight into buyer stages, they may discover businesses they previously classified as “ready-to-buy” are actually only in one-third of the way through their journey.)

How can you explain temporary fluctuations in marketing results during your organization’s transformation? Chart your team’s progress as it becomes more nimble. Here’s where an agility scorecard comes in handy. Rate how well your team is performing in various dimensions of agility. Forrester Research’s business agility model provides a strong framework to consider as you identify measurement areas that are most meaningful to your organization.

The 10 Dimensions of Business Agility

MARKET	
Channel integration	Information sharing and cross-channel experiences
Market responsiveness	Customer knowledge and rapid access to resources
ORGANIZATION	
Knowledge dissemination	Broader sharing, flatter organizations
Digital psychology	Trend awareness and digital skill sets
Change management	Embracing change and embedded change management
PROCESS	
Business intelligence	Information management and distributed analytics
Infrastructure elasticity	Cloud awareness and embrace of cloud options
Process architecture	Process skills and core system independence
Software innovation	Real-time experience and incremental development
Sourcing and supply chain	Agile sourcing processes and supply chain flexing skills

Source: [“The 10 Dimensions Of Business Agility,” Forrester Research, Inc., September 9, 2013.](#)

Not every marketing organization's scorecard will look the same; the measurement areas will shift, depending on each team's degree of agility and maturity/consistency in its practice. For example, a legacy enterprise marketing organization striving to adopt an "outside-in," customer-centric mindset may build on Forrester's model, adding transformative areas to its scorecard.

MARKET

Adaptability to changing customer needs

ORGANIZATION

Experimental mentality
Flexible roles and fluid responsibilities
Future-forward investment

As a starting point, you can build your ratings system on a simple scale of one to five. To inject objectivity, invite business partners who have worked closely with your organization to evaluate its adaptability. Identify your agility gaps, then create a roadmap for closing them.

Again, it's important to realize that your marketing team members won't become magically agile once they wrap their heads around it. In fact, they may not have the basic marketing skills necessary to flex with an omnichannel market. This is more common than you might think. [DemandGen reports](#) that as many as 82% of marketers don't have any formal training; they learn on the job.

If you want your marketing organization to become more agile, your team will need your vision, orchestration, support and inspiration. But they'll also need you to champion their efforts in the C-suite. This is a lot easier if you measure and report your progress. Otherwise, senior leadership may not acknowledge your agility endeavor as anything more strategic than "faster, bigger and better."





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[Shelly Lucas \(@pisarose\)](#) has 15 years of experience delivering value and results through B2B social networking, public relations, corporate communications, analyst relations and marketing programs for organizations ranging from global Fortune 200 companies to small, not-for-profit businesses. Shelly holds a B.A. in English from [Central College](#) and an M.A. and Ph.D. in Literary Theory from the [University of Nebraska-Lincoln](#).

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