

Marketers must master the whitewater rapids of emerging markets

By [Mark Peters](#), issued by [UCT Graduate School of Business](#)

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Marketing professionals and CMOs of the future will not succeed unless armed with the sort of skills that allow them to respond confidently to rapid and constant changes inherent in emerging markets.

Old-school chief marketing officers (CMOs) were like entertainment directors on a cruise ship. Today, a CMO must have the skills of an adept kayaker, negotiating a series of whitewater rapids that require continuous assessment, readjustment and rapid response if marketing strategy is to succeed in emerging markets.

Paddling, capsized or stuck in an eddy?

The swift growth of emerging markets, with their explosion of product choices and communication channels, is resulting in rising consumer empowerment.

The digital revolution has created customers who can see and say more about the organisations that serve them than ever before. But this revolution has left many CMOs struggling to respond quickly and appropriately to the changed customer relationship.

Today it is impossible to completely control any information, no matter how confidential. The agenda we need to apply to marketing strategy is: we must be better and faster, constantly.

Operating in a permanent whitewater environment, the CMO must be aware of the minutest change in conditions, know when to hold steady in the eddies or paddle forward strongly. And when capsizing, have the skill to execute the most important lesson of all - the Eskimo roll - holding breath and nerve, confident of sound decision-making, and currents that will once again pull the head above water.

Deliver value to empowered customers

A recent study published in McKinsey Quarterly suggests three factors critical to capturing the loyalty of emerging-market consumers: harnessing word-of-mouth effects, emphasising in-store execution, and getting brands onto shoppers' shortlists for initial consideration.

Technology is increasing the depth of customer engagement, but with some important twists that differ from mature-market consumers who tend to have more experience with brands and product categories than their emerging-market counterparts.

Word-of-mouth plays a disproportionate role in the decision journeys of emerging-market consumers. Getting consumers to consider a brand appears to have an outsized impact on purchase decisions. Equally important is that CMOs place special emphasis on what happens when products reach the shelves of retailers. The in-store phase of the consumer decision journey tends to be longer and more important in emerging markets than in developed ones.

Part of the new customer relationship must focus on recognising opportunity to create value for customers and reprioritise investments to analyse digital channels - blogs, tweets, social networks, peer reviews and consumer-generated content - to access consumers' honest, unmediated views, values and expectations. Then make use of advanced analytics to recognise preferences, trends and patterns across every touch point.

Three very important questions to ask: Am I gearing my marketing people, programmes and processes to understand individuals and not just markets? Which tools and processes are being invested to better understand and respond to what individual customers are saying and doing? And, how is customers' data and privacy being safeguarded in a multi-channel, multi-device world?

Foster lasting connections

There is a significant opportunity to capitalise on digital channels to stimulate conversations with existing and potential customers, and create new types of relationships to reveal untapped opportunities. Successful CMOs must engage with customers at every stage of the customer lifecycle, and build online and offline communities to strengthen the brand. Critical to this process is helping an organisation define and activate the traits that make it unique, then working to meld the internal and external faces of the enterprise.

The CMO of the future must synchronise marketing tactics and investments to create and grow a pervasive and innovative total customer relationship. Then take tangible steps to connect customer insights with product and service development, and stimulate customers to become brand or company advocates.

Capture value, measure results

No kayaker would make it far without studying the next stretch of river to be travelled. He must pause in the eddies, know where the rocks are, the distance to the next eddy, and where the rapids and tides are likely to be most treacherous.

CMOs are increasingly having to show a real return on their marketing expenditure. Their knowledge must stretch farther than ever before and what they lack in knowledge they will need to gain by hiring people with the technical, digital and financial skills needed to augment strategic marketing in this new age of rapid change and realtime communication.

Capitalise on new tools to measure what matters. Use advanced analytics and compelling metrics to improve decision-making and to demonstrate your accountability. Enhance business acumen by adjusting your talent mix to increase technical and financial skills, and grow your digital expertise by finding new partners to supplement your in-house resources. And lead by example - expand your horizons by enhancing your personal financial, technical and digital savvy.

Fit for the future

A recent study conducted by IBM, involving some 1700 CMOs across the globe, suggests that the top three capabilities most important to the personal success of CMOs in the next three to five years will be: leadership abilities, listening to customer insights and creative thinking.

You can carry on as before, and continue to feel stretched. Or you can seize the opportunity to transform your marketing function by responding to these new realities: The empowered customer is now in charge of the business relationship. Delivering customer value is paramount, and an organisation's behaviour as much a part of the value equation as the products and services it provides. Lastly, the pressure to be accountable to the business is not just a symptom of hard times; it is a permanent shift that requires new approaches, tools and skills.

In emerging markets all of this takes place against a back drop of uncertainty and complexity (political, social and cultural). In this context we can borrow a lot of good things developed in marketing, but aspects need to be tailored to emerging market contexts.

Now, undoubtedly, is the time for the CMO to climb into that kayak, strap in, and get set for a thrilling, strategic journey along the whitewater rapids of emerging markets.

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McKinsey reference: Building brands in emerging markets, by Yuval Atsmon, Jean-Frederic Kuentz and Jeongmin Seong; September 2012

IBM reference: [From Stretched to Strengthened: Global CMO study](#)

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