

When digital marketing needs data science: Collaboration is key to combatting skills shortage

Tapping into the skills and experience of their digital marketing partners could offer local brands a solution to the growing skills shortage facing marketing departments, especially in critical data science areas. Global digital marketing specialist, Incubeta, looks at how CMOs can still enjoy all the benefits of great data activation right now, while also building valuable internal resources at the same time.



Niamh McLiam, director growth partnerships at Incubeta

Bad planning exacerbates the skills deficit

“Although data activation remains fairly nascent in South Africa, local agencies have been slow to factor in just how important data skills will become in future, especially when it comes to data science and data engineering. At present, the available resources generally only have basic analysis and dashboarding skills which is problematic when it comes to tasks like insights generation and advanced analysis. Because of this, it is extremely difficult to find skilled individuals and often we have to resort to hiring more junior resources and heavily invest in their training to help them reach the global standards required,” explains Rory Little, data solutions lead at Incubeta SA.

Little says the implementation front is not much different with many job applicants having a more general knowledge, and that it remains tough to find the deeply technical and experienced skill sets. What’s more, attractive in-house jobs, both locally and abroad, act as a lure for available skills, exacerbating the problem.

Spreading the skills too thin impacts delivery

Another challenge is that the few skills that are available are being asked to take on more than they can reasonably handle, which puts the industry at further risk.

“When it comes to implementation, the few senior resources that remain in our industry are required to be involved in all projects because junior teams aren’t able to execute independently. This adds a good deal of stress to the senior specialists and can make offers to move to internal client teams look very attractive,” Little comments.

Another big challenge is that local brands don’t always understand the need for data specialists and so remain hesitant to pay for the high-end offering.

“Often clients see these services as a cost centre and not a benefit centre. In order for data services to be fully effective, we also need a shift in the client mindset. Clients will often only look at the initial capital outlay rather than the exceptional return that’s waiting down the line,” Little shares.

Despite these challenges, Little says his team has already designed and rolled out a number of data science solutions which have been implemented across a range of their local clients. These currently focus on budget optimisations, anomaly detection and predictive audiences, all significantly amplifying clients’ existing digital offerings.

The solution is a collaborative approach

While the skills shortage remains critical, one way to address the challenge is to collaborate with a marketing specialist that has already invested in a data team with the senior skills needed to help fast-track future skills development.

“The role of the agency is evolving as more and more brands move to bring expertise in-house. But brands should acknowledge that external partners can support and augment their efforts, rather than being seen as a threat or just another expense. Brands’ partners come with vast experience, particularly within niche areas in which they have been investing for many years. Brands should lean on their partners for training and enablement to enhance their internal skills, out-sourcing where necessary until they have the required internal resources,” advises Niamh NicLiam, director growth partnerships at Incubeta.

While there is nothing stopping brands from relying entirely on partners for their data skills, NicLiam says having a few strong internal resources ensures quality delivery and is worth the investment.

“An inhouse specialist is better able to truly live and understand the brand, and can serve as the conduit through which deep insights can flow. This will only enhance the work done by specialist agencies. Often there might be a disconnect in understanding if specialist teams externally are dealing with generalist teams internally, and vice versa. This disconnect disappears when similar skills are matched and so working with partners to elevate internal skills works for brands and agencies alike,” she shares.

Looking ahead, NicLiam says brands need to be thinking in the long term if they hope to stay ahead of rapidly changing consumer expectations.

“There is now a value exchange between consumers and advertisers, and in return for their loyalty, they expect seamless experiences that are personalised to them – all in a cookieless privacy era. It’s crucial therefore that brands are on top of their data activation strategies. In order to really stay abreast of future technologies, it’s necessary to enable in-house

teams. In our current skills crisis the smartest way to do this is by collaborating with specialist partners,” she says.

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