

WHAT PROBLEM ARE YOU TRYING TO SOLVE, ANYWAY?



DEFINE THE ISSUE, SETTLE ON A STRATEGY, AND SET TARGETS ON HOW TO SPREAD THE MESSAGE

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In any given week, plenty of marketing problems need your attention. You're stretched thin by numerous demands on your energy and focus, and it's tempting to seek an easy solution. But easy solutions rarely turn out as we expect. They run over budget, extend past deadline, or cause added chaos and confusion for your internal and external customers.

Instead, spend more time making sure the marketing problem to be solved will move the needle in ways that are meaningful for your customers or the company. Will it improve outcomes for both? For many of us, fighting off competing demands in order to focus and accurately identify the problem is the biggest challenge. Where to begin? Saying yes to everything is a guaranteed path to burnout, mediocrity, or both. These four steps will help ensure that you select the most strategic marketing problems to work on and will guide you on how to act on them after you identify them.

1/ THE PROBLEM: DEFINE IT CLEARLY

Where did it come from? The best problems to tackle are ones where you find connection to both the company and your customers. These kinds of win-win projects will have the biggest impact. Don't confuse where the problem came from with the importance of the problem. The CEO may ask for your assistance on a project, but if he or she realized that doing so would cost the company significant revenue loss, they'd probably reconsider.

Has this problem been solved by others in our industry or outside of it? You need to determine the realistic possibility of success. Can new or evolving technologies be applied to assist your efforts? Has someone else solved it before? If so, what can you learn from them? If it hasn't ever been solved, why is my outcome likely to be different? Accelerate your learning by observing those who have blazed the trail before you—even if they aren't from the same industry.

What do coworkers say? Unless your title is also CEO, you'll likely need the voluntary help of others around you. Test the waters first during informal conversations with your coworkers. If you share the problem and potential solutions with them, do they light up in agreement or become disinterested? Try talking about it in different ways, if you feel strongly that it has merit. You may simply need to find a more effective way of expressing the problem and opportunity.

This early feedback is critical in deciding whether you have the support of other departments. You can choose to risk going it alone like a pioneer, but as the saying goes: Pioneers often die with arrows in their backs.

What does the time line to success look like? Can you get measurable progress in a reasonable time? Or will it likely get shut down before you gain momentum? The time to your results is a fantastic tiebreaker when everything else seems about equal. It usually feels like more fun to tackle the "really big" problems, but if you aren't delivering both short- and long-term victories presently, you may not have that luxury yet.

2/ STRATEGY: PLAN TO SUCCEED

Even if you can choose the problem for marketing to work on, this is often where it all falls apart. The impulse to take quick action will kick in, along with the adrenaline of starting a new project. But a quick start in the wrong direction will stop you dead in your tracks. Take a deep breath, grab some blank paper, and start thinking hard about your strategy. Consider:

- How can I test assumptions on a small scale before committing all my resources?
- What are the likely roadblocks?
- What are the likely internal objections from others in the company?
- Can I break the process down into smaller steps, or does the process need simplifying?



- How can I show clear progress to others in the organization?
- What is a measurable definition of success?

3/CONTENT: SERVE THE STRATEGY FIRST

Decide how to tell your story. One of the best ways to persuade others is by telling a compelling, emotionally charged story. What content will communicate your story to your target audience? There's no silver bullet that will work in every scenario. Sometimes you need to use professionally shot video, while other times you may only need a blog

post or an email. Do you need to build out a series of messages or will a single piece of content suffice? The answer will be clearer if you've spent enough time thinking through your strategy. Content must serve the overall strategy. To that end, it needs to have a clear story, not simply be created for the sake of being hip and trendy.

4/DISTRIBUTION: FIND THE SWEET SPOT WHERE ATTENTION AND PRICE INTERSECT

When a question is originally presented, how the content is to be distributed is often paired with what the problem is. Think, "How do I get more walk-in traffic to the model from Facebook?" or "What type of newspaper ad do we need to make to sell this inventory home?" How you choose to distribute your message is actually the final step. Your strategy and content type will determine the right distribution methods. As marketers, we're always trying to find the sweet spot that marks our target audience: where attention and price intersect.

Know which channels—social media, pay-per-click advertising (also known as PPC), email, MLS listing, company blog, letter from the president—are most likely to get the attention of your desired audience. Then, ask yourself: What's the price of that audience attention and the action we want them to take? Often you'll need multiple channels to get the results you need. Small adjustments to your content will make the best use of secondary channels. For example, a 2-minute video for the company website will need to be edited down for Instagram, where videos longer than 60 seconds aren't allowed.

As the market continues to gain momentum, it's all too easy to get distracted, accept too many projects at once, or mistake an urgent project for an important one. With this four-step process for selecting and implementing solutions to challenges faced by your company or your prospects, you'll have the maximum impact possible on your company's success. **PB**

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