As marketers, one of the biggest challenges we face is how to devote proper time and resources for the development and testing of new marketing ideas. Sometimes it’s just easier and more convenient to run the same successful campaign year after year instead of starting from scratch to develop something new. The trick I have found to really move the marketing needle is not to accept the status quo. Instead, plan time in your schedule to question, brainstorm and think outside the box.

Finding the right balance between: A) managing and completing everyday tasks, and B) devoting time and energy for creative planning and strategic testing, is a constant challenge many marketers face in this industry. The explosion of digital advertising and social media has created the importance of cross-channel marketing that allows for messages to be seen and heard beyond the traditional channels. Consequently, cross-channel marketing prompts the need to create multiple ads, messages and targeting for each of these new channels.

Due to the fast pace of new technology, ideas and products, marketing must be nimble and move more quickly to provide the best products and services to our members and customers. And, with the constant change in businesses, today’s marketers need to spend less time on autopilot. We must attempt to adapt, redefine old ideas, re-examine priorities, seek new ways to be creative and solve problems in our own lives or the lives of others. “We’ve transitioned into always transitioning,” says author and futurist, John Seely Brown.1

It’s so easy, when you’re busy and trying to check things off your marketing “to do” list, to take the easy road and complete tasks the way it’s been done before. However, to move the marketing needle and adjust to new strategic options, one must intentionally take a step back and ask questions in order to try to always improve. This can pose a challenge for marketing executives, and usually affects many other positions in the banking industry as well.

Innovation expert and author, Warren Berger writes in his book, A More Beautiful Question, “Trying new techniques is imperative to break free from the same thought process.” He goes on to say, “We have to veer off the beaten neutral path. And we do this, in large part, by questioning.” Berger recommends these three important questions to start the process:

- Why...?
- What if...?
- How...?

Once you’ve started asking questions to push the marketing needle, try the following steps to guide you through the process of creating and implementing out of the box thinking in your marketing strategy:

1. **Communicate, share and develop your marketing plan with your team and partners.**

Communication is key but it’s also great accountability. If you surround yourself with others who are willing to try new initiatives and also ask Why-What if-How questions, projects are only bound to be better. Because, let’s face it, my idea is good and your idea is good – but, when we work together, the final project is bound to be great. When marketing departments are limited to one or two people, that collaboration and perspective is a bit harder to achieve. Don’t be afraid to join marketing groups on LinkedIn or to involve trusted vendors in your Why-What if-How questions. Good vendors should be more than happy to assist in your collaboration. They can also help you focus on the bigger picture and provide different perspectives.

2. **Fail fast and fail forward.**

Always work for success but know not every project will succeed. Use data to support and track projects and then push forward with improvements. If something fails, learn from it, apply new strategies and move on quickly. And remember, not all successful people always had successful ventures. For instance, Babe Ruth struck out 1,330 times. Colonel Sanders was fired 12 times and his famous chicken recipe refused at 1,000 restaurants. Heck, even Bill Gates is a Harvard drop out. Perhaps Thomas Edison said it best: “I haven’t failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work.”

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3. Celebrate successes.

Once your team has accomplished a success, celebrate it. Go out for dinner, share a public brag board, mention it at the beginning of a meeting and never forget to say thank you. Praise is a very big motivator, and so is feeling like a person’s contribution is valued and valuable. Just because it is someone’s ‘job’ to do x or y or z doesn’t mean that recognition is not appreciated when they share valuable insights to help marketing efforts succeed.

In the end, taking time to think outside the box is all about finding the optimal balance of completing marketing strategies while keeping an open mind to Why-What if-How questions. Plan and schedule regular sessions to encourage such collaboration with your team, your vendors, or other employees/supervisors. A good rule of thumb for marketing executives is to always move forward on current projects, have less fear to “fail forward,” and to give yourself permission to question the status quo and test alternatives.


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