

Digital marketing is a pandemic hero, but CMOs need support

By  Roan Mackintosh

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Although it was already on a positive trajectory, Covid has catapulted digital marketing to a much more strategic position within local organisations. However, while there have been huge gains from the shift, the growing reliance on the discipline to bolster shaky pandemic sales is placing added pressure on CMOs and their teams.



Source: www.pexels.com

While the importance of digital marketing has been growing continuously over the last few years, there is no doubt that Covid has supercharged the shift in how it is being seen within organisations. Digital used to be an afterthought, seldom mentioned at a steering level and often commanding less than five percent of the overall marketing budget.

What's more, there have been many instances where, realising that their traditional sales channels aren't performing, boards have placed unrealistic expectations on their digital teams.

We have sometimes seen digital teams being asked to deliver 200 percent more on the same budget. This has been one of the unfortunate results of Covid as companies have seen their normal sales channels decimated and are now putting all of their hope into a digital miracle.

A shift in the conversation

According to Incubeta, the shift in digital marketing requires inter-departmental support.

“A CMO’s success is based on organisational buy-in. Throwing budget at digital without the collaborative support of the organisation is setting the CMO and their team up for failure. Increased budget holds very little value if it’s rolled out in isolation,” says Chelsea Owens, business unit director at Incubeta.

Fortunately, the Incubeta team has seen a marked improvement from local companies which are beginning to acknowledge the role digital marketing has played in building sustainability.

The shift in digital marketing has brought the digital teams and leaders closer to the centre of the business. As you shift your strategy to move closer towards customer centricity it makes sense that the digital marketing teams move closer to the centre of your business. We are finally seeing meaningful change, where CMOs are taking their seat at the boardroom table.



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Those who get it right prosper

Checkers’ digital offering, Sixty60, Cape Union Mart and Hyundai, are examples of how local organisations have successfully fast-tracked their digital marketing initiatives, but also ensured organisational changes to support the shift.

We have seen massive changes in how leaders approach digital marketing. We are seeing interdepartmental meetings which never happened before. Merchandising is sitting down with the marketing team and for the first time asking how they can support the digital efforts.

A lack of synergy between departments also has a big impact on digital agencies and how effectively they can help marketing teams deliver.

We can ensure that people explore and engage with the product offering online, but if a customer lands on the add-to-cart webpage and the company doesn’t have the product in their size or in the colour variant that they want, you won’t just lose a sale, you’ll damage the brand experience.

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A privacy-first future demands a new way of operating

Another change has been the extension of the marketing team’s remit.

Marketing leaders must now also focus on conversion rate optimisation. It’s no longer just about getting people to the website, it’s about having content that resonates with the customers. The websites are so important that in some instances we are advising clients to throw out old ones and start from scratch.

Looking at the interaction between paid and organic search is also on the agenda for a privacy-first future. Mackintosh says CMOs must focus more on their content strategy to ensure better organic ranking, which can then be leveraged for paid search. He recommends fresh content, like blogs, to help keep the relevance high and boost the paid efforts, but again he warns that effective SEO will require a closer working relationship with the IT department.

Owens explains that better communication with clients’ IT departments also means her team is exposed to more backend

conversation data and warehouse data. She says this is vital in the looming cookieless environment where digital teams will depend more on first party audiences and measurement frameworks.

Good news for local CMOs

For local CMOs, the good news is that the opportunity in South Africa is significantly higher.

With the right investments made in the right places local companies can reach whole new markets that they may not have before – this is especially the case when one looks at the mobile penetration and the increasing sophistication of the South African consumer, relevant to international markets. The growing boldness of the digital brand managers is showing results. A fail fast mentality is allowing brands to try new things, quickly and aggressively and if they don't work, then they move on to the next opportunity.

Owens points out that partnership is key.

“Breaking down the silos within the organisation and accessing support is a critical requirement for CMOs. But so is having an agile and trusted digital marketing partner who is given the autonomy to shift budgets so they can take advantage of trends,” she says.

ABOUT ROAN MACKINTOSH

Managing Director - Africa at Incubeta. Roan joined Incubeta in May 2019 after spending 11 years at WPP's global digital marketing technology and consultancy arm, Acceleration, where he was group business director. Roan's extensive experience as well as his insatiable curiosity have helped hone his skills in digital strategy and mobile advertising, making him a valuable industry commentator.

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