PROPOLIS LEADERS FORUM
FROM B2B MARKETING

The Propolis Leaders Forum

2023 Report

The year of the great marketing team ‘reset’?

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Introduction

In case you've been living under an AI-generated rock, the past three years have seen:

- The great AI awakening, with the entire planet talking about the opportunity this technology can provide.
- A revolution in working behavior, as office workers the world over switch their WeWork office spaces for the comfort of their kitchen tables.
- A challenging economy, which, much like my 2011 Ford Fiesta, never quite breaks down (touch wood), but also struggles to get out of third gear.

At the same time, pretty much every single marketer I've spoken to on The B2B Marketing Podcast for the past two years has talked about the high workloads and the sheer volume of 'stuff' that needs doing. Could that be down to B2B marketers being expected to wear an increasing number of hats, or is it down to a struggling market forcing marketers to work harder and harder for their businesses? Well, it depends on whom you ask, but one thing that the Leaders Forum has revealed is the possible need for a 'reset'.

What do we mean by a reset? Well, with the added pressure on marketing teams, the emergence of AI, and the changes in working behavior, a common theme that emerged was that marketing teams aren't always set up for success in this day and age. Whilst there are still plenty of great people in this wonderful profession, there's also a sense that teams aren't always as high-performing as they could be. And that's important not just for the health of the business, but for the health of those working at said business. After all, who wants to be miserable with an endless supply of tactical jobs filling their inboxes?

With that in mind, we focused our latest Leaders Forum on one core theme: the future of the marketing team. On 6 September at the iconic Merchant Taylors' Hall in London, we brought together a series of panelists and speakers from across the world of B2B to share their insights. What are the main challenges and opportunities they see? How do they actually intend to integrate AI into their businesses? What is their role as the leader in all of this?

Following each session, we held roundtables, allowing our delegates – CMOs, Marketing Directors, and the very crème de la crème of marketing leaders across professional services, SaaS, manufacturing, and more – to share their own thoughts on the matter and learn from their peers. Throughout the day, we also collected data from our delegates, allowing us to paint a picture of what marketing leaders think right now in 2023. This report reveals all.

The plight of the modern marketing team

In our opening session, Joel Harrison, Editor-in-Chief and Co-Founder of B2B Marketing and Propolis, hosted a panel with: Scott Stockwell, Senior Brand and Content Strategist, IBM; Dr. Christine Bailey, Senior Director & Head of KYC Marketing, Europe & Africa, Moody's Analytics; Garry Hurry, SVP, Marketing, Circana; and Andy Johnson, Founder and Director of Client Strategy, HUT 3. The purpose of this session was to understand the external and internal factors affecting marketing teams in 2023, and how they're impacting the performance of their teams.

Embrace the chaos, or be swallowed by it

According to one panellist, the sheer pressure to hit the numbers is leading to a return of the dreaded 'blame game'. As marketing champions, we'd have hoped that we'd be beyond this by now, with businesses understanding the value that marketers provide.

However, it seems that when the numbers aren't being hit – even though they may not be being hit because of the market – marketers are now receiving their share of the blame. In this sense, we may be temporarily seeing some of the old protectionism creep back into businesses. However, when the market rebounds fully, the hope is that this fades away once again.

Teams want to work in a way that works for them

As we know, the pre-pandemic world saw most office workers in the building five days a week. When Covid-19 reared its ugly head, however, we obviously saw a shift towards a hybrid or fully-remote approach to office work. This trend has been well documented, but, for Dr. Christine Bailey, the more interesting takeaway is that team members now want to work in ways that work for them. By this, we don't just mean 'working from home', but the style of working itself. Do they prefer to check-in every day, or just once a week? Do they prefer to work in sprints, or manage multiple projects on an ongoing basis?

With that in mind, Christine claimed that, since the pandemic, she's become much more aware of the different ways in which team members like to work.

After all, we all know the importance of personalising our approaches to different accounts and sectors, so why wouldn't we take the same approach with our team members? This is only compounded by the fact that we're in a tough market for talent right now, with the attraction and retention of good people regularly cropping up as a major challenge for client-side and agency-side leaders alike.

With this in mind, the sense from this session was that leaders should make a concerted effort to understand how their staff like to deliver, and then set them up with the tools they need to do so. In other words, take a look back on what's worked pre, during and post-pandemic, and establish what a high-performing team would truly look like today, if we were to build it from scratch.

General positivity around AI

Later in the day, we had a full session and roundtable on AI, but we asked our initial panellists what they thought about it all, and how it's affecting their teams. The long and short of it was that there was an initial fear amongst some team members around AI, but that now the mood is generally positive.

Indeed, when we put a 'hands in the air' poll in the room, two thirds of the room said they were 'positive' with the remaining third 'cautious.' The level to which our panellists were actually using or experimenting with AI differed, but there was a degree of realism. In other words, marketing leaders aren't quite expecting to deliver entirely AI-integrated marketing campaigns overnight, but they are certainly moving towards that direction.

What's impacting marketing leaders right now?

Following this first session, we wanted to hear from our delegates. After all, our panellists, no matter how good, cannot speak for every marketer! With that in mind, we split the delegates into roundtables, and asked them to partake in a workshop-style exercise, led by our Propolis Experts and Ambassadors.

In this first roundtable, we wanted each table to identify the issue that they felt was impacting them the most right now, and then to discuss what they felt the solutions or opportunities were. In addition to this, we wanted to understand how empowered marketing leaders actually feel to make the changes necessary to overcome these challenges or capitalise on these opportunities.

We did this by providing attendees postcards with the following topics:

- AI
- Results (short, mid and long-term)
- Talent (recruitment, retention and wellbeing)
- Structure, roles and responsibilities
- Budget availability
- Capability, training and mentoring
- Measurement
- Working model (office, remote or hybrid)

Delegates were also able to add topics that they felt were worthy of discussion.

With these postcards in front of them, each delegate was provided with three sticky dots assigned to 'scale of impact' and three sticky dots assigned to 'ability to respond'. They could then either put one, two, or three dots on, say, AI, depending on how important they felt its scale of impact was. They could then do the same for the 'ability to respond'. Designed by 'design thinking' expert, Scott Stockwell, this system provides delegates with a visual matrix to view the topics based on the scale of their impact on business and the marketing leaders' ability to respond.

The result of this working group was as follows:



Of course, these topics were just our 'starter for 10', with other working groups putting forward 'Minimising internal nonsense ', 'stakeholder management', 'customer experience', 'data' and 'marriage of sales and marketing' forwards as other key factors.

Marketing teams not set up to respond to external and internal impacts

Well, perhaps unsurprisingly, this tells us that marketing leaders see that AI is going to have a game-changing scale of impact. However, at the same time, they felt 50% less empowered to do anything meaningful with it. That doesn't mean that marketers aren't doing anything with AI (as we'll see later), but it does suggest that they need support in order to truly capitalise on its potential.

AI aside, there are a number of other topics flagged where marketers feel the scale of impact is significant, but their ability to respond doesn't match up.

What do I mean by this? Look at the table, and you'll see that only the bottom two topics ('measurement' and 'working model (office, virtual or hybrid)') have a higher 'ability to respond' score than the 'scale of impact' score. And, crucially, these are the two topics ranked lowest in the table in terms of scale of impact!

This tells us that there are a number of internal and external factors that are making a significant impact on marketing success right now, but marketing leaders do not feel they are perfectly equipped to respond to them.

Some of these factors may be out of marketing leaders' control, but this supports the 'reset' hypothesis flagged at the beginning of this report. After all, if marketing leaders don't feel they (and their teams) can respond to these challenges, surely some form of reset is required to ensure they have the tools they need to succeed?

Regardless, what are marketing leaders doing about these challenges right now?

For stage two of the roundtable, we asked each table to focus on the topic that they had identified as the 'most urgent' and which they felt had the most ability to impact. Once this topic had been identified, we asked them to share the strategies and tactics they have employed, and what they would recommend and what they wouldn't. Specifically, delegates were asked to share things that they:

- Tried, but would not continue.
- Tried, and would expand.
- Would avoid repeating.
- Want to try.

Here, our delegates undertook an honest discussion around what they would recommend to their peers, and what they would absolutely avoid. We did collect data on these responses, but in isolation, these responses don't give the full picture. For that reason, we have decided to leave the exact responses out of this report. However, this exercise certainly fostered a mood of open and honest collaboration – truly in the spirit of the Leaders Forum.

How is AI impacting B2B marketing teams?

In our second panel of the day, we wanted to take a deep dive into the big one: AI. Specifically, we wanted to discuss how AI is changing B2B marketing teams. In order to provide some food for thought, this panel was hosted by Joel Harrison, and included: Kate Sinclair, Partner, BD & Marketing, and Head of Corporate Responsibility, LCP; John Watton, VP Marketing EMEA, VMWare; and Karla Wentworth, Propolis Expert for Marketing Operations & Technology.

For Karla, AI signifies a transformational shift in marketing, and it's one we should embrace. After all, we've been talking about the need to have 'thinking space' for years, and AI could be the solution to this. Having the AI handle those tough, manual, pain-staking jobs, while marketers do what we do best – be creative. John Watton agreed, claiming that AI isn't about replacing us; it's about providing us with the space to do more 'added value work'. Indeed, 'speed' was flagged as a major impact from AI. Having AI handle the sheer volume of manual tasks means marketers can move faster in other areas of their role, and bring products and services to market faster.

Of course, AI is not a new phenomenon, but ChatGPT served as the great awakening, and not just for marketers, but for people the world over. Now that we're aware of just how powerful this tool can be, it would be foolish not to embrace it. Even by looking at it through the least ambitious lens possible, your competitors will be using it, so can you afford to not look at it?

Ethical question remains around AI

Perhaps the most interesting point of discussion was raised by one of our delegates, who flagged the issues around the ethics of AI. In other words, who might it negatively impact? Is it right to put out messages to clients that you haven't crafted yourself? Is it just copying other people's work? All these and more will be the big questions people have to wrestle with over the coming years, and the answers will not be straightforward.

Whilst bills are being discussed in ivory towers the world over, 2023 is undoubtedly a sort of AI Wild West. Whilst some will see this as a huge opportunity, undoubtedly there will be others that look to exploit it.

For Karla, it's down to businesses and marketers to bear responsibility around the ethical dilemmas. We cannot wait for bills to be passed, but should take the matter into our own hands. Indeed, from a sheer PR point of view, it's not exactly going to be a great look if it all comes out that your marketing department has been using AI in a perceivably negative way.

Marketing leaders cast their vote on generative AI's greatest opportunity

For this second roundtable, we sought to learn more about the different things our delegates are doing when it comes to AI. After all, we're still in a period of experimentation and discovery at the moment, so we wanted to understand what marketing leaders are actually doing about it. In order to do this, we provided each participant with a table that looked like this:

Gen AI capability	Actions and outcomes, OR opportunity and expectations	(L)ive (P)lan	Business opportunity (1 low, 5 high)
Generate text, images, videos, code			
Discover trends and insights			
Summarise information			
Automate processes			
Interact with users			

Delegates would then list their live and/or planned use cases of generative AI, and then score them from 1 to 5, based on how big of a business opportunity each presents.

Given the nature of this exercise, we collected a list of hundreds of ideas (both those that are live and in action, and those that are simply planned). With that in mind, the table on the next page demonstrates where marketing leaders are at in reality when it comes to AI. Note: the number of initiatives does not mean these are all different initiatives; it is simply the number of initiatives that were flagged by all combined delegates.

Gen AI capability	Number of 'Live' initiatives	Number of 'Planned' initiatives	Average business opportunity (1 low, 5 high)
Generate text, images, videos and code	36	23	3.4
Summarise information	25	13	3.6
Discover trends and insights	23	21	4.2
Automate processes	23	19	4
Interact with users	15	26	3.9

So, when it comes to using generative AI, we often immediately think of generating content in one form or another. After all, this is usually the story that grabs the headlines and, indeed, this table shows that this is where the most work is being done.

However, our delegates also thought this was the area in which generative AI offers the lowest business opportunity (3.4 out of 5)!

Using generative AI to discover insights and trends, meanwhile, was flagged as having the highest business opportunity, but ranks third in terms of the amount of initiatives that are both live and planned.

So, clearly, herein lies an enormous opportunity (for both client-side marketers and martech vendors alike).

Final thoughts

We concluded the 2023 Leaders Forum with a session on the role of the leader, followed by a session by Olympic gold medallist and former captain of GB & England hockey teams, Alex Danson-Bennett. After all, we can talk about external and internal pressures, new possibilities, and technologies all day, but it's down to B2B marketing leaders to make sense of these and build the next generation of high-performing teams.

One thing that's certain is that 2023 has been a 'nuts' year, but one rife with opportunity. So, the question is, who will take these opportunities and lead their organizations to success?

This upcoming quarter, we'll be focusing our content in Propolis – the global community for B2B marketers – on the topic of creating high-performing teams. So, look out for more Expert-led content to help you reset your teams.

If you are interesting in joining the conversation in person next year, explore the Propolis page and download the membership brochure to learn more.

