

CMO 2025: The future of marketing leadership

Rapid and unpredictable waves of societal change combined with potent advances in technology and analytics have resulted in a growing scrutiny and re-evaluation of the CMO's role. The role is already unrecognizable from what it was 10 years ago. Five years from now, it will look very different still.

Observers have noted that a range of new technical skills will be required and that the CMO will play an even more critical role in revenue generation. McKinsey¹ summarises marketing today as “the ability to harness the full capabilities of the business to provide the best experience for the customer and thereby drive growth.” Its modern marketing model requires an updated set of capabilities and enablers. Bain² describes three archetypes for CMOs — the creative iconoclast, the professional general manager and the digital wizard — noting that these competing archetypes “inform — and too often cloud — the process of selecting the best person for a specific company.”

In a series of wide-ranging conversations, Spencer Stuart sought the views of marketing leaders about what the profile of the CMO will encompass in 2025. These discussions addressed the intensely complex nature of the role. Yet we were struck by the emergence of a constant theme among our group: that the foundation of success for a CMO in 2025 will rest on the kind of characteristics that we already observe in the most successful leaders in other business contexts.

These characteristics cannot be forced and depend on an inherently low-ego, inclusive leadership style; one that sets an important cultural tone as well as demonstrating the value of educating, mentoring and inspiring. Such leadership reflects an evolved suite of qualities — such as the ability to persuade, motivate, connect and inspire at functional and board level — which will be essential for the CMO of 2025 to meet the growth challenge which is becoming a core remit of the marketing function. Our summary of the 10 key characteristics of the CMO 2025 appears at the end of this article.

¹ *Modern marketing: What it is, what it isn't, and how to do it*, McKinsey & Company, March 2020

² *How CEOs Can Solve the CMO Dilemma*, Bain & Company, October 2019

First motivate, then trust your team

The CMOs of 2025 will be what Mars Inc's Lead CMO Jane Wakely calls "architects of growth for their companies"; indeed, she argues, the core purpose of the CMO "is not to advertise or to market — it's to grow the business and the category sustainably". And, as all our discussion partners note, effective leadership along that path will be about working through others.

When Lubomira Rochet joined L'Oréal, a leading cosmetic company, as chief digital officer, she was tasked with rebuilding the organisation's entire marketing operation into a generation of digital first-marketers. It was her soft skills that saw her through a complex and immense undertaking, she believes. Rochet describes herself as a servant leader, and instinctively favours a humble approach.

"What I learned first is that you need to avoid the us-versus-them syndrome," says Rochet. "You're coming with a mandate for transformation, and that's violent in the sense that it challenges a lot of habits and ways of doing things. So, you don't bring arrogance, none of this 'I'm the future, you're the past.'

A marketing leader has to educate, motivate and trust their team.

"You respect the amazing job people did before you. You position yourself as 'I'm here to support you, to help you.' That's critical." Rochet notes that this approach is common among outstanding leaders, who look not to control but to empower: "It's about erasing barriers or blocks to people being able to do their job."

"More than ever I believe in having the mindset of a servant leader," agrees Facebook Global Client Partner Talitha Rutten. "You're there to set the vision and be very clear what the vision is, and what the team's role is in achieving it. How they go about achieving the vision is up to them to define. I'm in service of them and there to support. They own what they do. A marketing leader has to educate, motivate and trust their team."

Millennials have already challenged traditional leadership approaches, says Thulani Sibeko, CMO at South Africa's Standard Bank Group, and their expectations, and those of subsequent generations, will become the norm: "Command and control is an absolute disaster with millennials, so my style is participative and consultative."

Many of our discussion partners noted that the momentum of ownership and responsibility falters badly if it does not come with freedom to fail (see *Five lessons for failing well, failing safely* at the end of this article).

"Accepting failure has to be part of the culture; it has to be seen as part of the success," says Margaret Verstedden, chief commercial officer at Dutch online retailer Bol.com. "If you get fired or demoted or even just reprimanded if you fail, the next person won't be quite as willing to try."

Remove the noise

The volume and complexity of the CMO 2025 task will be intimidating, and marketing leaders will have additional tools whose capabilities are yet to be identified — and which as individuals they cannot hope to master fully. As so many of our group of CMOs and COOs emphasise, you can't do everything: "You need to understand the different elements, but you can't master them," says Nina Bibby, CMO at telecoms service provider O2. "That's why people and talent are so crucial."

What you do have to do, argues Jane Wakely at Mars, is "simplify what matters. You have to be clear what will make a difference to your business performance and remove the noise as much as you can." More than ever, she agrees, a CMO's role will be about "building the right talent, which you enable to have real technical depth, and which you orchestrate across an ecosystem."

These CMOs of the future will drive digital and analytics strategies that will be just as disruptive as those that arose two decades earlier. In the face of such ramped-up complexity, leaders must have the agility and character to bring "moments of calm in the storm" to an organisation's culture, adds Charl Bassil, VP Global Marketing at Absolut Vodka.

"Great CMOs stay focused on how their marketing organisation is contributing to overall business goals, and they help to communicate that value to the rest of the company," says Cammie Dunaway, CMO of Duolingo, a language-learning platform. Marketers must have the intellectual heft to impose clarity, to simplify what is measured in terms of how it supports the business strategy, says Wakely. Otherwise, huge sums and many hours of work can drain away.

"Do not get lost in analysis," she warns. "Invest in raising an organisation's deep understanding of the true drivers of growth as well as their 'digital IQ'."

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Finding a narrative that unifies

The demand for nuanced change leadership skills will grow as expectations of the 2025 marketer broaden. But even the most insightful of marketers will fail if they cannot sign up their entire organisation to a common cause.

“You can be amazingly visionary, but if nobody ‘gets’ you, feels motivated, wants to work for you — then you’re just one person,” says Rutten at Facebook. Mark Singleton, CMO of Photobox, an online photo printing company, agrees: “You need to spend the time building the people organisation, building those relationships. If you haven’t got those, you’re a one-man band.”

Nina Bibby at O2 says her 2025 counterparts will only expand their role as influencers and collaborators. “We should be active integrators across the organisation to deliver a great experience to customers. With the proliferation of channels and ways to engage and as customer experience changes beyond recognition, we have to be the ones who construct the overarching narrative that makes all the parts work together so we can arrive at the destination.”

Defining that overarching narrative will be a driving force behind maintaining performance during periods of intense change, believes Standard Bank’s Sibeko. “It’s fundamental. Marketing must touch the entire organisation — collaborating with areas that have a different outlook is what creates success. The CMO has to be able to collaborate with finance just as they collaborate with HR.”

The CMO 2025 will strengthen their organisation’s culture by ensuring it is cut through with an understanding that it is collective work that matters, not the sum of individual work, says Charl Bassil at Absolut. “The team will be made up of amazing individuals and some not so amazing, but they all lock into each other. It’s like the Springbok rugby team — #strongertogether.”

Finally, says Sibeko, the CMOs of 2025 should retain sight of the human element of their role, no matter the complexity. “Digital is the enabler, but the role is about connecting with humans and emotions. People who forget that are making a major mistake.”

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Talk the language of the boardroom

“There was a time when marketing expertise could be plugged into a few discrete categories,” says David Messinger, CMO of Activision Blizzard, an interactive gaming and entertainment company. “But now, my colleagues and our leadership expect me to be an expert not just about marketing but about the business as a whole. It’s like majoring in 12 subjects simultaneously.”

The CMO 2025 will meet this challenge by forging partnerships and building cross-functional alliances, which takes subtle and persuasive communication skills. “As much as the CMO is responsible for getting people through the door, they need to have a seat at the table across every function,” says Photobox’s Singleton.

That means speaking in a language the C-suite understands, advises O2’s Nina Bibby — marketers at all levels must “abandon marketing lingo in favour of business lingo. It’s only when I got to the top table, when I joined the ExCo at Barclaycard, that I realised how useless marketing lingo is around the board table.

“It creates barriers and we need to be building bridges. The best marketing functions are fully integrated across the business, but we can’t be if we are speaking our own language.”

The strategic, visionary CMO is innately curious and inspires curiosity in others.

Be curious; keep learning

There was clear consensus among those with whom we talked that the marketers who count in 2025 will be people who are curious and flexible, with career-long appetites for learning and a determination to stitch that into the cultural fabric of their business.

For the CMO of 2025, change will be both an ongoing learning process and the new normal, not something to get through and then settle back down. “It’s an ability to internalise change as a norm,” says Absolut’s Bassil. “Maybe it’s emotional resilience, or maybe it’s curiosity — perhaps both.”

Curiosity is one of the qualities that Activision Blizzard’s Messinger says he admires most in people. “The strategic, visionary CMO is innately curious and inspires curiosity in others. I think that’s the only prototype that succeeds over the long term.”

Learning can come from many quarters, adds L’Oréal’s Lubomira Rochet; it’s a question of being open to it. “I try to be as close as possible to the start-up ecosystem,” she says. “I mentor many of them and I’m super-involved in incubators or accelerators. It’s a way for me to stay alert not only to new technologies, but to new business models.”

Bol.com’s Versteden envisions that by 2025 the CMO will demand novel and open ways of thinking about change management and leadership — and her conclusion reflects a flexible, explorer mindset. “I think there will be many more collaborations between different companies in order to survive and be competitive” she says. “Companies will need to think in a world of collaboration, not competition.”

Diversity becomes not only a talent and retention issue, but a business imperative.

Diversity above all

Employers already have to work ever harder to position themselves as employers of choice, and that pressure will only increase as younger generations of people who are highly vocal about purpose over reward become the majority in organisations.

“Value for employees today is a better life,” says Philip Morris International’s chief consumer officer Stefano Volpetti. “More money and a better life are not the same thing.” The prospect of working as part of a team that is not open and inclusive does not figure in their notion of a better life.

The CMO of 2025, like their C-suite partners, will build on today’s understanding that diversity and inclusivity — of all kinds — is no mere compliance issue. As evidence mounts that shows how diversity boosts innovation and creativity, diversity becomes not only a talent and retention issue, but a business imperative. “When you have a diverse team — backgrounds, gender, ethnicity, it doesn’t really matter — the better the results you will get,” says Photobox’s Singleton.

Talitha Rutten of Facebook offers another reason why having a diverse team is essential. “Teams should include people with very different strengths, passions and diverse views. I believe that one of the reasons that diverse teams perform better is that they allow individuals to play to their strengths and work on things that they are passionate about.”

True diversity will allow the CMOs of the future to place humanity at the centre of the workplace and thereby create a trustworthy brand. After all, concludes Charl Bassil at Absolut, “it is that humanity that needs to be able to connect with the humanity outside.”

10 key characteristics of the CMO 2025

1. Collaborative outlook

The CMO with a low-ego and inclusive approach to uniting teams and organisations is a CMO with advanced change leadership skills. The fundamentals of marketing are expanding so fast, and so far, that successful CMOs are those who manage change by fostering a collective sense of enterprise and collaboration, underpinned by trust. Carried across the organisation, collaboration is a powerful motivator; when it is weak or falls prey to competing internal interests the CMO risks achieving little beyond adding to the tumult. The CMO will have an appetite for embedding cross-functional collaboration into their organisation's cultural fabric — instead of just doing what they've always done.

2. A true communicator and influencer

The ability to find, and to communicate, clarity in complexity is a CMO essential. Confident and unambiguous communication across formats, brands, and stakeholders dispels uncertainty at board, department and team level. Setting clear goals allows everyone to understand what the “mission” is. Getting what is needed to deliver those goals depends on the CMO having the innate negotiating diplomacy of the natural influencer — and, crucially, being an able navigator of ecosystems across the entire organisation.

3. A master storyteller

The CMO articulates vision and strategy by ensuring there are no errors in translation. Establishing an organisation-wide narrative shows — implicitly and in practice — how all moving parts slot together to function as one. There will be periods of noise, intense change and rapid innovation across ever-proliferating channels, yet the best-in-class CMO does not lose sight of the imperative to drive performance. It will be down to him or her to paint the narrative that propels that. Additionally, the CMO who talks the language of the board — dumping the language of marketing at the door — is far better placed to advocate, be it for strategy change or bigger marketing investment.

4. Tenacious driver of growth

CMOs should be able to talk fluently at board level about how a particular strategy will affect financial outcomes. Their fluency helps them to secure buy-in at board level to need to build long term, in the face of demands for short-term returns. They understand that growth has to be real and sustainable; the strategies they drive will be humanised and the metrics more holistic. The CMO who is committed to creating a brand and a business with a purpose that makes people's lives better is inextricably committed to real growth.

5. Sees the big picture in technology and data

A valuable CMO does not need to know how to measure something, but does know what to measure. He or she does not need to be a data scientist, but understands how to cut through the noise to parse what is best placed to serve growth. The CMO constantly scans the technology horizon seeking that low-flying potential gamechanger.

6. A test-and-learn mindset

The rapid evolution of platforms causes fragmentation and an increasingly complex consumer journey. However, an agile CMO will test and learn and scale new ways of marketing to understand how the proliferation of marketing channels work, who's using them and, again, where they can serve growth.

7. Curious and always learning

An inquisitive and openminded approach, seeing oneself as on a path of continuous learning, reveals a CMO who is both humble and of an explorer mindset. A spirit of intellectual adventure means they are not afraid to engage with cutting-edge thinking. And because they are open-facing, eager to learn from best practice by connecting non-competitively with peers outside their own organisations, they have built relationships that deepen the well of knowledge, creativity and innovation from which they can draw.

8. Educates, mentors, inspires

The modern CMO of 2025 understands the pure value of lifelong learning. It is not a one-way street: it empowers, it boosts collaboration, it inspires others to be intellectually curious. It also helps to future-proof the business, underlining why people and talent are so crucial. An inspirational educator is an instinctual team-builder and talent-manager.

9. Builder of diversity and inclusivity

One of the measures of a top-flight CMO is an insistence on building teams that are diverse across all dimensions. Genuine diversity brings new types of people spurring new ways of thinking. It stokes creativity and collaboration, and is viewed as a business imperative.

10. Authenticity

This is what consumers want to see from brands, so the authenticity of a CMO, his or her real human traits, will be vital. Their values and integrity will govern how the marketing function humanises a brand, triggers the emotional response that allows a brand to connect with its customers. Facing a tsunami of change and complexity, it is the CMO who must synthesise that into something that keeps at its heart the consumer as a human being.

Five lessons on failing well, failing safely

A CMO helps to build a vibrant and exciting culture. But unless that comes with an implicit leadership-mandated licence to fail safely, tangible advances will be few or temporary. Dealing with failure is part of success, and nuanced CMO leadership both embeds that and makes it safe to do so.

1 No shaming. Why would anyone think adventurously if the ethos is one of naming and shaming?

“If you get fired or demoted or even just reprimanded if you fail, the next person won’t be quite as willing to try.”

MARGARET VERSTEDEN, BOL.COM

2 Failing is exploring. Too many companies still have a mindset of avoiding failure, rather than doing something amazing.

“You can’t have an explorer mindset and a test and learn culture if people don’t feel safe to take risks and fail. Building great things means taking risks. We have a saying: ‘The riskiest thing is to take no risks.’ In a world that’s changing quickly, you’re guaranteed to fail if you don’t take any risks.”

TALITHA RUTTEN, FACEBOOK

3 More inspiration, less directing. A team that is helped to be confident makes better decisions, faster because they are not paralysed by a fear of being wrong.

“The job of a CMO is to tap into skills and get into more discretionary effort. It’s about inspiring beyond just giving direction.”

THULANI SIBEKO, STANDARD BANK

4 Be candid. People who can articulate failure are likely to have a capacity for collaboration and solution-finding.

“Being able to talk about failing tells me that someone has a muscle for change, for resilience — that’s something you can’t fake.”

LUBOMIRA ROCHET, L’ORÉAL

5 Lead from the front. Giving colleagues full visibility and treating them with honesty strengthens a culture of safety.

“Never expect anyone to do something that you wouldn’t be happy to do yourself.”

MARK SINGLETON, PHOTOBOX

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