



## Going Beyond the CMO Role

Making the transition to broader leadership positions

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*“To be a great marketer, you need a strong understanding of the consumer and the ability to effectively reach that consumer. To be a general manager, you need to manage the complexity of a multifunctional organization, and have the ability to fully understand how the business works. Ultimately the two need to work in concert to be a great leader.”*

JEFF CASWELL  
VICE PRESIDENT AND GENERAL MANAGER OF TYSON FOODS

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The role of the chief marketing officer (CMO) is being viewed as increasingly strategic. CEOs are entrusting CMOs with wider responsibilities — from oversight of sales to digital strategy. This has provided a springboard for some CMOs into general management (GM) roles: Nearly one-fifth of CEOs of the consumer-facing companies in the Fortune 500 have marketing backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> What does it take to make the leap? CMOs who have successfully made the shift agree on some key points: You need to demonstrate curiosity, build cross-functional expertise, manage your personal brand and be clear about your intentions.

<sup>1</sup> Of the 283 consumer-facing companies in the Fortune 500 in 2014, 50 had CEOs with a marketing background. Twenty-three of these had eight or more years' marketing experience.

A shift into general management requires a broader set of skills ... and some courage. While there is a great deal of opportunity for growth, there is also some risk. So, how do you determine whether you have the interest and ability, gain the right exposure and, ultimately, find the right opportunity to enable you to make the shift? Former marketing leaders shared the lessons they learned from their transitions into general management roles.

## The initial spark

“I always knew I wanted to either be a CMO with a lot of financial accountability, or a GM with a creative slant to the position,” said Claire Bennett, executive vice president of American Express Travel. Bennett was previously senior vice president of global advertising and brand management at American Express. Her preparation for the shift to general management started early with a focus on financial and accounting studies: “I knew I wanted to have that because I thought I might eventually want to be running a business.”

For others, the desire to take on a broader role built more gradually. “I had both the intellectual curiosity and a passion to be part of the bigger decision, rather than just an implementer,” said Rob Price. “I found I really wanted to be at the grown-ups’ table, and the closer I got to the center, the happier I was.” In 2014, Price moved from his role as senior vice president and CMO of CVS/Pharmacy, the 7,400-store pharmacy chain, to become president of Edible Arrangements, the fresh fruit bouquet creator with more than 1,100 franchises worldwide.

Curiosity and passion to build a great business over time, and managing an entire profit and loss statement (P&L) rather than just a few elements of it, are what piqued Jeff Caswell’s interest in taking the leap. Before becoming vice president and GM for Tyson Foods, Caswell was a marketer at businesses like Evian, Quaker Oats and ConAgra.

## The right stuff

Self-awareness, really knowing yourself and understanding what you are — and are not — capable of, are vital when considering the shift to a broader leadership role, according to Frances Allen, brand president of Jack-in-the-Box, a restaurant chain with 2,200 locations across 21 states, and former executive vice president and chief brand officer of Denny’s. Caswell spelled out the variables: “There’s a higher risk of not delivering on the type of performance that you’re used to in your function and there is organizational risk. If you decide to shift into a cross-functional assignment, there’s a chance that that could be a permanent home or the ability to go back might no longer exist. There is a risk that a GM role may not satisfy your passion points. Passion fuels your success in many ways, so it’s important that there is that fit.”

Do you have the “right stuff” to be successful in your pursuit of this role? Jim Farley suggested a simple litmus test: “You have to care.” Farley is executive vice president and president of Europe, Middle East and Africa for Ford Motor Company, the organization’s highest general management role. He made his way into this position after five years as the automaker’s executive vice president of global marketing, sales and service. “You have to be curious and you have to care about the business impact of what you are proposing,” he said. “To get a product idea sold, there were times when I had to learn about the investment — not just whether the product was going to be accepted by customers, but whether it was a good business proposition. Those were humbling experiences because the impact could be significant. I found, however, that there were a lot of marketers around me who did not care.”

Caswell cared. In fact, with his first GM experience at ConAgra, he was hooked.

“The challenge at ConAgra, where I moved from a marketing director role to that of GM, was finding ways to re-engage, to stabilize and grow all of the elements of the business: share, topline, gross margin and operating profit,” he said. “The more I got into it, the more elements there were to consider and work on, from overheads to labor and input costs — decisions that had as much to do with costs as with the consumer. It was a completely new experience — and a very different lens — one that I found intellectually challenging. I realized that the impact I could have on the P&L was amplified by my ability to go deeper in those elements and I was fascinated.”

The transition requires leaders who are not just able to think critically and generate ideas, but who also have the Executive Intelligence to stretch and grow in the face of new challenges, and across multiple dimensions of leadership. Spencer Stuart’s Executive Intelligence (ExI®) Evaluation, a proven measure of executive potential, measures executives on five dimensions of intelligence — business, organizational, interpersonal, learning and conceptual intelligence. These dimensions are central to a leader’s capacity to be successful in new, unfamiliar and complex situations — exactly the type of situations in which CEOs and top team leaders are tested. The marketing leaders who cultivate these facets of intelligence will be best positioned as viable candidates for GM roles.

## How can you get there?

CMOs who successfully transitioned to broader roles shared ways marketers can actively position themselves for bigger leadership opportunities in the shorter term and build a strong foundation over the long term for enduring success.

### Go outside your comfort zone and be curious

Consider taking assignments that are less on the beaten path. “Take the projects that may involve creating turnaround platforms, growing with emerging brands and acquisition integration,” advised Caswell. “These are the assignments that can build skill-sets and

## Getting ready to make the leap

Here are ways CMOs can prepare and position themselves for GM roles:

1. Be curious and broaden your skill-set and experiences at every possible opportunity.
2. Prepare yourself for general management with at least one non-marketing role, such as finance or operations.
3. Volunteer for mission-critical, cross-functional projects.
4. Build commercial credibility by staying close to customers.
5. Develop deep, personal working relationships/ partnerships with your peers.
6. Become indispensable internally by positioning marketing as a driver of value for your business. Own the consumer and you will always win.
7. Play the role of “integrator” across your company. Leverage your unique position to connect people with new ideas without caring who gets the credit.
8. Get exposure to your board — or try to land a non-executive director role externally.
9. Develop the reputation of being unafraid to make tough decisions.
10. Find a mentor who is already a CEO or in a general management position.

experiences that are broad and a little non-traditional. Ultimately, in a general management role, that tends to be what's required."

Curiosity can also open doors to other areas of the business. "A CMO is a member of the operating committee and has all the reason in the world to be curious," Farley said. "Use your role to insert yourself into those venues where functional decisions get made — and ask the right questions when you're in those venues. The vocabulary you use is very important."

To break out of the marketing mold, Price advises leaders in the function to acquire different experiences by working on cross-functional projects and pursuing rotations. Most marketers find that it is easiest to obtain these cross-functional experiences as early in their careers as possible, as it can be more difficult to switch functions once reaching the senior-most levels. More senior leaders may need to look to shorter-term opportunities to broaden their expertise, such as joining a due diligence or acquisition team or taking additional executive education courses.

### **Build strong foundational skills**

The need for classic business skills, especially understanding of financial levers, cannot be overstated. Financial and analytical skills are among the most valuable for CMOs to cultivate if they are to make a successful transition. "The greatest skill you need to be a CEO or manager is financial acumen — you need to understand the vocabulary of finance," said Farley. "Most of all, understand the processes by which cost can be managed." Developing this expertise enables marketing leaders to place themselves on the trajectory to manage a full P&L, a prerequisite for many GM roles.

Some industry sectors may provide better opportunities to develop a CMO's financial acumen and holistic business perspective than others. Price noted that operation-intensive businesses with lots of physical assets, moving parts and people with whom to negotiate can be breeding grounds for promotable CMOs. "In environments where the focus is on execution and on front-line consistency, the roles of the CMO and head of operations have more in common, which probably prepares someone better for a GM position than perhaps a CPG environment where branding and marketing tend to be much more compartmentalized," he said.

Jeremy Cage, president of The Cage Group, credits his earlier tenure with Procter & Gamble for providing him with the foundation to grow beyond marketing: "They're at the forefront of making sure that their marketers have all of the core skills required to be able to lead a business, regardless of what the business was." Cage went from CMO at PepsiCo in 2008 to senior vice president of global snacks in 2010, and became CEO of the Lighting Science Group in 2013.

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Advances in technology are also redefining the table stakes today. "It used to be a few channels that you could force your message out to everybody and that's changed dramatically with social media," said Cage. "What's the next Twitter? CMOs today have to be dramatically more nimble and agile in making decisions than they ever had to be in the past." With customers using various digital channels to shop and communicate, leaders cannot afford to sit on the sidelines. While marketing leaders tend to have the pulse on consumer digital trends, they must commit to ongoing education in this arena, whether it's attending boot camps or bringing in industry experts to advise on new digital opportunities for the business.

**Want a seat at the table? Listen and collaborate.**

As a CMO, breaking into senior circles can be difficult. It takes subtlety and a willingness to take the time to understand context, as well as perspectives and priorities that may differ from yours.

You're far more likely to be invited to the table if you're a listener, according to Price. He credits mentorship and a concerted effort on improving his listening skills with making him more welcome at the table — and more effective.

You also have to be a natural collaborator and authentic in your desire to learn. "Show curiosity and try to expand your own base," advised Bennett. "Spend time with people across the organization just to see how they do what they do. And when you talk about your marketing results, talk about them in terms of how they impact the business and the financials."

Collaboration also means bringing others into the marketing fold. Bennett invited a member of the finance team to join her marketing meetings to help her understand the impact of marketing on financial decisions. "That behavior — that embracing of other functions and taking input from them into your world — encourages them to invite you into theirs," she said.

**Fit to a "T"**

What do GMs and CEOs look for in promotable candidates? Today, Caswell searches for candidates with "T" skills — the vertical bar representing depth of functional expertise and the horizontal bar representing the ability to lead, collaborate and influence.

"A leader with 'T' skills is a highly talented individual who can have real impact and manage from a position of functional expertise," said Caswell. "I look for candidates who have a point of view and impact beyond their functional capability with the curiosity to broaden their skills and the ability to influence." The CMOs who have successfully made the shift to GM roles often demonstrate this balance of attributes. They also tend to be naturally curious executives who have looked for opportunities to continually build their skill-set throughout their career.

**Manage your personal brand**

A number of the executives we spoke with noted that marketers can, ironically, be acutely deficient in managing their own brand, which can be limiting when pursuing a role with greater scope. A strong personal brand conveys that you are not just a marketer, but a business leader.

"You need to get as far from that marketing guy or gal caricature as you can," said Price, "because the route to general manager depends on being perceived as something much more than a marketer." To shape that perception, Farley advised: "Shift the way you talk about the business so that you take full accountability for business outcomes; don't just be the marketing guy who happens to be driving this project or business."

At the same time, demonstrate the value that marketing brings to the entire organization — as the source of the deepest insights into the customer relationship. As Stephen Quinn, retiring executive vice president and chief marketing officer of Walmart U.S., put it: "Whoever owns the customer wins."

Additionally, marketing leaders should not discount their functional experience as they position themselves for broader roles. "CMOs are more prepared than ever to be able to make the leap because marketing has become so complex that CMOs today have to be dramatically more nimble and agile in making decisions," Jeremy Cage said. "This prepares them extremely well for taking on other functions."

**Communicate your goals**

While it seems simple, being vocal about your aspirations can go a long way in positioning marketers for GM roles. "You have to sell yourself," Bennett said. "By telegraphing your interest, you can create the opportunity — it worked for me at Quaker Oats and at Dell." At Dell, Bennett headed acquisitions with responsibility for an approximately \$1 billion budget, then went on to run Dell Computer's software and peripherals business, a role that demanded strong marketing skills.



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“One piece of advice that I would give anybody is make your intentions, your goals, your ambitions very clear to your manager and your board,” advised Allen. During her tenure at Denny’s, the board understood where she wanted to go and was committed to paving the way for her.

Many leaders we spoke with also encouraged GM hopefuls to develop a personal board of advisers. People who recognize your talent, believe in you and who you trust as mentors can help guide you on this journey.

## Conclusion

Many marketing leaders aspire to roles beyond the function, but only some will make the leap. Although the transition is not an easy one, it is becoming increasingly common, paving the way for more CMOs to use the function as a springboard. Those who successfully transition bring a blend of passion, cross-functional expertise and an ability to see the big picture. These transitions are not a matter of luck — although good timing can help — but the result of strategic efforts on the part of the marketing leader. Those who deliberately cultivate a holistic perspective of the business and relationships across the enterprise, as well as build a personal brand and a team of advocates best position themselves to reach new heights.

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