

# How to get marketers to board level

**Chris Harrison, Marketer**

Marketing

We live and work in a region where there are still relatively few marketers at executive board level. In fact, there are fewer marketing directors than HR directors. This may reflect the perception that HR – in its traditional role of controlling the workforce – is more deserving of a seat at the top table than those charged with promoting the business. If so, both parts of that perception are wrong. Companies need HR leaders attuned to the company's promise to the market and able to recruit and develop staff to deliver it. But they also need senior marketers; able to represent the consumer point of view at board level.

But what kind of marketers will fellow C-Suite members take seriously? Charlotte Rogers, revealing the key results of a new study by *Marketing Week*, asks what makes a modern marketing leader. Strategic vision and a natural storytelling ability? Mastery of data and customer champion? Motivator of diverse



■ A senior marketer must design creative action. He or she should build teams with diverse expertise, both outsourced and in house.

and inclusive teams?

When I talk to managing directors in Africa, their biggest criticism of the marketing fraternity seems to be a lack of commercial acumen. Marketers have a reputation of being good at activity, but not so hot on productivity. Happy to spend money; but not too keen to be held to account for it.

The issue is not local.

Commenting on the global profession, Prof. Mark Ritson of Melbourne Business School is forthright: "I remain convinced that most marketers don't really understand gross margin and variable costs. They live in a bull\*\*\*\* bubble."

So how can marketers rise to greatness? What skills and attributes do they need to develop on the journey?

I must admit that looking for answers in *Marketing Week's* 'Anatomy of a Leader' research study was unrewarding. Perhaps because 600 UK marketers were sampled; but no opinions sought from senior colleagues in other disciplines.

To be fair, 86% of marketers questioned thought strategic thinking very important. And 74% said understanding sales and being commercially aware were fundamental to making a leadership contribution

But things went downhill from there. There was a lot of loose talk about admirable personality attributes like humanity and empathy; bravery and agility being "essential" to the modern marketing leader.

But relationship building came in a distant third, alongside people management and problem solving.

In my view, a strong marketing director should represent the bridge between a business and

its customers. He or she should use their unrivalled knowledge of the marketplace to challenge the complacent certainties that often develop at the top of companies. There are unsubstantiated beliefs that the market 'loves our products'; competitors 'admire our customer service' and staff are indeed 'living the brand'.

A senior marketer must design creative action (in the widest sense of the word). He or she should build teams with diverse expertise, both outsourced and in-house. Teams capable of addressing business weaknesses and seizing commercial opportunities.

Most of all, they must be accountable to fellow board members.

**Chris Harrison leads The Brand Inside.**

**To comment on this article, send a Tweet to [harrisoncj](https://twitter.com/harrisoncj) on [www.twitter.com](https://www.twitter.com) or chat with him on LinkedIn**