



FEATURE

## **The makings of a more confident CMO**

Three ways to increase C-suite impact

Diana O'Brien, Jennifer Veenstra, and Timothy Murphy

The expansive role of the chief marketing officer is filled with possibility, but many CMOs lack the confidence to truly engage with the C-suite. How can CMOs build confidence to elevate their influence and fully realize their role's potential?

**A**S FAST-EVOLVING TECHNOLOGY and consumer behaviors collide, the role of the chief marketing officer (CMO) has evolved substantially, increasing the CMO's visibility and *potential* for leadership and influence. The CEO and other leaders in the C-suite look to the CMO to provide data-driven insight, contribute to strategic business discussions, and demonstrate how marketing drives growth.

Despite these expectations, many CMOs struggle with C-suite acceptance, according to our new survey (see sidebar, "Research methodology"). This lack of CMO engagement is problematic for more than just the CMO. Organizations that marginalize their CMOs may pay a price in lost opportunities: Previous research reveals that when CMOs take on a more active role in growth initiatives, success follows in the form of higher long-term growth rates.<sup>1</sup> Yet many CMOs still struggle to find a voice at the C-suite table, with many of their peers viewing them more as senior tacticians rather than vital strategic partners.

Why have CMOs struggled? And just as important, what can CMOs do to elevate their stature to more

effectively engage in discussions that drive enterprise value?

Our research suggests that CMOs sometimes disadvantage *themselves* through a lack of confidence as they engage with their peers. Greater self-awareness may be a first step some CMOs can take toward achieving greater influence. That said, for that self-confidence to be justified, CMOs must actively contribute to strategic discussions—by demonstrating ownership of key competencies, speaking the common language of the C-suite, and collaborating effectively with their C-suite peers.

Based on our study findings, we recommend CMOs start with these three things:

- 1. Give yourself permission.** Out of all the C-suite executives we surveyed, CMOs were the least likely to perceive themselves as high performers—even when their C-suite peers generally thought otherwise. Some CMOs are *unknowingly* relegating themselves to the sidelines of strategic conversations. CMOs can start to break this pattern by giving themselves permission to admit what they don't know, ask questions outside their traditional scope, and get in the mix of discussions happening around them.
- 2. Own the customer experience.** The CMO is often the C-suite executive best placed to champion the customer's voice, help the organization appreciate the experiences their customers have, and hold the data to prove how those experiences impact customer behavior. We see the CMO defer to other functions to give voice to issues around the customer's experience.

#### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article is based on data collected for the Deloitte C-suite study, which included a survey and in-depth interviews with 575 Fortune 500 executives across the C-suite, focused specifically on how C-suite executives view CMOs' contributions. The study was conducted between October 2018 and February 2019.

CMOs should work hard to understand what the data tells them about current customers and how to keep them, or how to attract target customers. That understanding can enable the CMO to become the C-suite's go-to person on customer experience, even if direct responsibility may lie in other areas of the organization.

- 3. Be the first to connect.** As organizations increasingly become more connected with customers, partners, and employees, collaboration is a necessity to successful execution of strategy. Still, we see CMOs collaborating at a lower rate than their C-suite peers. CMOs can work to change this by intentionally connecting and finding opportunities to work with C-suite colleagues on issues that are important to each, looking for ways to use customer insight to help each CxO reach his or her goals.

## Give yourself permission

**"I don't look at my role as singularly focused on marketing and communications. I think about this role as a business strategist just as much as a subject matter expert. When I sit down to have a discussion, I think a lot about the agenda, the topics at hand. I do my own research going in; I've talked to others in the industry to make sure I'm adding value at the same level as another member of the C-suite."**

— *Dustee Jenkins, global head of communications, Spotify*

Our research reveals a striking and unnecessary crisis of confidence among CMOs. For instance, when we indexed C-suite respondents on their ability to impact strategic decision-making, the overall direction of the business, and the ability to garner support for their initiatives amongst their peers, CMOs gave themselves a rather harsh assessment—*only 5 percent* of CMOs consider themselves high performers, the lowest in the C-suite. This stands in stark contrast to the CEOs, 55 percent of whom consider themselves high performers. The average for CEOs, chief information officers (CIOs), and chief financial officers (CFOs) is 35 percent.

Fortunately, the lack of confidence among CMOs is largely more perception than reality (figure 1). Most C-suite members perceive the CMO to be performing at a level much higher than they see themselves, especially in areas such as demonstrating financial impact, customer expertise, and initiating collaborative efforts. In nearly all cases, some of the most influential players in the C-suite—CEOs, CFOs, and CIOs/chief technology officers (CTOs)—believe CMOs deliver effectively on multiple fronts. This is particularly true for CEOs, who give CMOs much higher marks for performance than the other members of the C-suite give CMOs. For the CMO, who often assumes poor self-performance, this zoomed-out view suggests that much of the C-suite respects, and leans on, the CMO's expertise.

That being said, the chief sales officer (CSO) and chief operations officer (COO) may still need some convincing that the CMO is generally performing at a high level. This could reflect the competition for influence within this more closely aligned subset of the C-suite, or merely the natural tension in what

each of these roles tend to value strategically. This finding further points to the need for CMOs to finely tune their messaging and interact more intentionally with peers.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

*Get comfortable with being uncomfortable.* Margie Warrell, a leading author on building confidence, observes that people defer to “playing it safe” after achieving a small amount of career success.<sup>2</sup> These “successes” reinforce risk aversion and fear of failure. This phenomenon is especially relevant for CMOs. After decades of being asked to manage

campaigns and act as brand custodians, they are now being invited to take a more strategic enterprise role—which may sometimes mean putting themselves in uncomfortable situations, taking professional risks, and embracing the opportunity to grow. Although navigating this new frontier can be daunting, CMOs who fail to do so run the even bigger risk of irrelevance—both perceived and actual.

*Don’t ask, just do.* CMOs receive their highest evaluations from the C-suite in demonstrating an understanding of the customer (figure 1). This

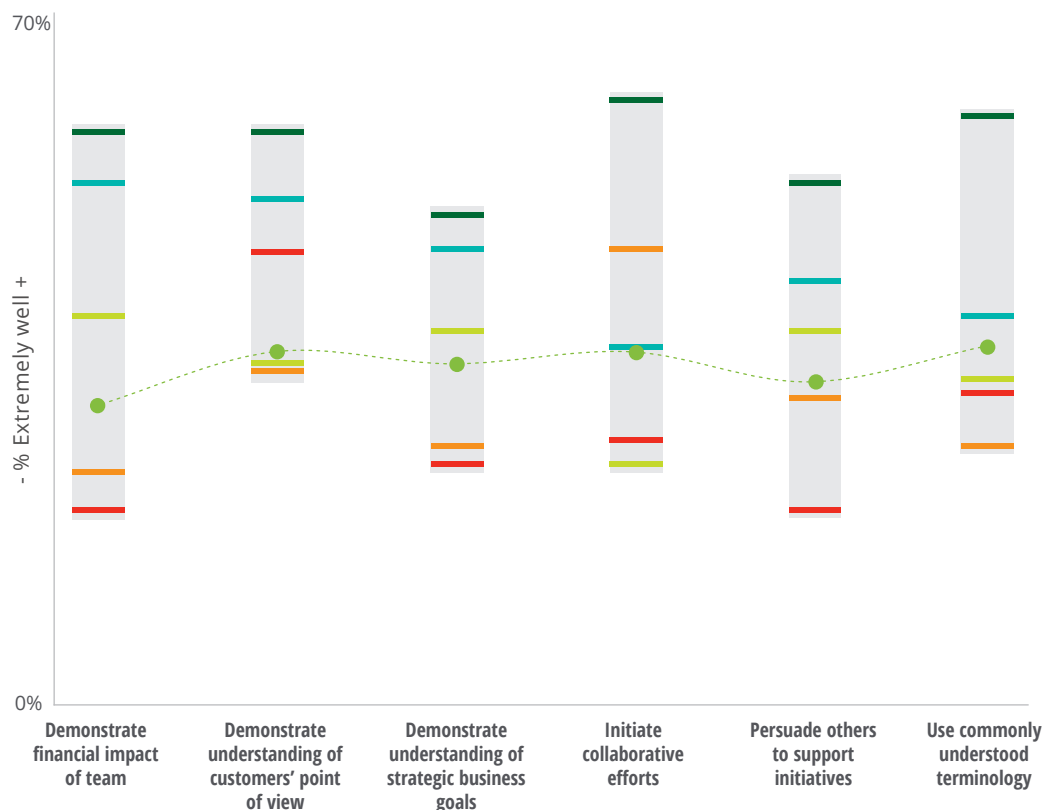
FIGURE 1

## CMO performance perception versus reality: CMOs are not doing as badly as they think

Others in the C-suite

Evaluating Their CMOs: — CEOs — CFOs — CIOs/CTOs — COOs — CSalesOs

● CMOs’ self-evaluation



Source: Questions from Deloitte C-suite survey: Q—When working with other members of the C-suite, how well are you able to accomplish the following? [CMOs' self-evaluation]; Q—When working with other members of the C-suite, how well is your CMO or equivalent able to accomplish the following? [peer evaluation of CMOs]

position of expertise is a natural “in” with C-suite colleagues. Rather than waiting for others in the C-suite to define their role and contributions, CMOs should recognize this strength, and position themselves to drive conversations about the customer, fill knowledge gaps, or collaborate with peers. By deliberately drawing on their role’s natural strengths—deep understanding of the customer, skill at storytelling, and competitive insight—CMOs can begin to operate from a place of confidence and occupy their rightful seat at the table with their C-level peers.

mere 11 percent perceive the CMO as champion of customer experience and nearly half (48 percent) believe this responsibility falls to the CSO (figure 2). In some key areas such as digital transformation (1 percent) and product road map development (3 percent) the CMO is nearly invisible. Instead, the CMO is generally seen as the owner of marketing strategy (46 percent) and new markets (42 percent). One potential reason for this perception is the evolving roles of marketing, technology, and customer experience, which is blurring traditional boundary lines and often leaves the CMO with the least defined role.

## Own the customer experience

**“Our CMO serves as a reminder of the voice of the customer in all discussions. Not just the voice of the customers but the shoes of the customers as well. He goes out and sees customers a lot. He’s a great listener and he’s good about bringing back reflections that he gathers.”**

— *David Golden, former chief legal and sustainability officer, Eastman Chemical Company*

While customer experience is considered the new competitive battleground, our research signals that ownership of customer experience—and its powerful economic potential—remains dispersed, meaning it lacks a clear champion among executives (figure 2). This contributes to the lack of understanding of what is valuable to the customer, making the delivery of exceptional experiences less likely.<sup>3</sup>

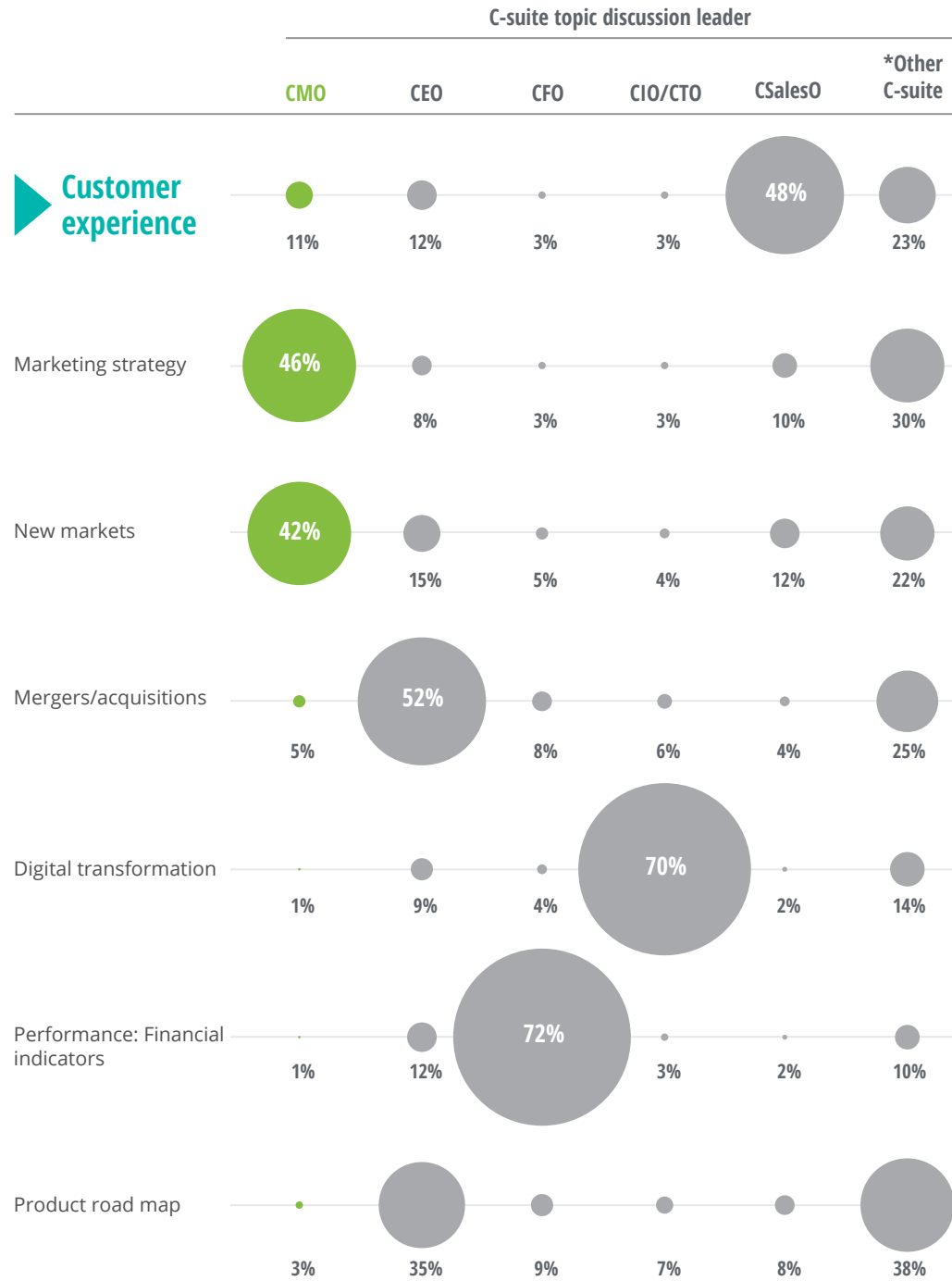
Not only does customer experience lack a programmatic owner in the C-suite, but relatively few see the CMO as owning the customer experience. A

This lack of clarity can give CMOs an opportunity to actively cement their leadership with other members of the C-suite. Most C-suite executives see CMOs as knowing the customer and customer sentiments better than other members of the C-suite. CxOs also consistently report that CMOs who demonstrate competency in strategic business goals and effective communication are in the best position to lead customer experience.

Barbara Goose, CMO of John Hancock, delivers customer insights to build the brand’s

relevance with consumers and drive strategic investments for growth. She says, “We’re getting so much data so quickly that we need to make decisions much faster than in the past. But it allows us to understand customers and their journeys in ways we couldn’t before.” She also reports the John Hancock organization is “seeing the impact we can have when we leverage data to reach the right customer at the right time.” In addition to unlocking opportunity for customer connection, data also drives decisions on new products for development “or parts of the brand to invest in, to what degree, and in what order.”

FIGURE 2  
**The C-suite is muddled about who owns the customer experience: An opportunity for CMOs**



Source: Question from Deloitte C-suite survey: Q—During typical C-suite discussion, who generally leads the conversation on the following topics? [self- and peer evaluation]  
\*Other C-suite: COO, CStrategyO, CLO, CHRO, and HBU.



The impact of that customer data centricity extends beyond marketing. “We’re helping the entire organization see how customer experience and net promoter score are tied to financial returns,” she says. “In some ways, it turns the organization on its head. People are reorienting to truly put the customer first. It’s an amazing transformation.”<sup>4</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

*Piece together the mosaic of the customer journey.*

Peter Strebel, CMO turned President at Omni Hotels, explains that customers interact with a brand through dozens of different channels.<sup>5</sup>

Technology helps CMOs move from isolated marketing campaigns to mapping and owning the entire customer journey. They can use data from customer interactions to piece together myriad customer experiences, revealing the customer journey and their expectations of the brand. Feedback from target customers will strengthen this outside view of the brand. By bringing customer insights to the C-suite, CMOs can become the chosen strategy partners and important players in making effective customer, product, and business strategies.

*Translate customer insights into the language of business.*

CMOs can increase their acceptance from other C-suite partners by speaking the language they understand and add value to their peers’ own work.

For example, by making small changes in how they demonstrate their understanding of enterprise concerns, CMOs can converse with the CFO in business or financial terms. Hugh Dineen, US CMO, MetLife, says his “team converted the metrics of marketing to the metrics of the business. Instead of talking awareness, we talked acquisition. Instead of talking consideration and purchase, we talked inquiries and close rate. Instead of talking loyalty, we talked persistency and ultimately cross-sell and upsell.”

*Never leave the customer out of the conversation.*

CMOs can keep the voice of the customer central to strategic decisions and help the C-suite see risk factors, such as an overt focus on short-term revenue, a failure to anchor efforts around true competitive differentiators, or becoming too far removed from the deep motivators behind customer behaviors. CMOs should also ensure they and their C-suite counterparts talk to actual customers frequently. By initiating and encouraging their peers’ experiences with customers, CMOs can build natural customer centricity into the C-suite’s thinking.

Spotify’s Dustee Jenkins agrees, and also helps her colleagues think through the risks of potential strategies. “If we’re pursuing something, I would be very vocal about risks I see either reputationally (as we’re thinking about the impact to the consumer and how a consumer might perceive something), or it could be that the risk is in a really crowded space like video. I would help them understand based on what I’m seeing, what I’m hearing,” she says.

**“Success meant making sure that you didn’t bring something to the C-suite that didn’t have somebody else as a partner, as a sponsor for it. You made sure that you didn’t surprise anybody.”**

— *Bill Houghton, former CIO, General Motors*

## Be the first to connect

Now more than ever, market disruption and competition demand that the C-suite operate as a cohesive team rather than a group of independent functional experts. In a 2018 study of human capital trends, Deloitte described this as the mandate for a “symphonic C-suite,” one where the CEO is a conductor who fosters connections across

functions and helps every C-suite leader assess priorities and determine how each can have impact more broadly across the organization.<sup>6</sup>

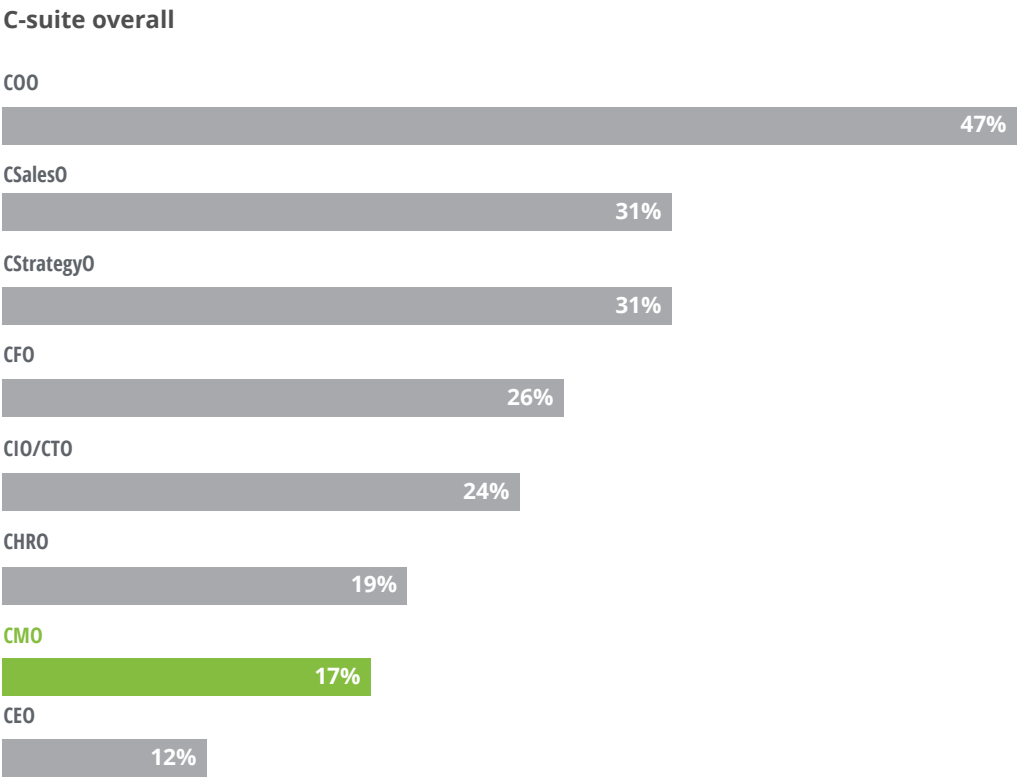
CMOs are not engaging as often as the rest of the C-suite in cross-functional collaborations—only 17 percent of CxOs in our study report having collaborated with CMOs over the last 12 months (among the lowest of all C-suite positions; see figure 3). Forgoing these collaborative opportunities goes against the grain of a role that aspires to be an enterprisewide influencer. CMOs should work to become influential strategic partners, rather than functioning merely as department heads.

Self-identified high-performing CMOs report much higher rates of C-suite collaboration. It indicates that CMOs with confidence in their abilities and deep understanding of the customer do not shy away from cross-disciplinary collaborations, thereby reinforcing the importance of coming to the table with confidence.

These relationships with other C-suite peers can unlock new doors for the CMOs, and even get funding for additional CMO initiatives. For example, in one study, as many as 94 percent of CFOs indicated they would direct more funds to digital marketing if CMOs could demonstrate a direct correlation between digital campaigns and sales.<sup>7</sup>

FIGURE 3

Who members of the C-suite say they collaborated with over the past 12 months: CMOs have a vast opportunity to collaborate more



Source: Question from Deloitte C-suite survey: Q—In the past 12 months, have you worked on any initiatives collaboratively with other members of your C-suite? Select all that apply. [self-evaluation]



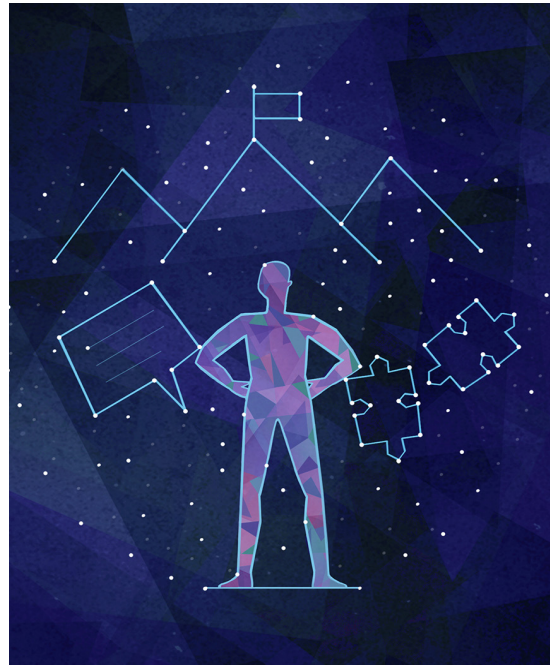
Such opportunities are not just limited to the CFO and CMO dynamic. CMOs can work with CSOs (to build compelling purchasing experiences), CIOs (to redesign digital touchpoints), and even COOs (to make customer-friendly backend customer service functions, such as return policies).

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

*Find problems you can solve together.* CMOs are often being left out of critical collaborations (either intentionally or inadvertently), which is most likely contributing to the general lack of CMO confidence. The onus to initiate collaborative efforts is on the CMOs. By encouraging a fellow C-suite member to partner on key marketing initiatives, CMOs build their own confidence and C-suite confidence in the CMOs. Confident CMOs work as trusted partners; they understand their peers' strategic pressures and propose ways to enable peer or joint success. Joint ownership of initiatives naturally fosters executive buy-in and avoids taking colleagues by surprise.

*Align metrics with important business priorities.* CMOs can further enhance relationships with peers by setting key performance indicators that align to the business agenda. C-suite peers, in fact, look forward to this behavior. For example, respondents to our survey consistently stated a desire for CMOs to understand the business and demonstrate that the true impact of a major campaign on the sales force has been thoughtfully considered. They also expressed the need for CMOs to be conversant in other areas of business value beyond marketing.

One key area for CMOs is partnering with CFOs on widely accepted key financial measurements. For example, CMOs engaging with CFOs should highlight how marketing initiatives affect financial metrics, such as operating margin and shareholder value. A CFO ally helps CMOs “prove marketing’s value” for the company and in the C-suite. As former CFO of Ally Financial, Chris Halmy, puts it: “I want my chief marketing officer to bring detailed



outcomes that are measurable and reflect how those outcomes are going to drive growth in the business.”

*Build an external network to bolster the internal network.* Simply by the virtue of their role and closeness to the customer, CMOs have access to wide data and external relationships, beyond customers, their data, and their feedback. They can bring in independent research or dive into their experiences to bring a fresh perspective to C-suite conversations.

Samsung Electronics America’s chief privacy officer, Darlene Cedres, understands this. “Great CMOs have insights based on experience and relationships,” she says. “They talk to industry thought leaders and bring powerful information back to the C-suite. They have insights, experience, and data about our external stakeholders. They also learn about the regulatory environment in great detail.” CMOs leveraging external knowledge and making it useful to the C-suite can increase their appeal as trusted advisors for customer-related decisions.

Additionally, the very practice of connecting with that external community can build confidence to speak up in the C-suite, according to executives in our study. Being braver about asking questions of external marketing leaders can arm the CMO with confidence to sit across the table from the CEO or business unit leaders and say they have talked to customers and CMOs, and here's the broader view.

## A more confident CMO, a more confident C-suite

CMOs have the power to enable each member of the C-suite to make more informed decisions, drive financial performance, and take the customer experience to new heights. As a group, CMOs can afford

to give themselves more permission to lead with confidence, while at the same time taking care to fill knowledge gaps and collaborate with C-suite teammates. They should not fear failure—our survey results reveal that executives do not expect CMOs to have all the answers. If anything, the peer group will likely only appreciate initiatives from the CMO office.

By having confidence in their deep domain expertise in understanding the customer and sharing this understanding artfully with a strong point of view using language appreciated by the entire C-suite, CMOs are poised to be a powerful force in the strategic direction of the enterprise and create even greater customer and business impact from their seat at the executive table.

## Endnotes

1. Diana O'Brien, Jennifer Veenstra, and Timothy Murphy, "Redefining the modern CMO," *Deloitte Review* 22, January 22, 2018.
2. Margie Warrell, "Use it or lose it: The science behind self-confidence," *Forbes*, February 26, 2015.
3. Maxie Schmidt-Subramanian et al., "Value for customers: The four dimensions that matter," Forrester Research, July 10, 2019.
4. Mary Morrison, "How John Hancock's CMO drives a customer-first focus," *CMO Today*, May 20, 2019.
5. Blake Morgan, "When the CMO owns the customer experience: 10 top CMOs share their POV," *Forbes*, August 29, 2017.
6. Dimple Agarwal et al., *The symphonic C-suite: Teams leading teams*, Deloitte Insights, March 28, 2018.
7. Penny Wilson, "Bridging the CMO/CFO divide," *Marketing Insider*, December 20, 2018.

## About the authors

### **Diana O'Brien | [dobrien@deloitte.com](mailto:dobrien@deloitte.com)**

Diana O'Brien is the global chief marketing officer for Deloitte responsible for driving growth across all businesses. In this role, Diana connects a network of brand, communications, marketing, and insights organizations. Her responsibility is to champion the voice of the customer, surface deep insights with advanced analytics, increase sales velocity, and gain greater competitive advantage with stronger, differentiated experiences. One of Forbes World's Most Influential CMOs, O'Brien also leads the C-Suite CMO Program and serves as an advisory partner to global life sciences clients. Connect with her on Twitter [@DianaMOBrien](https://twitter.com/DianaMOBrien) and on LinkedIn at <https://www.linkedin.com/in/dianaobrien/>.

### **Jennifer Veenstra | [jveenstra@deloitte.com](mailto:jveenstra@deloitte.com)**

Jennifer Veenstra is a director with Deloitte Consulting LLP. She leads Deloitte's CMO Program, focusing on innovation especially around the client experience, driving strategy and market integration for major mergers and acquisitions, and working across multiple functional areas with a focus on customer strategy. She has led many innovation projects, including the transformation of the Deloitte Client Experience and development of Deloitte's Greenhouse® Experience labs. Connect with Veenstra on Twitter at [@Jen\\_Veenstra](https://twitter.com/Jen_Veenstra) and on LinkedIn at <https://www.linkedin.com/in/jennifer-veenstra-383307/>.

### **Timothy Murphy | [timurphy@deloitte.com](mailto:timurphy@deloitte.com)**

Timothy Murphy is a researcher and analytical scientist at Deloitte Services LP, developing thought leadership for Deloitte's Center for Integrated Research. His research focuses on the managerial implications of the behavioral sciences within the workforce and the marketplace. Connect with him on LinkedIn at <https://www.linkedin.com/in/tim-murphy-2525a822/n>.

## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank **Sarah Allred** and **Nicole Caven** from the CMO Program's content and insights team for their contributions to this article.

## Contact us

*Our insights can help you take advantage of change. If you're looking for fresh ideas to address your challenges, we should talk.*

### Practice contacts

#### **Diana O'Brien**

Global chief marketing officer | Principal | Deloitte Consulting LLP  
+1 513 784 7303 | [dobrien@deloitte.com](mailto:dobrien@deloitte.com)

Diana O'Brien is the Global CMO of Deloitte and is based in Cincinnati.

#### **Jennifer Veenstra**

Managing director | CMO Program leader | Deloitte Consulting LLP  
+1 415 783 4223 | [jveenstra@deloitte.com](mailto:jveenstra@deloitte.com)

Jennifer Veenstra is a director with Deloitte Consulting in San Francisco and leads Deloitte's CMO Program.

## About Deloitte's CMO Program

Deloitte's CMO Program supports CMOs as they navigate the complexities of the role, anticipate upcoming market trends, and respond to challenges with agile marketing. To read more on the latest marketing trends and insights, visit [cmo.deloitte.com](https://cmo.deloitte.com).

CMOs often hold one of the most innovative and challenging roles in business today. Those who excel can operate at the highest level to drive growth and create value for their organizations. Deloitte helps bolster the value CMOs deliver as they advance along their career journeys. Through research and insights that identify upcoming trends and market changes and a powerful arsenal of marketing service offerings, Deloitte has information to help arm and enable CMOs to reach new heights. Contact the authors for more information or [read more about our marketing services on cmo.deloitte.com](https://cmo.deloitte.com).







# Deloitte. Insights

Sign up for Deloitte Insights updates at [www.deloitte.com/insights](http://www.deloitte.com/insights).



Follow @DeloitteInsight

## **Deloitte Insights contributors**

**Editorial:** Kavita Saini, Anya George Tharakan, Preetha Devan, and Rupesh Bhat

**Creative:** Anoop K R and Adamya Manshiva

**Promotion:** Alexandra Kawecki

**Cover artwork:** Josie Portillo

## **About Deloitte Insights**

Deloitte Insights publishes original articles, reports and periodicals that provide insights for businesses, the public sector and NGOs. Our goal is to draw upon research and experience from throughout our professional services organization, and that of coauthors in academia and business, to advance the conversation on a broad spectrum of topics of interest to executives and government leaders.

Deloitte Insights is an imprint of Deloitte Development LLC.

## **About this publication**

This publication contains general information only, and none of Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Limited, its member firms, or its and their affiliates are, by means of this publication, rendering accounting, business, financial, investment, legal, tax, or other professional advice or services. This publication is not a substitute for such professional advice or services, nor should it be used as a basis for any decision or action that may affect your finances or your business. Before making any decision or taking any action that may affect your finances or your business, you should consult a qualified professional adviser.

None of Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Limited, its member firms, or its and their respective affiliates shall be responsible for any loss whatsoever sustained by any person who relies on this publication.

## **About Deloitte**

Deloitte refers to one or more of Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Limited, a UK private company limited by guarantee ("DTTL"), its network of member firms, and their related entities. DTTL and each of its member firms are legally separate and independent entities. DTTL (also referred to as "Deloitte Global") does not provide services to clients. In the United States, Deloitte refers to one or more of the US member firms of DTTL, their related entities that operate using the "Deloitte" name in the United States and their respective affiliates. Certain services may not be available to attest clients under the rules and regulations of public accounting. Please see [www.deloitte.com/about](http://www.deloitte.com/about) to learn more about our global network of member firms.