

Getting to the Top in Marketing

By Kathryn Ullrich

Executive panelists at the “Getting to the Top in Marketing” career development program echoed what Product Marketing executives said at the related program a month earlier: knowing the customer is key. These marketing executives continued to add insight to the skills that set them apart on their progression to top roles: vision setting, delegation, adaptation, measurement of results and stakeholder management.

On March 7, 2006, senior executives in marketing including Tom Bobitch - General Manager and Chief Services Officer at Visage Mobile, Melissa Dyrdaahl – SVP Corporate Marketing and Communications at Adobe, Judy Kirkpatrick – VP International Development at eBay, Denise Peck – VP Marketing Operations at Cisco, and Marlene Williamson – VP Americas marketing at Symantec shared their experiences in reaching senior marketing posts in major Silicon Valley corporations.

Similar to the previous Product Marketing career program in the series, these Marketing executives echoed the need to understand the customer. This program continued by adding more insight on the skills to advance from mid-level to higher posts, including: setting a vision, delegating, adapting to culture and change, measuring impact, and managing stakeholder expectations.

Know thy customer.

To start the program, Denise Peck answered that to be a marketing executive you must develop your customer sensing skills. Don’t ignore the data you learn on customers. Judy Kirkpatrick described the most important marketing discipline with the terminology ‘customer driven innovation’: a product or service is only good if the customer will use it. She also shared an example from Intuit’s early days of Quicken. Data suggested that home checkbooks were being used in small businesses. The company discounted these focus groups, avoided the data and this segment for two years; the small business segment is now a major portion of their business.

Tom Bobitch joked that at Clorox he was constantly hearing how he needed to understand, “...what Mabel at the Moraga Safeway wanted, and what my boss’ wife wanted.” However, warned Kirkpatrick, focus groups are only one data point so don’t rely on the data exclusively. Melissa Dyrdaahl added that focus groups can tell you what doesn’t work but can’t envision what is needed in product direction.

Set a vision.

Williamson shared that as the senior executive, “You need to be comfortable creating a road map because you won’t get a road map.” You need to set a vision and have the leadership qualities to inspire others to that vision. Bobitch stated that for a marketing leader, it’s not necessarily the marketing specifics that are important but the vision of what’s next. Put together a picture of where you need to go.

Delegate.

Dyrdahl said, “You get to a high level position because of your expertise in management as a leader, not a doer.” Set the vision, divide the tasks amongst your team, lead and support the team.

Williamson echoed that marketers need to be comfortable with gray areas. “You trust that people will accomplish their objectives, not in your way, but they will get there.”

Adapt to cultures and change.

Williamson who has worked at large and small companies told the audience to, “Adapt to the culture you are working in. The Apple culture, Taiwanese culture, IBM culture are all radically different with different leadership styles.” Understand the culture you are in and develop your marketing leadership to work within the culture.

Peck learned the most about marketing in a role not in marketing: investor relations. She asked to take on this role marketing the company’s stock, marketing the company not a product. She took a risk and applied marketing techniques to Wall Street to help the street understand the company’s strategy; this differentiated her company from the rest of the companies in the market. Both Peck and Williamson shared that taking jobs sideways is as important as moving up.

Kirkpatrick echoed, “Change is inevitable, especially on the Internet, in new countries.” Develop the flexibility for change when as Kirkpatrick has when her role expanded to doing electronic commerce in China.

Measure impact.

Williamson spoke of the need for marketing executives to be comfortable with metrics. She said that rather than being “...perceived as drunken sailors spending the company’s profits”, marketing should show the value the group creates for the organization, understanding operations and metrics and the group’s impact on the organization.

When the panel was asked what measures should marketing be accountable for, Bobitch answered for all: “Revenue.” Many of the panelists added that as marketing departments they have revenue responsibility. Educate and show the rest of the company what marketing does.

Manage stakeholder expectations.

Peck presented the important concept of managing stakeholder expectations of marketing within large organizations. How does marketing deliver value to product development, engineering, manufacturing and other divisions? Dyrdahl confirmed that she does a lot of this. In small organizations you might do more marketing but in large multi-division corporations you set expectations and manage processes. Look at your job at a higher level, building stakeholder value and get buy-in from other groups or they will complain when there are changes. Evangelize and train the organization on what a marketing division does. “You’re in a middle “integrator” role as Bobitch offered, bringing together all of the divisions with the marketing vision.

About the Getting to the Top Career Series

Alumni Career Services at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, together with executive recruiting firm Kathryn Ullrich Associates, Inc., and marketing consultancy the Highland Team, present the speaker series for career development – *Getting to the Top*. This series explores the skills and knowledge successful marketing and sales leaders leverage in their careers to get to the top.