Inside the Mind of the Chief Marketing Officer

Strong personalities take on the growth challenge

Russell Reynolds Associates’ Inside the Mind of … series addresses the leadership and behavioral attributes of various groups of executives.
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Inside the Mind of the CMO: Change agents at a crossroads

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Growth is firmly at the top of most companies’ agenda, yet few have a dedicated chief growth officer. Consumers now demand targeted messages, delivered across multiple platforms, at a time and place of their choosing.

The chief marketing officer (CMO) profile has evolved to respond to the growth agenda. CMOs have developed strong characteristics around innovative, pioneering and influential behavior.

These extreme behavioral characteristics are a double-edged sword. The traits that help to succeed in the CMO role may set up clashes with other C-suite members and also may be a hindrance in CMOs’ onward career trajectory.

When creating digital change, though, this group is well-positioned. CMOs share many attributes with chief digital officers (CDO) that facilitate strong change and partnership relationships.

Will this polarizing personality type be the CMO model going forward? The future of the CMO may well be a full splintering of the role into subtypes that are driven both by particular business needs and a more tightly articulated psychological profile.

**METHODOLOGY**

The Russell Reynolds Associates database—unique in that it contains more than 5,000 data points from the top ranks of corporations worldwide—allows us to make statistically driven observations about the characteristics possessed by leaders in a particular field.

Our methodology was straightforward: We compared 36 CMOs from companies totaling more than $1.5 trillion in market capitalization with our broader database of executives (as well as with chief executive officers (CEO) and other C-suite figures) on 60 psychometric scales from well-validated leadership assessments to understand on which scales the CMOs showed statistical differences from the other populations.
Compared with other C-suite figures, CMOs have a markedly extreme leadership and behavioral profile. They differ from the overall executive population across a large number of attributes and to a significant degree on several of those attributes.

The first set of attributes centers on CMOs’ innovative, pioneering spirit—they act unconventionally, test limits and are not beholden to structures. These traits conform well to a conventional mental picture of a CMO.

The second set of attributes provides a welcome explanation as to how these innovators are successful in action—they use their strong social orientation and persuasive tactics to operate in a remarkably active and productive fashion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>CMOs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract thinking style</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generate innovative solutions</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imaginative</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistent</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decisive</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek high levels of activity</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open to new ideas</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek to understand people</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adapt to different audiences</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outgoing</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not beholden to structures and guidelines</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take initiative and test limits</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unconventional</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuasive</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusive</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bold</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lead from the front</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CMOs as they seek the CEO role

Inside the Mind of the CMO
As their role grows and changes, CMOs increasingly look to the CEO role—with mixed results

CMOs aspiring to the CEO role can bring a uniquely innovative sensibility to that role. We found that chief marketing officers differ significantly from chief executive officers on nine psychometric attributes. CMOs hoping to become a CEO will find these traits may potentially help or hinder their forward career path.

![Statistically significant differences from CEOs that hinder CMOs as they seek the CEO role](image)

- **33%** more unconventional
- **32%** more likely to eschew structures and guidelines
- **29%** more likely to display flashy leadership

![Statistically significant differences from CEOs that help or hinder CMOs as they seek the CEO role](image)

- **22%** more bold
- **21%** more abstract thinking style
- **21%** more outgoing

![Statistically significant differences from CEOs that help CMOs as they seek the CEO role](image)

- **36%** more imaginative
- **32%** more likely to adapt to different audiences
- **32%** more likely to take initiative and test limits

FOR CMOs WHO WANT TO BE A CEO …

- **Be in the right place.** Faster-moving or more transformational industries, in particular, are better suited to the CMO leadership style, as are companies in the midst of change or innovation programs. CMOs may struggle as a CEO in more heavily regulated industries.

- **CMOs need to moderate how they display some of their more extreme attributes.** CMOs test limits, are bold and are upfront in their influencing style. CEOs seek to understand different perspectives and involve others in decisions but do not overanalyze. They achieve success through others yet remain tough minded.

- **Make sure others are on board.** The CMO leadership style can be unconventional, colorful and flashy. CEOs exhibit measured emotion. CEOs excel at calculated—not careless—risk taking. They display intensity but maintain control.
CMOs and chief information officers/chief technology officers (CIO/CTO) are increasingly being challenged to work closely together, and this partnership can be fruitful but rocky. One possible driver of this effect is the extreme personality of CMOs across four core traits. Compared with CIOs/CTOs, CMOs are far more unconventional, innovative, imaginative and willing to test limits.

Additionally, when we compare CMOs with chief financial officers (CFO), we see even greater gaps across these attributes. This reflects both the extreme personality of the CMO and the strong contrast we generally observe between CFOs and their other C-suite peers, reflecting the role CFOs play in managing risk by counterbalancing their colleagues’ more boundary-pushing traits.

### CMOs vs. CIOs/CTOs and CFOs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>COMPARED WITH CIOs/CTOs, CMOs ARE ...</th>
<th>COMPARED WITH CFOs, CMOs ARE ...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UNCONVENTIONAL</td>
<td>29% more unconventional</td>
<td>40% more unconventional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INNOVATIVE</td>
<td>13% more innovative</td>
<td>29% more innovative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMAGINATIVE</td>
<td>32% more imaginative</td>
<td>60% more imaginative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEST LIMITS</td>
<td>21% more willing to test limits</td>
<td>30% more willing to test limits</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**HOW CAN ORGANIZATIONS LEVERAGE THESE TENSIONS PRODUCTIVELY?**

- **Embrace stylistic differentiation within the C-suite.**
  As the notion of “diversity of mindset” becomes an ever more desirable element of company culture, organizations should view a non-uniform C-suite as an asset, not a liability. By fending off groupthink, the sharp personality differences between CMOs and CIOs/CTOs or CFOs in fact drive creativity and enhance risk management.

- **Let CMOs be innovation engines on a scale broader than traditional Marketing’s turf.**
  Because CMOs’ “imagination DNA” is so much stronger than other C-suite members’, CMOs can be usefully deployed to help solve problems innovatively across any number of areas—not just the typical Marketing remit.
Inside the Mind of the CMO

**CMOs and chief digital officers: Birds of a feather?**

CMOs and chief digital officers are extreme personality types with a good deal of “leadership DNA” in common. Both groups show innovative thinking, intellectual openness and the ability to adapt their message across audiences. However, while CDOs focus on disruption—leveraging their contemplative nature to engineer new ways to push the envelope—CMOs, true to their functional role, are far more focused on straightforward selling. They are change agents up to a point but then prioritize persuasion, whereas CDOs would choose to break down barriers.

**HOW CAN ORGANIZATIONS BEST DEPLOY CMOs AND CDOs TO EFFECT DIGITAL CHANGE?**

**CMOs**
- Communicate and influence the board and CEO to help drive the company’s digital understanding and engagement.
- Ensure that digital efforts are highly contextualized to overall company strategy.

**CDOs**
- Concretely drive digital transformation efforts.
- Serve as organizational provocateur on digital topics—continually open up new areas of inquiry.
Inside the Mind of the CMO

As the CMO role splinters, different psychological attributes may come to the fore

Perhaps even more fascinating than the psychological picture of CMOs today is the potential schism within the role going forward. On one hand, companies seeking greater disruption than what today's CMOs can provide are appointing a chief digital officer or chief innovation officer. On the other hand, companies seeking to harness the CMO role to more growth-oriented business goals are creating a chief customer/experience officer or chief growth officer position.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavioral and Leadership Trait Spectrum of New Roles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHIEF DIGITAL OFFICER</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executives in this role are charged with leading large-scale digital transformation efforts within an established, complex organization.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge traditional approaches</th>
<th>Innovative</th>
<th>Forward thinking</th>
<th>Embrace calculated risks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurial spirit</td>
<td>Data powered</td>
<td>Accelerate actions</td>
<td>See the big picture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Inside the Mind of the CMO
What’s next for CMOs?

As the CMO role continues to morph, companies will benefit from understanding the following dynamics:

1. USING THE POLARIZING ATTRIBUTES OF THE CMO AS “A FORCE FOR GOOD”
   
   Organizations are challenged to direct CMO energy toward the most important change initiatives—within Marketing or more broadly.

2. UNDERSTANDING WHICH “CMO FLAVORS” THEIR ORGANIZATION TRULY NEEDS
   
   Diagnosing what role (or roles) truly suits an organization’s needs—be it a disruption-focused chief digital officer, a CEO-esque chief growth officer or simply a change-oriented chief marketing officer—is key to optimizing CMO performance.

3. GETTING THE MOST OUT OF “CREATIVE TENSION” WITHIN THE C-SUITE
   
   By understanding the dramatically different psychological attributes of CMOs and their closest C-suite partners (CIOs/CTOs, CFOs), organizations can thoughtfully leverage contrast in thinking to provide a balanced strategic and operational picture.

4. BEING SAVVY ABOUT MATCHING THE CMO TO THE BUSINESS CONTEXT
   
   Depending on business conditions and the company’s life cycle point, organizations will seek a CMO who is further from—or closer to—the polarizing profile of today’s “new breed.”
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