

J E F F R E Y N O L D S



THE
MONSTER
THAT ATE
MARKETING

**A Leader's Guide to
Reimagining, Reengineering,
and Reinvigorating the
Modern Marketing Department**

What Leaders Are Saying About *The Monster That Ate Marketing*

"A useful book in every way, delivering examples that simplify the complex while charting a clear path for marketing leaders to elevate their leadership role."

KEN JOHNSON, CEO, Ridgeline Insights

"*The Monster That Ate Marketing* is a must-learn for all marketers and a must-read for the C-suite. I will be gifting *The Monster That Ate Marketing* to our entire executive team."

REBECCA CATLETT, Director of Marketing & Communication,
Okanagan Specialty Fruits

"Insightful, entertaining, and prescriptive, this book is the first to show us a clear path to victory over the very real and exhausting marketing monster. *The Monster That Ate Marketing* offers a clear path out of our frenetic pace and into a whole new world of coherence, clarity, productivity, and success."

ROB PEREZ, Regional President, First Interstate Bank (Ret.)

"As a marketer of twenty years, most recently in the e-commerce and DTC world, this book could not have been more timely or spot-on! Overall, a fun read with practical insights that resonate and great validation for what I'm feeling and how I operate today."

EMILY HUANG TETZ, Sr. Director of Product Marketing and
Channel Development, Lovevery

"Jeff's grassroots marketing wisdom, combined with his natural ability to motivate and inspire others, makes this book the new go-to reference for any marketing leader."

RICKY LYMAN, Creative Business Coach and Founder, FlipRide

"Entertaining, logical, and easy to read. You'll not only enjoy this book, but you'll refine your way of thinking with each and every page."

COURTNEY FEIDER, BS, CMT, PCC, Management Consultant and Executive Coach

"Jeff Reynolds is an innovative leader in marketing, designing the future for organizations by taking them from what is and building a bridge to what could be. *The Monster That Ate Marketing* concisely puts principles into practice for any marketing leader looking to reinvigorate and modernize their marketing department."

PRINCE MCCLINTON, Founder, Art of Visuals

"People can profess theories all they want (and they often do), but Jeff has done the work and walks the walk. Truly no one better to learn modern marketing leadership from!"

CHRISTINA LENKOWSKI, Podcast Publicity Strategist and Pitch Trainer

"*The Monster That Ate Marketing* is nicely written in a comfortable, conversational style. I was particularly struck with the energy and enthusiasm I sensed behind Jeff Reynolds's revealing stories and insightful guidance. The book's concepts, principles, and practices are lavishly illustrated with many examples drawn from diverse companies and individuals, both present-day and historical."

KARL WIEGERS, PhD, author of *The Thoughtless Design of Everyday Things*

"So many business books spoon-feed you ideas on how to do better marketing—which is fine. But on every damn page of *The Monster That Ate Marketing*, Jeff Reynolds hits you with a lead pipe of awesomeness and wisdom on how to become a better marketing leader. Grab a package of highlighters, a couple pens, and a notepad. You're about to be slammed with the knowledge and steps to becoming a modern marketing leader."

TRAVIS FRANKLIN, Senior Marketing Manager, QualityLogic

"This is not simply a motivational book with clever quotes from marketing gurus. This is a toolbox filled with real-life charts, graphs, bullet points, key takeaway summaries, and challenges to action. Jeff lays out a personal manifesto for change and an instruction manual to put it into action."

MARK STINSON, author of *A World of Creativity* and host of the podcast *Unlocking Your World of Creativity*



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*The Monster That Ate Marketing: A Leader's Guide to Reimagining,
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For those who believe in the
power of getting sh*t done.

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A Leader's Guide to
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and Reinvigorating the
Modern Marketing Department

JEFF REYNOLDS



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Introduction:

My Wake-Up Call

“No pressure, no diamonds.”

– Thomas Carlyle

Marc Andreessen is smart. The inventor of the first commercially viable web browser and founder of one of Silicon Valley’s bellwether venture capital firms, Mr. Andreessen has forgotten more about building companies than I will ever know. So when given the opportunity to pitch our start-up to him, my cofounder and I went in prepared. Or so we thought.

In the prior few weeks, we had raced between coffee shops along University Avenue in Palo Alto, pitching our start-up, Wevorce. As crazy as it sounds, we were (and the company still is) reinventing divorce by making it calm and collaborative, an experience, however painful, that could better preserve the relationship between both parents even as the marriage was ending. By the time we began courting investors, the company

had earned a spot in Y Combinator, the world's leading start-up accelerator, as well as coverage in the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and elsewhere.* All this attention attracted the support of big names in the legal field as well as hundreds of early customers.

Our progress made it surprisingly easy to get introductions to angel investors—so easy that we stacked meetings in thirty-minute increments, strategically switching locations between each one. We'd rush into a coffee shop, do a meeting for half an hour, then rush out to our next one down the street.

Most of the angels wrote investment checks while the coffee was still hot. The emotion-packed story of my cofounder's childhood divorce trauma captured their attention while my marketing wherewithal—honed over decades of running advertising agencies—sealed the deal. Other companies solved hard technical problems; we knew how to sell.

The funds we'd raised from these individual investors gave us a strong start. Now we hoped that an investment with Andreessen Horowitz, the Valley's preeminent venture capital firm, would put us in orbit. It was not an easy meeting to get. If not for a personal introduction from one of the founders of Y Combinator, the meeting would never have happened so early in our lifecycle. This gave us a mostly unearned sense of inevitability. We were confident, maybe even cocky, but still nervous.

With our sales prowess, surely, we could convince Mr. Andreessen to invest, right?

Wrong.

He was polite enough, listening to the first half of our

presentation while he enjoyed his breakfast (an omelet and a selection of freshly squeezed juices delivered by a man in a chef's hat). Occasionally, he or one of his blue-shirt-and-khaki-pants-wearing colleagues would politely interrupt to ask a clarifying question. Smooth sailing.

We got this, we thought.

Then we clicked to our PowerPoint slide on the unit economics of the business. The slide showed how revenue and expenses would look on a per-customer, or unit, basis. We had intended to move quickly through this slide, but Mr. Andreessen interrupted. He wanted to understand the numbers.

With a series of rapid-fire questions, this legendary investor laid waste to our projections. They were entirely out of whack. Our customer acquisition costs were much too high compared to our customers' projected lifetime value. We wouldn't be—couldn't be—as profitable as our spreadsheet claimed. All the money invested in building our brand was not paying for itself. I was working hundred-hour weeks at the time, “doing marketing,” but had little to show for it on the bottom line.

I see now that moment marked a turning point. It was there, sitting at the big conference room table on Sand Hill Road, that I recognized I had not approached our marketing efforts properly. Sure, I had made our brand famous and succeeded at attracting early customers. This was no small feat when you're trying to disrupt a staid industry. But I had failed to fully consider how my marketing efforts fit into the much more holistic puzzle of building a business. In other words, I was a success as a marketer in terms of tactical implementation but a failure as a marketing leader.

The next day, Mr. Andreessen sent a kind rejection email. His

* *The New York Times* once even referred to me as “a kind, jittery software designer.” (I should've taken the hint.) <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/05/magazine/y-combinator-silicon-valleys-start-up-machine.html>

venture capital firm would not be investing. And while Wevorce would go on to raise millions in capital from other prominent investors, for me, personally and professionally, nothing was as valuable as Mr. Andreessen's (presumably unintentional) lesson.

In the years that followed, I became consumed with marketing leadership, particularly with how to best structure and motivate a marketing organization to generate sustainable business results. Discussion on the topic was scarce. Thinkers like Seth Godin were illuminating big philosophical ideas about the field, while writers like Donald Miller and Jay Levinson wrote prescriptive tactical playbooks. Few, if any, bridged the gap between big ideas and tactics from a marketing leader perspective.

This book aims to do just that.

Not Another Tactical Marketing Book

This is not a book about marketing. It is a book about marketing leadership—or, more specifically, the practice of marketing leadership. Like the practice of yoga or the practice of medicine, mastering marketing leadership is a continuous journey of trying, failing, and ultimately improving.

As Seth Godin wrote in *The Practice*: “The practice is not the means to the output; the practice *is* the output, because the practice is all we can control.” The *Bhagavad Gita*, one of the sacred texts of Hinduism, expresses the same concept this way: “The wise man lets go of all results, whether good or bad, and is focused on the action alone.”

I'm asking marketing leaders to stop obsessing over what they can't control—Google's algorithm, your boss's anxiety of

the week—and instead, expend their precious resources on the practice of marketing leadership.

Currently, most of the research in this area is being done by large consulting firms. Accenture, McKinsey & Company, Bain & Company, and others have dedicated practice groups conducting studies and advising blue-chip companies on creating high-performance marketing organizations. The trouble is the number of companies with access to these high-priced consultants is exceedingly limited. Most organizations can't afford them. And even if you can, engagement normally requires sign-off at the highest level of your company. These barriers leave many marketing managers and even CMOs to fend for themselves when it comes to organizational development.

The result? Few marketing leaders or would-be marketing leaders invest in thinking deeply about how their departments do their work. These leaders don't have the time, money, or energy to do so. Instead, they medicate their marketing departments with new tactics and technologies that inject them with a dose of novelty and the almighty “measurable results.” Never mind if what is measurable matters at all.

Marketing leaders are increasingly trapped beneath the weight of the marketing-industrial complex, the unspoken alliance of companies who sell advertising, software, data, and all the other cures for whatever ails you. Sometimes the cure is worse than the disease. In this case, the cure is often the cause of the disease. Marketing leaders are pressured to try everything—to *do* everything.

Omniclubhousebookdatatweetinflenurtureserptimization culture is a monster of our own creation. This monster gets its strength by luring us away from the holistic, big-puzzle

view of marketing and tempting us with sugar-high details like specific metrics or new channels. Details are important, of course. But they are not the most important thing, especially for marketing leaders.

Who This Book Is For

The Monster That Ate Marketing is not a book for people who do marketing; rather, it is for those who want to think about *how* marketing is done. The mechanics. The conditions and cultures in which it is practiced well.

This book is written for professional marketers, most notably CMOs, directors, managers, and other leaders—and those growing into a leadership role. It is for the relatively small number of souls who embrace the mantle of marketing leader because of the positive impact they can have on their teams and the world.

This book is not about mastering marketing tactics. It's about creating an environment that develops better marketing, better marketers, and better marketing departments.

In these pages, we'll discuss the mindset, models, and actions that can help you to reimagine, re-engineer, and reinvigorate your marketing department. This book is based on three simple truths:

1. Marketing departments are overwhelmed by infinite possibilities and ever-increasing demands.
2. The forces that got us here won't be the forces that free us.
3. Marketing leaders have the ability—and a responsibility—to fix the practice of modern marketing leadership.

The Monster That Ate Marketing is a call to action. **It is an appeal to marketing leaders to shape the marketing function for the modern world.** To say “no” to busyness so they can say “yes” to effectiveness. To reclaim the role of strategist and leader, instead of reacting to the pandemonium that surrounds them.

Marketing departments have become bucket brigades. We spend our days putting out fires, not preventing them. Someone (the CEO, competitors, even ourselves) strikes the match, tosses it over their shoulder, and—whoosh!—we marketers get the call. Off we go, rushing toward the blaze with our pails of ads filled to the brim with features and benefits, hoping to extinguish the flames. We collapse at the end of the day, exhausted, unsure if our efforts were successful, and certain that the fire will likely reignite tomorrow.

We can't take this anymore! Our profession is at an inflection point. Either we can stand on the sidelines and watch it devolve, or we can reshape our position as marketers, so we are leading not just in *what* we are doing but also in *why* and *how* we are doing it.

How This Book Is Organized

This book is not a strict how-to guide, nor is it purely theoretical. My team at Reynolds+Myers puts everything in these pages to work every day. We've applied this thinking for clients across the United States and beyond. Start-ups. Fortune 500 companies. Multigenerational family businesses. Clients apply the techniques in their own unique ways, but they've all seen their jobs, teamwork, and lives improve. I hope our techniques help you, too.

This book is divided into three main sections:

1. **Taming The Monster:** A look at the current reality of marketing not as an act, but as a profession. An argument for a new approach and a model for organizing the modern marketing organization.
2. **Principles:** An exploration of the simple, yet potent, rules that should guide our thinking and our actions as Modern Marketers.
3. **Practices:** Examples of methods, models, and approaches to improve our day-to-day work. Or what we should be doing as Modern Marketers.

After challenging the conventions and ingrained mental models that are holding our profession back—I call it “muddled marketing”—I will introduce new tools for applying modern marketing thinking to your organization. By the time you reach the end of this book, I hope you have a new perspective on the function of marketing in your organization and on your role as its leader.

The Monster That Ate Marketing is a mix of new and proven ideas. It synthesizes, summarizes, and translates the ideas of some of the great thinkers and doers in business and in marketing. The Suggested Reading section in the back of the book lists some of the people who inspired my team’s and my exploration of the practice of marketing. I invite you to view this book in the same way—not as a book of definitive answers, but as a jumping-off point for finding your own.

Let’s get to work.

PART ONE: Taming the Monster

Amid the terror dawns the promise . . . no period of rapid change is without victims or beneficiaries. Winners or losers. Often, what determines which side we land on is not talent or work ethic. The market doesn’t care how gifted you are as a bowling pinsetter when it no longer demands that its pins be manually set. In times of transformation, it is those who can understand and adapt that fare best. The future of marketing belongs not to the cogs in the machine but to those who design and engineer it.

The following chapters examine the roots of marketing’s current wave of change and discusses how leaders can prepare themselves and their organizations to thrive within it.

Eaten Alive

“Indescribable! Indestructible! Nothing Can Stop It!”

– *The Blob* promotional poster (1958)

Glub . . . Glub . . . Glub.

Those muffled screams you hear? They are the sounds of marketers everywhere, drowning.

The tools that once held so much promise for helping us work smarter and live better have somehow turned against us. Software we hoped would deliver profound insights instead overwhelms us with a tangle of data. Dazzling dashboards display what’s easy to measure, not what is important to measure. New channels cry out to be babysat every hour of every day.

And for what? To invite a debate over some uninformed, half-baked theories by well-meaning colleagues? To fatten up our to-do lists with things we’ll never have time to do?

Marketers deserve better. We deserve to have control over our work, our lives, and our work lives. Instead, we are overwhelmed by a monster of our own creation.

* * *

The 1958 cult classic movie *The Blob* follows two small-town teenagers as they fight a giant gelatinous alien that engulfs everything it touches. The more it touches, the more it grows, eventually swelling to the point that it threatens to absorb the entire town. The teens try to warn the police sergeant, but the old codger, unable to see the new reality, refuses to believe them.

You probably get the metaphor. The Blob represents the crush of fads, technology, and data that form current, muddled marketing practices. The town, depending on your organization's size, is your department, division, or company. The police sergeant is your boss. And the teenagers? They're you.

Most marketers spend their days battling the Marketing Blob. They're trying futilely to get the attention of their bosses and colleagues to explain that the ever-expanding list of duties, channels, reporting, and technologies is smothering them—that their workload is untenable, and the energy needed, unsustainable.

This isn't working. The Blob continues to grow, but others don't see it or don't appreciate its potential to devour every free unit of time, focus, and budget.

The marketing department sees the Blob even when others can't. We watch as the creature, in the form of increasing demands and fewer resources, consumes our ability to achieve our goals. Days are spent answering emails, sitting in meetings, and generating reports. Mission-critical tasks get pushed aside as the crisis *du jour* consumes our days and nights, our weekdays and weekends.

Marketers, once in the envious role of *Mad Men* (and *Women*),

find themselves buried under the weight of the Marketing Blob. What once felt like an exciting, creative career has devolved into a constant crush of to-dos. *Think about tomorrow? I don't have the time and energy to think about today.*



The Marketing Blob represents the crush of to-dos, technology, and other distractions that force marketers to be reactive rather than proactive in their day-to-day work.

I hear the stories all the time.

Jason, a former marketing director at a regional group of auto dealerships, describes a schedule that had him “trapped in the hamster wheel,” working ten to twelve hours a day reacting to other people's emergencies but making little progress toward the company's marketing goals.

Katie, a graphic designer recently promoted to marketing

manager at a global agribusiness giant, shares her insecurity about the constant flood of new technologies, channels, and trends: “I have no idea what I’m doing!”

Milo, director of marketing at a mid-size software firm, scrambles to keep up with the constant frenzy of new ideas from his CEO and board of directors: “They’re just trying to be helpful, but they’re pulling [us] in a million different directions.”

It doesn’t have to be this way. You don’t have to spend your days—or your entire career!—battling the Marketing Blob. But to win, you will have to make some changes.

* * *

Marketers are at a crossroads. We can accept the Marketing Blob, along with the chaos and stress it begets. Or we can take back our profession, reclaiming our position as professional and proactive value generators. And as thinkers, strategists, and masters of execution.

To reclaim what it means to be a marketer, we must:

- Define our purpose (a.k.a. our why), goals, and strategies.
- Build our capacity to support them.
- Align our day-to-day priorities with all of the above.

This reclamation entails letting go of feelings that we’re missing out or somehow not doing our job by not knowing or trying everything. It demands that we stop worrying about collecting and connecting all the dots and instead become focused on the right dots.

Leadership is the single greatest force for moving a company

through this change. This means you. The ability of a marketing leader to align the organization’s goals, strategy, and capacity so that the entire organization’s energy is channeled in the same direction directly correlates with the organization’s ability to escape the clutches of the Marketing Blob and thrive. Those who do, we call Modern Marketers—capitalized. Being a Modern Marketer is distinct from merely surviving the all-too-common chaos of today’s approach to marketing, which I refer to as muddled marketing. By the end of this book, you will have three sets of tools to apply to the quest of creating a modern marketing department:

- 1.** The structural model of the modern marketing Organization (see “Ready, Set . . . Why” in Part One)
- 2.** Key principles Modern Marketers use to guide their thinking (covered in Part Two)
- 3.** Practices, mental models, and techniques you can take today to leverage the model and put this thinking to work (yes, in Part Three)



Modern Marketers don't view tasks and tactics as standalone activities. Instead, they see how these projects can become programs, working together holistically to reach greater heights.

When marketers become Modern Marketers, they stop racing haphazardly from shiny object to shiny object and begin building a marketing machine. They bring order to their lives. Inch by inch, goal by goal, the benefits reveal themselves. Your work begins compounding like your 401(k), with successes stacking ever higher to deliver greater returns from the same effort.

The result is a marketing machine of sorts that takes significantly less day-to-day effort to run, producing results while you move on to the next interesting challenge. This is how marketing should work. And it does if you have the courage to make it happen.

My colleagues and clients have reported that these techniques have helped them build marketing departments that are more:

Agile: Moving swiftly with precision and ease—not because someone set a three-alarm marketing fire.

Open-minded: Seeing previously invisible opportunities by reducing the influence of common cognitive biases.

Goal-based: Rallied around a shared vision of the future.

Value-creating: Stripping the busywork away from the high-value work, and concentrating on the latter.

Learning-obsessed: Incentivized to iterate, then retain and share knowledge.

Influential: Able to shape decision-makers beyond the marketing organization.

Fun . . . yes, fun: Rediscovering the joy of creativity and influence.

How does this vision compare to the way most marketing departments are currently run? The best modern marketing departments are well-organized problem-solving machines that go about their day-to-day operations with a sense of purpose. They manage a small number of tools to do a relatively large number of tasks. And, importantly, they have time to explore hidden corners of the market for high-leverage opportunities and apply the power of human ingenuity to seize them.

Muddled marketing departments don't work that way. They are anachronistic, just a bit out of sync with the needs of the

times. They are twentieth-century organizations, filled with marketers scrambling to squeeze in a few moments of focus for their most consequential work while an unremitting stream of meetings, emergencies, and administrative tasks tug them away. Plans go unexecuted. Budgets are unspent or misspent—though it can be difficult to know since there’s no consensus on what we’re trying to accomplish. *How are things at work? I’m swamped.* We’ve said or heard it so often that we’ve convinced ourselves that being crazy busy is a badge of honor.

Marketing leaders have the power—and a responsibility—to change that.

The next twenty years are arguably marketing’s greatest opportunity for transition. It’s all coming at us—fast: artificial intelligence, globalization, and the exponential growth of connected machines and humans. Historically, such times of transition are painful. While scholars meticulously organize historical eras into tidy packages, like the stone, bronze, and iron ages, the fact is, there are no neat lines dividing one era from another. There’s lots of disorder on the edges, and there’s a lot of pain as the tools and cultural mores of the current era tussle with those of the emerging one.

This is where marketing finds itself. Our language, job titles, and thought processes are anchored in the past, only loosely tethered to the needs of today.

Strangely, many self-appointed thought leaders and gurus have responded to this turbulence by taking a reductionist view. They attempt to break marketing down into all its component parts, stressing over optimizing specific tactics or channels. They deal out their secrets like a deck of cards, treating each one as the solution to all that ails you. Their clickbait headlines

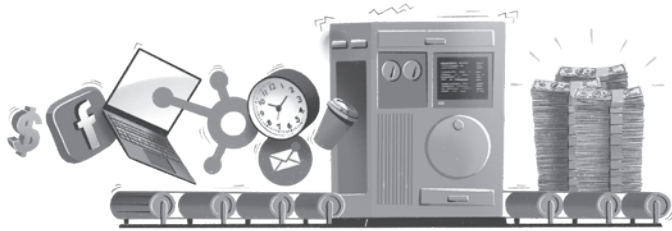
include gems like “5 Secrets to . . .,” “The One Thing To Do This Year . . .,” and “3 Advertising Trends Not To Miss!”

Real marketing—and certainly, leading a marketing department—doesn’t work that way. It is much more holistic. A marketing department is an ecosystem, an interplay of people and messaging and tools and context and everything else. It’s important to understand how all the pieces and parts function, but the real job of a modern marketing leader is to shape the whole.

When the ground is shifting beneath you, it is natural to grasp at anything seemingly more stable. The text of your Facebook ads, the color of your website checkout button, and upward-trending analytics charts provide a welcome distraction from the much more strenuous responsibilities of modern marketing leadership: developing strategy, culture, and capacity. Muddled Marketers embrace new tools and toys unquestionably because they provide the illusion of productivity while simultaneously helping them avoid the accountability and emotional labor that comes with making the hard decisions. Modern Marketers, in contrast, practice a sort of marketing minimalism wherein they strip away the superfluous to free themselves to focus on what’s most important.

Our industry is in a moment of great flux. The tools and thinking that are going to enable it in the long run are still in development. There were thirty years between the invention of preserving food in tin cans and the invention of a can opener. For decades, people pried their cans of beans open with just a hammer and chisel.* Today, there are umpteen modern marketing can openers yet to be invented.

* There’s an argument that the timing of the invention of the tin can was the single greatest factor in the rise of the US: <https://www.cancentral.com/>



Creating a Modern Marketing “machine” takes the chaos of limitless channels, technology, and to-dos and uses them as fuel for accomplishing meaningful business objectives.

The Memo That Changed Marketing

Neil McElroy had to have known he was taking a risk. After all, the young advertising manager had just cranked out a three-page memo despite the fact that his boss, Proctor and Gamble president Richard Redwood Deupree, famously preferred things boiled down to a single page.* But McElroy was desperate for help. He was overwhelmed with his duties as “brand man” for Camay Soap, “the soap of beautiful women.” He was angling to hire two assistants and hoped his memo would make a convincing case. In fewer than eight hundred words, the “brand man memo,” as it came to be known, presented a vision of proactive brand management. A first. McElroy outlined the case for marketers to not only handle traditional product promotion, which had been the convention, but also take full responsibility for all of the marketing elements related to the brand.

This responsibility included the big spends on advertising and packaging, as well as research, positioning, sales support, budgeting, and more.

The memo worked. It got McElroy his two hires and birthed the corporate marketing department as we know it today. His ideas moved marketing’s function from under the thumb of the sales department to its own specialty.

That was in 1931, before TV, mobile phones, the internet, or the Kardashians. Since then, we have transformed nearly every tool of our trade, yet have kept the same structure, processes, mindsets, and measurements from back when Herbert Hoover was president.

Sure, there were notable breakthroughs. The iconic mascots of the 1950s. The tightly positioned copy of the 1960s. The emotional resonance of Apple’s 1984 Super Bowl ad.

The language changes. Pop culture changes. But somehow the marketing department has remained suspended in amber.

Except for the expectations.

So-called advancements in technology, from desktop publishing to social media, continue to pile responsibility on the marketing department. “The marketing department somehow became the catch-all,” Jason, our auto dealer marketing director, laments. “We end up owning internal culture, early customer support, events, and basically all new ideas because there is no one else to handle it.”

Technology has ratcheted up the pressure on marketing departments to produce. In the 1990s, a fifty-person creative team at Ogilvy, one of the world’s best-run agencies, produced about 360 deliverables per year. Today, that number is fifteen

* *In Search of Excellence*; Tom Peters

thousand.* What once took weeks to produce now takes hours or even just a few minutes—and expectations have risen accordingly. We have volunteered for an arms race against ourselves. There are no signs of things slowing down.

The Five Forces Feeding the Marketing Blob

The Marketing Blob is not a passing fad; it is here to stay. Whether you are the CMO of a *Fortune* 100 company or the CEO of a small e-commerce company, the forces driving the complexity of marketing show no signs of going away. The five primary forces fall into five categories:

1. Increasing importance of marketing within organizations
2. Increasing complexity to support this importance
3. Increasing amount of technology needed to manage this complexity
4. Increasing amounts of data generated by technology
5. The same human limitations

Increasing Importance of Marketing

It's easier than ever to create a company, a product, or a brand. It's harder than ever to stand out. This combination makes the marketing function crucial to the success of almost every company.

In the early twentieth century, improvements in product manufacturing spawned the need for brand building—from McElroy and his ilk—to help consumers differentiate among this

* These are actual numbers from agency consultant Michael Farmer, as discussed with Peter Levitan. <https://peterlevitan.com/>

proliferation of products. Today, this is true in the extreme. How do we know which products or services to choose? Marketing.

The power dynamics may not have moved fully in favor of marketers yet, but the tide is shifting. Some of the world's most prominent companies, from Disney to McDonald's to Tesla, are headed by marketers. Marketers are increasingly acting as the advocate for the customer, championing better products and better usability. Even at smaller companies, marketing roles are gaining a louder voice within their organizations. I would argue it should be even greater.

Increasing Complexity Supporting Marketing's Importance

When I was a young account manager, my marketing plans were always organized by the media mix: TV advertising, print advertising, public relations, and so on. We generally clustered the various media into sixteen categories. This number of options seemed overwhelming at the time, but I now know that we were actually drawing from an extremely limited palette of options. We were stuck coloring with the cheap Happy Meal sleeve of crayons compared to the giant box of Crayolas that has become standard issue today.*

Similarly, as marketing—and, as a result, the marketing department—grew in significance to the organization, an elaborate new ecosystem sprouted up. This ecosystem consists of a host of new tools, ranging from thinking (conferences and methodologies) to software (data analytics and automation) to consultants (hi). It all proliferated, partly because new tools like

* Crayola manufactures 120 standard colors, plus a handful of specialty colors, at any given time.

these were necessary to address the flood of changes, and partly because there were riches to be made.

No longer was a primary target audience sufficient. Now we needed personas and archetypes. I'm not saying these things aren't valuable. I'm only saying that they added vast complexity to the lives of marketers. Complexity that continues to expand as new channels and challenges are heaped on top.

More Technology to Manage Complexity

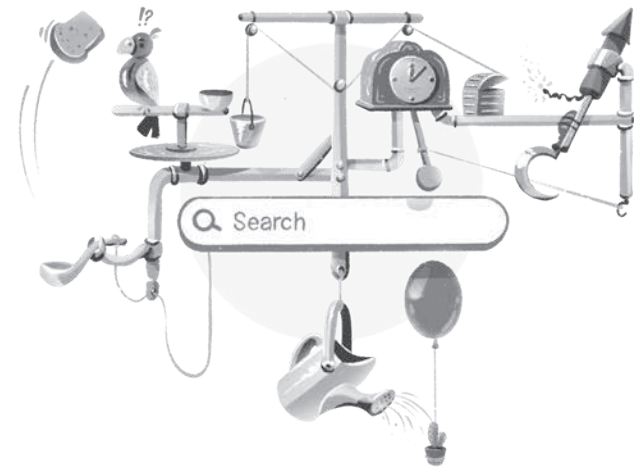
The upside of these tools is that we can, theoretically, do more in less time. The downside of all these tools is that we can, theoretically, do more in less time. Read that again. Too much of a good thing is still too much. More channels + more data + more tools = more complexity.

To manage all of this new complexity, we rely on an increasingly unwieldy collection of software. A typical enterprise today uses *ninety-one* marketing cloud services.* That doesn't even include sales CRMs or other internal collaboration tools. When an organization uses dozens of tools to manage its marketing tasks, then just learning and organizing those tools becomes a significant part of the workday.

Increasingly, when we say "tools," we mostly mean the software that powers our daily work lives, including project management, timekeeping, accounting, analytics dashboards, and so forth. While humans need the software, the software increasingly does not need the humans. Instead, many software programs use an API (application programming interface) to communicate with

other software. Most mortals don't understand how computers actually communicate or how to interact with the code, adding yet more complexity. Take the world's most popular search engine, for example. Google has been developed over nearly two decades by thousands of software engineers. There is quite literally not a single human who can grasp exactly how the code that runs Google works.

The paradox is that technology both relieves and adds to the complexity in our lives.



Many tools we use provide marketers with an illusion of control when the reality is that their complexity makes true control impossible.

Consider this sample of tools utilized daily by a typical marketing specialist of different eras . . .

* <https://chiefmartec.com/2017/06/average-enterprise-uses-91-marketing-cloud-services/>

Marketer Tools 1960s	Marketer Tools 2020s
Notepad	Notepad
Pen & pencil	Pen & pencil
Memos	Memos
Consumer research	Consumer research
Typewriter	Laptop
	Email
	CRM(s)
	Digital asset manager(s)
	Optimization & testing software
	Content management system(s)
	Project management software
	Performance dashboards
	Search engines
	SEO analysis software
	Data visualization tools
	Marketing automation software
	Email marketing software
	Messaging software
	Collaboration software
	Scheduling software
	Timekeeping software
	Analytics software (multiple)
	Social media (multiple)
	Smartphone

More Data Generated by Technology

In the time it takes to finish reading this sentence, another one thousand terabytes of data will be generated. For reference, in the 1960s, about the time David Ogilvy was inventing advertising as we know it, the cost of a hard drive to store that much data would be about ten billion dollars. That's a lot of zeroes.

Terabytes upon terabytes of data must be valuable, right? As it turns out, no. Most organizations are not equipped with the necessary people, processes, or tools to deal with it. Forget big data; we can't even handle small data.

One day, I was touring the headquarters of a fast-growing technology company. It was operationally excellent, with a first-rate product marketing team who put a great emphasis on understanding the needs of their customers. When we got to the marketing department, our guide called over to their latest hire, a data scientist. We talked for a moment about his work. His role, he explained, was to answer questions about customer behavior in their app. I asked where the questions originated, and he explained that product marketers would funnel them to him based on their active projects.

"How do you know which questions to try to answer first?" I asked.

"I answer the easiest stuff first," he answered earnestly.

"And what if the easy stuff isn't important?"

"My job is to create the data, not to make sense of it," he replied.

The Same Human Limitations

The four drivers described above have transformed our work but have not transformed us. Technology, while powerful, hasn't changed fundamental human instincts. Self-preservation and socialization (our desire to be part of the tribe or herd) still propel us.* We may be armed with an MBA, a laptop, and an

* Sex drive, while undoubtedly a significant part of our lives and even some people's work lives, is outside the scope of this book.

Excel spreadsheet, but our DNA doesn't care. More data just provides more opportunities for us to tell ourselves stories that justify our beliefs. We're only human, after all.

"The problem with 'We, the People' is you, the people."

— David Javerbaum, in @TheTweetOfGod

Technology Can't Save Us

As the Marketing Blob has grown, marketers have turned to technology as a lifeline, but in the process, we have only made the monster stronger. We create new channels to reach customers, new methods to understand them, and new tools to manage it all. The software and automation we had hoped would offer relief from our overload just exacerbates the problem. With each new addition, we volunteer to increase our to-do list as well as the time we spend learning and babysitting this new tool. But how often do we ask whether the addition is worth it? Is it really solving a problem, or is it creating new ones?

One thing all the tools do is generate more information. Data has become the security blanket of the marketing profession, soothing us with an illusion of facts and truth and answers even where there are none. I'm using the word "data" here as a catch-all for the loads of information—qualitative and quantitative—that we must consider or use in our role as marketers. This data includes raw data, such as analytics and statistics, as well as more refined data, like strategic plans, news, TED Talks, and your boss's opinions.

Data is both the fuel and the output of twenty-first century marketing. Our job is to ingest it and then create work that

produces more of it. Customer research becomes insights which become ad campaigns which become analytics which become customer research. It's a hamster wheel.

Obviously, we need data. But marketers must recognize that data alone won't solve marketing problems any more than a gym membership solves beer belly problems.

Entrepreneurs have responded by creating an entirely new subindustry of marketing: MarTech. We must be experts not only in the craft and trade of marketing, but also in all the technology that runs it. From the earliest days, MarTech's great promise to marketers was measurability.

The ability to track customer actions was supposed to be the response to John Wanamaker's famous quote that has haunted advertising for a hundred years: "Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted; the trouble is I don't know which half."* By now, we should all know which half is working. Most marketers don't. As useful as all this MarTech is, its primary output is even *more* information, which runs head-on into the same human limitations we've always had.

Lack of data isn't our problem; too much data is. In a data-bloated environment, the biggest challenge becomes sifting through the morass to focus on what matters. Statistician Nassim Nicholas Taleb explains this well in *Antifragile*:

* Wanamaker was a rockstar of marketing's "convincing" marketing era. He once took out an advertisement that explained how he worked in five steps. The first one? "We advertise what we have for sale." *The Entrepreneurs*. Robert Sobel, 1974.

In business and economic decision-making, data causes severe side effects—data is now plentiful thanks to connectivity; and the share of spuriousness in the data increases as one gets more immersed into it. A not well discussed property of data: it is toxic in large quantities—even in moderate quantities.

Just because you can get more data doesn't mean you should. As Taleb explains, “more data—such as paying attention to the eye colors of people around you when crossing the street—can make you miss the big truck.” Marketers go to work every day feeling the truck bearing down on them while everyone else fixates on customer eye color.

Modern marketing is not about gathering more data. It's about gathering the right data and using it to get where you need to go.

Mining and collecting data has never been cheaper, yet it comes at a cost. More time spent sifting. More technology you must learn to manage. More decision fatigue. More arguing over irrelevant factors. And more team members needed to keep it all straight.

Technology can't save us because what is deficient isn't our tools; it is our deeply ingrained belief that more information, more data—more, more, more—will somehow assuage our anxiety. Marketers often believe a fantasy that somehow, in the midst of the hurricane, the solution is to unleash more debris when what we first need to do is take shelter.

The good news? There is a better way.

Takeaways

- The complexity of modern marketing will consume us if we let it.
- It's driven by five forces that are exacerbated, not relieved, by technology.
- The way to thrive in this environment is to focus on what matters most and ignore the rest.

Check-In

- Do you struggle to keep up with your to-do list? Why?
- How have the five fuels of the Marketing Blob affected your industry? Your company?
- Do you feel pressure to collect more data and use more technology? Do you have the skills and resources to comfortably manage it all?
- What could you do to counter the demands of the urgent so you can focus on the important?