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CMOs, Are You Brave Enough To Go 'Agile?'

This article is by Michael LeBeau, CEO, managing partner and founder, Scrum50.

Do you have the courage to embrace “agile marketing?” Many have read the theory. But the plain fact is that few marketers are actually executing with agility. True agility calls for re-learning how planning and program-development happens. First and foremost, it requires a forward-thinking CMO who agrees with the culture shift inherent in agile methodology.

Agile is a lightning rod. Ever wonder why?

Agile’s adjectives include fast, efficient, better. Its promise is intoxicating. Its reputation is certifiable. Its reality is, well, unconventional. It flattens hierarchies by empowering middle managers to prove out programs. Agile decisions become a function of consumer behavior, not marketing department opinion. Agile pushes the envelope, testing ideas quickly, knowing that some will sink and others swim.

To succeed at agility, first become comfortable with planning disruption.

Agile marketing wasn’t designed for the satisfaction of CMOs and marketing departments. To the contrary, agile punctures complacency by:

- a. Eliminating the large, consensus-seeking internal meetings;
- b. Devaluing the subjective in favor of objective data; and

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c. Demonstrating that failure is an option. Failure not only needs to be tolerated, but is key to any honest testing regime.

Second, stop fighting it. Recognize that agile is not only superior — it's inescapable.

Agile marketing leaves traditional planning practices in the dust. Today's always-on consumers mean the familiar 12- to 18-month campaign planning cycle is a thing of the past. The traditional model was okay back when companies could still afford to make big gambles and be wrong once in a while. But they no longer have the budgets — or timelines — to make investments in concepts that don't work. The traditional model had as its cornerstone the focus group. The unspoken truth of focus groups, however, is that their social dynamics and biases delivered too many false positives. Agile is like a marketplace focus group — but a legitimate one.

Recognize that “lean” and “agile” are invading every industry.

Agile methodology originated with software developers, around the time manufacturing companies pioneered lean management. Lean started at companies like Toyota, as a process to speed up manufacturing. These practices are now informing and reshaping marketing. For the marketing department, agile methodology delivers in three ways:

1. Produces great work in the shortest period of time;
2. Gains huge efficiencies with leaner creative brand management teams; and
3. Improves the quality of client output by staying highly focused.

CMOs brave enough to embrace agile will reconcile themselves to the fundamental changes they'll need to make internally. They'll also face the more difficult challenge of bringing their agency partners along with them.

In each initiative, the agile practitioner is placing a small bet, with the idea of scaling up those ideas or programs that do work. Naturally, not every bet will pay off. But some will. One of the best features of agile marketing is that failure occurs only when your bets are small, for example, below the radar — limiting any damage to your consumer relationships, not to mention your brand reputation.

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