

Top Marketing Officers Find Getting Together Helps Them Do the Job

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As chief marketing officers, Judy Verses of [Verizon](#), Michael Linton of [Best Buy](#) and Andrea Ragnetti of [Philips Electronics](#) are responsible for promoting very different products. Yet they share many of the same challenges in a job that has become increasingly complex and risky.

While their predecessors focused primarily on mass-market advertising, today's CMO must maneuver among an array of marketing outlets -- from Internet sites to cable-TV and movie-theater advertising to store promotions -- in an effort to reach diverse global customers. At the same time, they must justify each of their expenditures to CEOs who want quick returns on campaigns -- and who quickly replace marketing chiefs who don't deliver. According to a recent survey by executive recruiters Spencer Stuart, the average tenure of CMOs is just 23 months.

That has led some CMOs to turn to each other for support and problem solving. Like CEOs who mingle frequently at conferences, CMOs feel they can talk more frankly with their counterparts at other companies who share their work challenges but are removed from office politics.

Many are attending seminars and joining groups, such as Georgia State University's Marketing Roundtable. Founded 15 years ago, the Atlanta-based group, which costs members an annual fee of \$6,000, is more popular than ever "because marketing options and product pricing are more complicated, and consumers are busier, harder to reach and harder to figure out," says founder Ken Bernhardt, a marketing professor.

Ms. Verses, Mr. Linton, Mr. Ragnetti and 47 other CMOs have each paid \$50,000 to join Marketing 50, which held its first get-together in October. They were attracted by the chance to network and exchange ideas with peers from other big, global companies, including Kodak, Coke and General Electric. "It's a noncompetitive group with just one executive from a particular industry, so they have a chance to get ideas they can use that their competitors may not know about and also try to figure out some of their common problems," says founder Richard Smith, a former Spencer Stuart executive recruiter.

The gatherings may also help CMOs improve their ability to work collaboratively. "To succeed, they have to work across company functions with many business unit leaders," notes Gail McGovern, a Harvard Business School professor and former AT&T marketing executive.

Mr. Ragnetti, whose CMO post didn't exist at Philips before he was recruited to the company two years ago, joined Marketing 50 partly for the chance to build alliances with companies he does business with. Because of Philips's diverse product mix, "we're either a business partner, supplier, client or competitor with more than 20 of the other members, and with some we're both a supplier and competitor," he says. "Now I can solve, right on the spot, some conflicts that occur, and build networks and useful relationships," he adds.

He has also sought advice about his own challenge of building a global brand for a company that makes everything from shavers and electric toothbrushes to industrial lighting, complex medical systems and semiconductors. That task is complicated by the need to persuade Philips employees from disparate businesses and locations to identify with and support one global brand. "We want everyone to focus on the theme of delivering simple technology, but winning over engineers and Ph.D.s who file 3,000 patents a year and take pride in their complex innovations takes time," he says.

His peers at the meeting understood that challenge, as well as the difficulty he sometimes faces convincing other Philips executives that marketing can add to the bottom line. "When you meet the top 40, 50 marketing executives in the world and they all express the same problems, you don't feel so isolated," he says. "And when you return to your company and say GE or Kodak is doing this or that, it carries more weight than saying a consultant suggested a certain strategy."

Verizon's Ms. Verses initially hesitated about taking time off from her job to attend the meetings. But her interest was piqued by the chance to meet peers from industries outside telecommunications. "I figured I could spend thousands of dollars on consultants or be in a room of peers who'd come to some solutions," she says.

At the meeting, she sought advice from one CMO who had delivered a high return on a particular marketing investment, something she is aiming to do. He told her how he had organized a marketing campaign for a sports event and then leveraged that investment by getting a book published about the event and running part of the ad campaign on Internet sites.

"I came away with advice on how to do more with less," says Ms. Verses, who is seeking ways to battle cable-company inroads into Verizon's local and regional markets. She plans to meet again soon with six other members of the group at a regional meeting, before convening again with the whole group in a few months.

Best Buy's Mr. Linton, who initially worried group discussions would be too general, says he gained perspective on the marketing tools favored by other CMOs. "It's impossible for any one company to know about every new tool, so hearing what is working for others helps," he says.