

CMOs, The Time Is Now To Assign An AI Leader via @sejournal, @dannydenhard



There are three types of marketing leaders right now:

1. The one worried about performance and just had enough time in leadership meetings to hear what everyone else's opinion is on AI.
2. The marketing leader who is having to firefight and has spoken to their team about AI and the implications.
3. The marketing leader who has played with some AI tools and used a few prompts to see if it's useful.

There should be a fourth who is planning for the future, trying to work out where AI sits in their organization and how to get ahead, so they do not get lost and can confidently say we have an internal owner.

Right now, I only know a handful of chief marketing officers who are taking it seriously enough.

The Challenge: Trust

The challenge for most is, “Who do I trust enough to do a great job in pulling the department, and often the non-technical parts of the company, on the AI journey?”

As someone who’s held both CMO and chief growth officer titles and now coaches C-Suite leaders and consults, I decided to dedicate the last six months to going deep into AI.

I have worked with companies in and around AI since 2022. However, over the last six months, we have seen AI transition from a set of tools and models to help, to starting to influence the reduction of team headcounts and being responsible for hiring freezes unless you can prove AI cannot do it first.

If you haven’t started, it will become a hotly discussed talking point in board and leadership meetings.

The promise of AI is exactly what everyone is looking for: productivity gains (not starting from zero every time), cost savings (on hiring, having to rely on data analysts or agencies), and the ability to leverage competitive advantages. We are seeing some of this play out.

The return on investment of going first and early will mean you are ahead of competitors, you will quickly understand the investment case, and you will be able to calculate ROI early.

The Solution: Two Strategic Approaches

Where to start? Most people struggle with where to start and where it makes sense to kickstart the AI agenda.

With coaching and consultancy clients, I offer two ways to tackle this:

1. Find Your AI Champion: Apply The Owner, Co-Owner, Collaborator Model To AI

You must have an owner – someone who will be there with the team and responsible for championing tech and tools and integrating them into their workflow.

When that owner says something is important, the teams treat it as such. You need an owner for when something breaks, they take control. This is a high-trust role with a lot of status attached.

You have co-owners, those who feel connected – the team members who don't like being left behind but aren't confident enough to own it themselves. You might say these are the ones who are likely on the fence about leaving.

Last are the collaborators, the team members who need to learn, need co-workers to help them develop and talk through what the tools have done and where they have likely used AI to get themselves out of missing a deadline or a situation where they've missed something.

2. Org Design/Org Redesign

This requires a strong and forward-thinking department leader who requires reshaping your teams to adapt to the new technology shift.

A proactive and visionary department leader is now essential. This leader must restructure teams to embrace and adapt to the significant shift towards new technologies.

You are not just shifting for hires and skills gaps, as most do. You are reshaping for the next two years.

You have to plan out how the next six, 12, and 18 months will change, move team members around, where there will be headcount reshuffles, and in this situation, a new technology

that will reach all marketing disciplines.

The Opportunity: You will need to assign a natural long-term leader to AI. AI is not going away and will be the driving force in most businesses for the foreseeable future. You have to get ahead of when boards and C-Suites push you for your plan.

The Threat To Be Ahead Of: You must identify those who just will not naturally fit in the short to mid-term, and reshuffle your team members.

In this “do more with less” era, you will have to be at the front, leading and potentially losing headcount. AI has already seen mass layoffs, and this is unlikely to stop.

You will need to be ahead of the industry shifts. Being ahead is critical. Being close to your new owner or captain is pivotal.

The AI Owner

Who will be the owner of AI? And, how will you reshape your department?

Whether you are a marketing leader or a growth leader, you have to think about where these elements connect and who has the most exposure and muscle memory in big shifts.

Potential AI owners could come from several areas:

- **Social:** Is it a marketer from social media? Being led by platforms to change their content types, to understand the subtle algorithmic changes, and in most cases, had to ramp up the quantity of output.
- **Search:** Is it a search marketer? Is it a leader from organic search? If you have a strong SEO leader who understands other channels, you have someone who has seen huge changes in their industry. They have likely

faced major algorithmic updates and had to adapt to a large number of changes since the early 2010s.

- **Growth:** Are you a modern-day growth organization or an evolving marketing department? Do you have growth pros who look after paid, organic, and potential social?

You will know who fits best in your department. However, I predict it's likely the search or growth team.

You need someone who is used to unpicking shifts – someone who can understand technical aspects and interface with product teams and engineers while teaching their colleagues.

For the top tier of SEO or search professionals, this is something they have had to do for years.

This is an opportunity for your team members, particularly in search, as Carl Hendy and I discussed in a recent podcast: It's time to reset, mature, and take ownership from across different disciplines.

How To Find Your AI Leader

A core skill to look out for in the right candidate is having the ability to understand the importance of changes for the whole business and be able to hold their own with C-Suite executives.

The AI leader will have to hold strong, informed opinions based on knowledge of what is happening and how they assign budget and resources across the business.

Your AI lead will be a close colleague in many important meetings, so you trusting them and being able to learn and gain reverse mentorship will be essential.

The 90-Day Action Plan

Immediate: Week 1-2

- Write your AI plan and create a dedicated presentation to guide the team's success. Have a formalized kickoff: Start with the basics, explainers, examples of what success looks like, a set of approved tools and prompts, and workshops.
- Assign a budget line for AI initiatives.
- Address the department's AI fears through transparent communication.
- Launch formal AI kickoff workshop.

Short-Term: 30-90 Days

- Department Problem Solve: List out all of your existing problems within your department and work through how you can identify existing tools, leverage, and build internal tools and processes with AI to address these.
- Establish bi-weekly AI progress updates.
- Begin cross-functional AI coordination and start to rebuild roadmaps.
- Implement weekly team training and development sessions.

The Long-Term Plan: 6-18 Months

- Develop an AI-focused hiring strategy and plan a reorg with this in mind.
- Build executive presence for AI champions.
- Create measurable ROI frameworks.

Remember, in an ever-evolving AI landscape, you can be on top of being proactive and be well prepared for when your business needs to be reactive.

Good luck on your AI journey!

More Resources:

Featured Image: DC Studio/Shutterstock

<https://www.searchenginejournal.com/cmos-the-time-is-now-to-as-sign-ai-leader/548115/>