The CMO-CTO Power Struggle: Solving The Web Effectiveness Stalemate via @sejournal, @billhunt

In many organizations, a quiet but costly stalemate exists between two powerful forces: the chief marketing officer (CMO) and the chief technology officer (CTO). At the heart of this tension lies a fundamental misalignment. It is not of intent, but of incentives, timelines, and definitions of success.

What should be a collaborative engine for digital growth instead becomes a friction point that stalls progress, frustrates teams, and undermines website performance.

The Paradox: Shared Mission, Divergent Metrics

The CMO and CTO should be natural allies. Marketing relies on infrastructure such as bandwidth, uptime, speed, and scalability to execute campaigns, scale content, and deliver engaging experiences. And the CTO's success often hinges on that very growth: traffic spikes, conversions, and customer engagement that justify investment in infrastructure.

Yet, despite their interdependence, their teams often operate in conflict.

This friction often arises because:

- **Different Success Metrics:** CTOs are measured by uptime, performance, security, and technical debt reduction;

CMOs by campaign speed, reach, conversions, and engagement. What should be complementary can feel mutually exclusive when objectives aren't aligned or shared.

- **Perceived Bottlenecks:** CMOs may perceive technical roadmaps or risk-management procedures as hindering progress. At the same time, CTOs may see marketing priorities as "shiny objects" that risk stability or security – each side underestimating the complexity and importance of the other's world.
- **Communication Gaps:** Technical and marketing teams may lack routine, structured communication, leading to misalignment. Without early involvement, marketing might pursue tools or campaigns incompatible with the site's architecture, while engineering might roll out upgrades that inadvertently hurt campaign performance or SEO.

The irony is apparent: Without robust, scalable, and secure infrastructure, growth will fail under its own weight; without ambitious, creative marketing, traffic, and brand affinity may stagnate despite technical readiness.

The Cost Of The Stalemate

This tension is not just internal politics; it's a strategic risk. When the web becomes the battleground between growth and governance, the customer experience suffers:

- Content takes months to publish.
- SEO recommendations remain in limbo.
- Pages break post-launch due to miscommunication.
- Critical updates are missed, leading to security gaps or ranking drops.

Meanwhile, the executive team wonders why web performance is lagging despite strong talent on both sides.

Case In Point: Overcoming The “IT Line Of Death”

I was invited into a project by the company’s board of directors. After making my pitch, I felt like I had been given the golden ticket: the CEO told me I could have whatever I needed to improve search performance. But when I walked into the IT department, I was met with a harsh reality of the IT roadmap. The CTO informed me that all items on the list had similar C-level backing; however, the fact is that despite an ever-growing list of approved critical actions, budgets, and resources had not changed.

This was my introduction to the IT Line of Death – the fine line between what gets done and what gets ignored.

In the CTO’s attempt to be helpful, he told me there were only two options I could:

- Get my requests prioritized over the others, or
- Embed SEO fixes into existing IT priorities.

The only chance of success was to ensure that I integrated SEO into as many of the existing projects as possible. That meant rethinking how we leveraged workflows, ownership structures, and business priorities was key. If SEO isn’t baked into the original blueprint and lacks executive support, it will always be an uphill battle.

Another Case: When Bandwidth Beats Visibility

At one Tech B2B company, I was engaged to help them increase traffic to the website. I started with my technical review and noticed that most of the site was blocked to web crawlers. The server team had done this deliberately as they were concerned that search engine spiders would consume too much bandwidth.

Their KPI? An almost unrealistic “Nine Nines” uptime requirement.

Because uptime was their measure of success, any perceived risk to it, even from legitimate indexing activity, was blocked.

Meanwhile, the marketing team had a goal of exponential search growth. These conflicting KPIs put the teams in direct opposition. It took months of structured testing and validation to prove that crawl activity wouldn’t threaten system performance. Only after that were the blocks lifted, and search traffic began to climb.

The lesson: Unless there is a shared understanding of risk, value, and outcomes, the system defaults to self-protection over performance. And that stalls growth.

SEO As A Product: A Call For Deep Integration

In recent years, there has been a shift toward SEO as a product that amplifies the need for proper integration between the CMO and CTO functions. Eli Schwartz’s *Product-Led SEO* framework recasts SEO as a product development process, not a marketing channel. This view demands a collaborative strategy, user-driven technical builds, and ongoing partnerships between engineering, SEO, and content teams.

When SEO is treated like a product:

- It has a roadmap, not just a to-do list.
- It gets budgeted and staffed accordingly.
- It evolves continuously based on user feedback, search behavior, and business priorities.

This approach elevates SEO to its rightful place: a shared strategic function that requires co-ownership and integrated

planning from both marketing and technology leaders.

Turning Friction Into Force

In “Who Owns Web Performance,” we identified the shared nature of visibility, speed, and conversion outcomes. And in “From Line Item to Leverage,” we explored how visibility creates compounding value. But that value doesn’t materialize unless technology and marketing work in tandem, and this starts with the CMO and CTO.

The most effective organizations recognize this symbiotic relationship and create mechanisms for true collaboration:

1. Joint Planning

Have CTOs and CMOs co-create roadmaps for major website initiatives. When both are in the room from the start, stability and scalability get built alongside creativity and agility.

2. Unified Dashboards

Develop shared KPIs that reflect both technical and marketing priorities. This might include:

- Site speed + Core Web Vitals.
- Conversion rates by traffic source.
- Organic visibility + uptime.
- Structured data health + content engagement.

This makes success a “both/and,” not an “either/or.”

3. Blended Teams

Create cross-functional squads or “growth pods” that combine engineering, SEO, design, and marketing talent. These integrated teams reduce siloed thinking and create tighter feedback loops.

4. Visibility As A Shared Objective

Search visibility, indexability, and performance shouldn’t belong to one department. They are shared outcomes of infrastructure, content, governance, and strategy. Establish shared accountability with Visibility SLAs and cross-team escalation paths.

Executive Mediation: The Role Of The CEO Or COO

Ultimately, resolving this power struggle often requires intervention from above. The chief executive officer, chief operating officer, or chief digital officer must set the tone that growth and resilience are co-requisites, not competing values.

This includes:

- Setting expectations that speed must coexist with security.
- Holding teams accountable for shared outcomes.
- Resourcing integration — not just in tools, but in time and team alignment.

Web Infrastructure Is Growth Infrastructure

If there’s one takeaway from the CMO-CTO power struggle, it’s this:

Your website isn’t just a marketing channel. It’s a growth engine — and it needs to be treated as such.

When SEO, performance, indexability, and campaign agility are considered upstream — not after launch — you don’t just get faster launches; you get smarter outcomes. You get sites that

rank, load quickly, deliver meaningful content, and convert effectively.

This is the web as strategic infrastructure. And it can only be built when marketing and technology align.

From Turf Wars To Transformation

As AI-driven search, multimodal discovery, and customer expectations evolve, the web is no longer just a marketing asset – it's core infrastructure. It requires both creative fuel and technical architecture.

That means the CMO-CTO relationship must shift from tension to tandem.

Organizations that navigate this shift don't just eliminate friction – they unlock performance.

Because when technology and marketing move in sync, the web becomes more than a channel. It becomes a competitive advantage.

More Resources:

Featured Image: Creativa Images/Shutterstock

https://www.searchenginejournal.com/the-cmo-cto-power-struggle-solving-the-web-effectiveness-stalemate/553329/