



Q&A: What's your level of digital marketing maturity?

Jeff Alford, SAS Insights editor

Marketers were among the first to embrace emerging digital technologies, learning and adapting as their responsibilities evolve in concert with changing consumer behaviors. Yet many marketers continue to operate under strategies that have already passed their usefulness. What's the average digital marketer's level of digital marketing maturity? What's holding back their progress? How can you get in front of the wave of changes?

Wilson Raj is Global Customer Intelligence Director at SAS. He is responsible for collaborating with industry influencers, customers, partners, marketing and technology teams to establish and evangelize SAS' customer intelligence solutions.

We asked Wilson about the current state of digital marketing that he sees at many companies he consults with and visits.

Sometimes digital marketers are stymied by the complex cross-functional workflows and systems, and are unable to coordinate all the customer-facing touch points.

When did digital marketing begin to gain momentum and where is it now?

Wilson Raj: The digital marketing age was born alongside the interactive Internet in the 1990s. Email was the primary channel then. In the 2000s, the rise of social media and proliferation of new personal mobile devices further expanded digital marketing and gave consumers a greater voice.

Now, consumers have wrested control from marketers. They're more powerful, influential and discriminating than ever before. To meet the increasing demands of consumers, marketers must create, coordinate, measure and refine a range of experiences and interactions across multiple media and touch points. Today, the challenges of complexity, timing messages, speed of interactions, data overload and other factors are magnified significantly.

In response, digital marketing is evolving in a few decisive ways. Implementing a strong digital vision and strategy is increasingly important for the C-suite; it affects the entire organization, not just marketing.

Organizations realize they need to better [understand digital marketing](#) and the full range of customer experiences instead of only maximizing the performance of a few channels.

Another change is that marketing is exerting more control over technology budgets and resources than in the past. As a result, digital marketers must have a closer relationship with IT.

Finally, marketers are adapting to link data to storytelling. Data management and analytics prowess don't mean much if marketers can't appeal to their customers' logic and emotion through powerful, memorable brand narratives.

How has the role of marketers changed? What skills should they master to remain effective?

Raj: The goals haven't changed: to win, serve and retain customers by providing value and building trust so that the business can greatly improve the chances of making sales over the course of the relationship. And great customer experiences are still at the heart of these goals.

But, the scope of the marketer's role has dramatically changed from being a brand and communications steward to being more focused on business outcomes.

Now, marketers must understand the technical aspects – analytics, data mining and storage – in addition to a strong understanding of traditional, current and evolving marketing techniques.

Looking at it another way, marketers need to run the marketing function as a business rather than as a function within the business.

What is most marketers' level of digital marketing maturity?

Raj: It depends on what you mean by digital marketing maturity. If it means using a combination of digital and nondigital channels to interact with customers, then many marketers are already there.

But true digital marketing requires more. To fully capitalize on digital opportunities, marketing organizations must develop capabilities in:

- Marketing operations for customer-centered strategies.
- Gaining insights from data and analytics.
- Optimizing omnichannel interactions.
- Understanding – and even predicting – the customer's digital experience.

From the standpoint of these four critical areas for digital marketing, I believe marketers still have more ground to cover.

What is holding some marketers back from fully diving into digital?

Raj: I believe it invariably comes down to culture, organization, technology and operational process. Culture is about how a company's digital marketing vision is defined and embedded in the organization in terms of breadth of strategy, ownership, investments in skill sets, etc.

Organizational considerations include how collaboration takes place, how they are governed, what are the appropriate metrics, etc.

Technology is a key enabler in digital marketing strategy. Perhaps marketers are not using marketing automation and optimization software. I also see inadequate technology investments in data management and analytics – especially real-time and predictive capabilities – that hinder digital marketing efforts.

Lastly, companies also need operational processes that connect data and analytics to insights, decisions and actions. Sometimes digital marketers are stymied by the complex cross-functional workflows and systems, and are unable to coordinate all the customer-facing touch points.

The level of organizational maturity in these areas typically determines whether the customer sees one unified company and, in turn, how the company gains a single view of the customer.

The modern marketing team must possess combined talents in analytics, data mining, storage and a robust understanding of traditional, current and evolving marketing techniques.

Marketers can upgrade their skills by cross-training, such as taking courses in marketing analytics, spending time with data scientists, IT pros, etc.

Vendors and consultancies can also provide valuable resources through training programs, setting up centers of excellence, and more.

Also, more and more universities are offering courses or programs in data analytics. Marketers can take advantage of these programs or opt for appropriate modules. National associations such as the American Marketing Association (AMA) and the Association of National Advertisers (ANA) have rich resources and training on digital marketing approaches and technologies.

Which companies excel when it comes to digital marketing strategy development?

Take Vail Resorts. By embedding radio frequency technology in every pass, the company captures, stores and analyzes real-time skiing data, starting with the first lift ride. The data is accessible in real time at EpicMix.com and through the resort's mobile applications, and is used to enhance customer experience.

In its first season alone, nearly 100,000 guests activated EpicMix accounts. Forty percent downloaded the mobile apps and nearly 6 million digital ski pins were given out. Plus, 45 percent of the users shared their accomplishments on Facebook and Twitter – resulting in more than 35 million social impressions.

Vail Resorts was able to achieve such results because it viewed digital marketing strategy development holistically through culture, organization, technology and operational lenses.

For example, there was tight partnership between marketing and IT. It used a combination of technologies – marketing automation, real-time analytics and customer intelligence – to understand and personalize interactions. Vail Resorts also built a [robust customer database](#) that integrated all the points of customer contact. With this data foundation, Vail could use every piece of its rich customer information to deliver on its brand promise: the experience of a lifetime.



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