

What is Agile Marketing

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There are different variations of the definition of Agile marketing. Quite a few definitions focus less on ‘marketing’ and a lot more on ‘Agile’. The focus of this article is on defining Agile marketing from a real-world perspective and this needs to be considered carefully, because an inaccurate definition can create an inaccurate perception, which can lead to inappropriate expectations.

There is general consensus in the industry that Agile marketing embraces the core values and principles from software development teams. However, defining Agile marketing around specific methodologies and frameworks is not very useful, as this approach focuses on the technicalities of ‘how’ to do Agile, rather than considering the core purpose of marketing. Agile methodologies themselves do not include strategic marketing thinking by default, even though they are focused on product development (an essential part of marketing). However, Agile marketing is an iterative approach to planning and executing marketing strategies, which can improve collaboration between the marketing function and other organizational stakeholders, both internal and external. You might argue that marketing has always been iterative and that, therefore, we do not need Agile. Whilst this might be true in some organizations, the marketing planning function is too often rigid, highly structured (phased) and offers little to no flexibility in the short- to medium-term.

The question to ask, then, is: ‘Do the current tools, structure and processes within companies help them reduce silos?’

Next I would like to assess what Agile marketing is not.



The definition of Agile marketing

Before defining Agile marketing, I'd like to start with the definition of marketing. Listed below are a few definitions:

- “Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.” (American Marketing Association)

- “Marketing is not only much broader than selling; it is not a specialized activity at all. It encompasses the entire business.

It is the whole business seen from the point of view of the final result, that is, from the customer's point of view. Concern and



responsibility for marketing must therefore permeate all areas of the enterprise.” (Peter Drucker)

- “Marketing is the social process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want through creating and exchanging products and value with others.” (Philip Kotler)

The above definitions of marketing highlight the end-to-end process of marketing. Does the structure of marketing function within your organisation reflect the end-to-end customer experience optimisation? Most probably not. Functions like product development and customer service and other brand touch-points are oftentimes ‘located’ outside of the marketing function. Sometimes these teams don’t talk to each other at all! On top of that there are often multiple external agencies supporting your marketing efforts, all of which employ different strategies that directly affect your customers’ experience of your brand. Therefore, we must acknowledge that all of these touchpoints contribute to the customer perception of your brand. The ‘old school’ perception that the marketing department has the sole responsibility for customers has evolved. Even the customer perception of marketing has evolved towards expecting a whole-organisation approach to customer satisfaction. Whatever the department they interact with, customers now expect the same level of satisfaction and consistency from all your brand touchpoints.

Combining the definitions of Agile and Marketing is the common sense approach to defining what Agile marketing means. How does Agile help solve the problems that marketing teams face? First, let’s start by highlighting the two key problems that arise in marketing departments:



- Silos:

What does the structure of your marketing team look like? How integrated and collaborative are the internal teams? Some organisations have the Digital team separate from the Marketing team. Some work with multiple external agencies, using different strategies. The offline marketing team is often branded as ‘old school marketing’. How can you ever get a single customer view if your teams are not collaborating and communicating? Some companies try to use software tools to gather ‘a single customer view’. Whilst I am not trying to suggest that using software tools, in itself, is wrong, organisations need to be mindful to not over-spend on tools at the expense of harnessing its internally-generated customer information. Some consultancy firms recommend re-structuring the organisation in order to reduce silos. Will such initiatives solve the problem? Solving the problem of silos requires improved interaction and communication across teams. This is what the Agile process can provide, if implemented in a framework-agnostic way.

- Inhuman:

First let’s look at Scott Brinker’s impressive book “Marketing Technology Landscape”. I am not disputing the importance of technology in marketing, but technology does come with its flaws. The disconnect between marketing and the actual voice of the customer is ever-growing. The point I am trying to make here is wonderfully summarised in Steve Blank’s “Get out of the building“. I often ask marketing professionals this one question: “Have you ever spoken to any of your customers?” The answer is most often “No”, coupled with a puzzled look. As marketers, we are responsible for selling products and services we often had no input into during the product development phase. If we don’t feel any connection to what we’re selling, how can we ever expect to entice that connection with our customers?



Over the years, marketing has been criticized for being intrusive which has (over time and indirectly) led to the introduction of GDPR in Europe. Some marketers have destroyed the image of marketing because of their ‘tunnel vision’ focus on profits alone. I am not trying to say profit is a bad thing, however, forcing people to buy new things they don’t need is questionable. You might be of the opinion that marketing does not force new products on customers and this may well be ‘technically’ true. But at the same time, marketers have become highly skilled in applying subtle pressure on their customers in the form of shortening the lead in times for new product launches - and by ‘new product’ I really mean ‘old’ products which are only slightly improved with (very) minor points of differentiation. For example, I use an iPhone 6s Plus, which is about 2 years old and since the point of purchase Apple has launched not one, not two, but three (!) new products. Now I feel forced to upgrade my phone even though I don’t really want to, but that ‘What if...?’ is always at the back of my head. The effect of marketing activities on the environment is another issue that is worth mentioning, do we as marketers and organisations care about the safety of the customers? We say we do and yet we are all guilty of damaging the environment. But... I digress! So, let’s go back to the original point of this article and that was to identify the definition of Agile. In order to address this, I asked one of the authors of the 2001 Agile Manifesto, Arie van Bennekum, about his thoughts on the subject.

Arie defines Agile as “...a set of rituals that improve collaboration, communication and interactions within and across teams”. Based on the problems highlighted previously, Agile appears to be the solution marketing needs - a way of working that will improve communication across the silos within the business. Some people will argue that they are already doing that and don’t need Agile to communicate. They might consider they already have all the necessary tools that can help them communicate effectively across the entire business. The question to ask, then, is: ‘Do the current tools, structure and processes within companies help them reduce silos?’

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What Agile Marketing isn't

Agile marketing is not about Scrum, Kanban or other frameworks. It is also not about 'doing twice the work in half the time'. Implementing Agile marketing without a thorough review of your existing marketing strategy is pointless. Applying Scrum or Kanban without a clear marketing-related objective is likened to a bad marketing plan on steroids.

The primary focus is on how Agile rituals can help reduce silos and create high performance teams in marketing. Whichever way you decide to define Agile marketing, it must include the following:

- Marketing strategy that includes customer, brand and product management.
- Delivering value to customers through effective end-to-end customer experience.
- An agnostic approach to Agile frameworks.



Why Agile Marketing?

Most of the existing marketing models and frameworks were created before the internet era. Some even date back to the 1950's when communication with customers was a one-way broadcast. Customers in that era did not have the power of choice or knowledge currently available via the internet and smart devices. Although the marketing mix is still relevant, it is fair to say that what worked in the 1950s is obsolete now (or very nearly so). The traditional model where product, price, place and promotion are all siloed can not survive. This is why marketing needs to be Agile, so that it can respond to the constantly changing customer expectations. Collaboration between all internal stakeholders, from product development, sales and marketing all the way through to after sales services is required to maintain a high standard of customer experience. Marketing absolutely has to become Agile if it is to:



- Stay relevant and align with changing customer perceptions and expectations.
- Achieve the speed and flexibility required to successfully adapt to the competitive landscape.
- Streamline marketing processes in order to reduce waste.
- Create a culture of continuous improvement within the organisation.
- Improve team communication and wider stakeholder engagement.
- Create and use customer feedback loops to encourage an adaptive and iterative approach to marketing.
- Encourage collective decision making and foster the creation of high-performance teams.



How Agile Marketing Is Different

The following is what makes Agile marketing different to traditional marketing:

Leadership: Agile rituals promote the concept of collaborative and collective leadership. They signify a shift from command-and-control leadership style towards more subtle control. How you achieve this will depend on your organisational culture, because Agile requires a mindset shift. As a CMO, Marketing director or Team lead, are you willing to evolve your own leadership style?

- **Task Clarity:**

The lack of task clarity is the number one source of conflicts in teams. Let's use keyword research, analysis and mapping as an example: who owns these tasks in your team? Who is accountable for your website navigation and content? Agile marketing rituals help create task clarity in teams, which leads to an individual sense of ownership and increased transparency and effectiveness.

- **Team learning:**

How does your marketing team store its learnings? Do you have a repository of your team's lessons learned, spanning previous years? One of the things I learnt from



in waterfall projects is the importance of the ‘Lessons Learnt Log’. The best way to increase team learning is to make sure you create an environment which will support shared learning. ‘Pair programming’ is a phrase used by Agile software teams which can also be applied in marketing. For example, Miss A joins your team with 10 years’ experience, she spends 3 years with your team and then moves on. Miss A leaves your team with 13 years’ worth of learning that is not transferred to her replacement. The company should have made an effort to store a summary of her past experiences (both within and outside the organisation) and pass these on to her replacement. This is what I mean when I tell my clients that transferred learning plus peer coaching within their teams will create a learning culture.



Conclusion

There are lots of horror stories about marketing teams that we never talk about. How do internal politics impact the marketing function due to your internal company structure? Also, who owns and has 100% accountability for your digital customer experience? Is it your UX team? Marketing? The CEO? Customer Service? HR? Your Analytics team? Conversion Optimisation team? Content team? The next question I want you to think about is: who takes the blame if anything goes wrong on your website? Normally, it's the IT team that gets the blame by default in most organisations. This issue of only one person or team taking the blame is the problem Agile marketing is aiming to solve. It is only the proactive collective ownership of problems that will transform a blame culture.

Agile frameworks by themselves do not teach us how to create a winning marketing strategy. It does, however, help you manage your workflow more effectively by supporting the quality of team collaboration.



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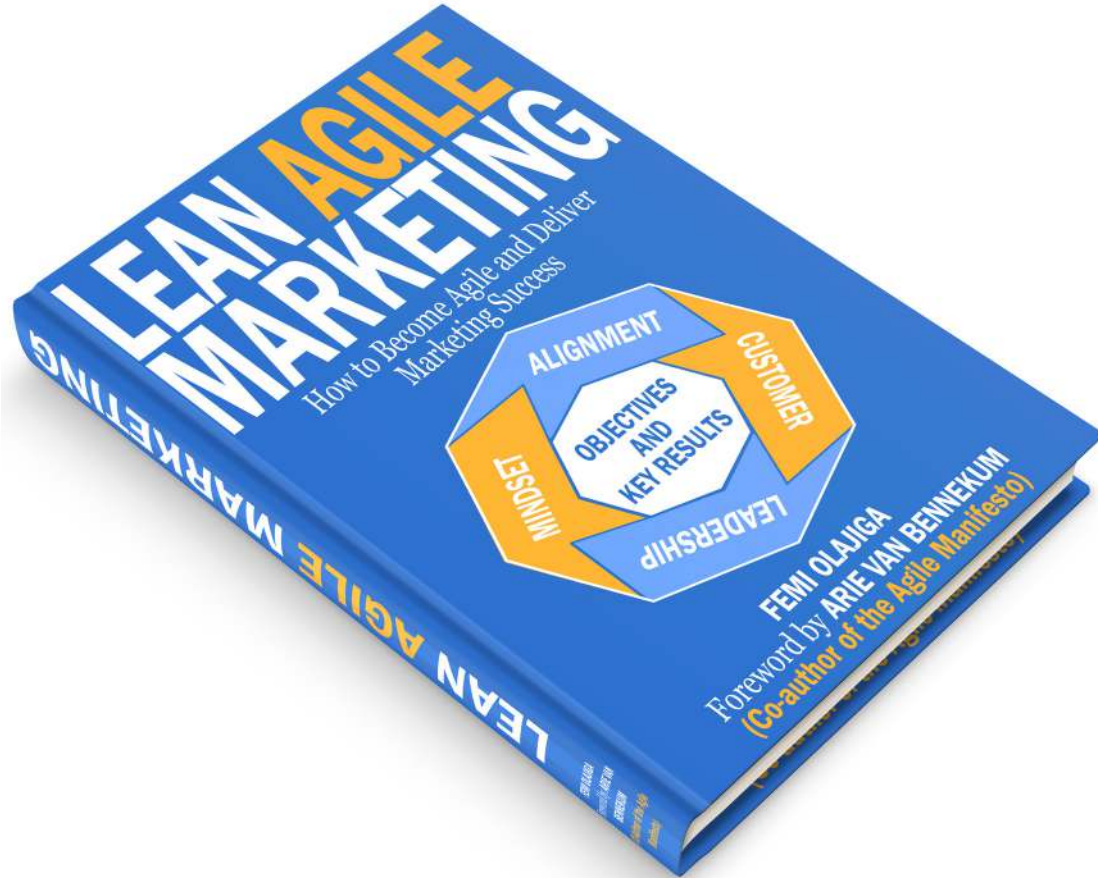
This article is not exhaustive - I only discuss here the two most common problems facing marketing teams.

To learn more about how Agile marketing is different and how it might be applied within your organisation Contact me or connect with me on LinkedIn. You can also buy a copy of my recent book: Lean Agile Marketing on Amazon.com.

To learn more about Agile marketing generally, bookmark my Agile marketing blog for regular updates.



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