It’s the ultimate irony. CMOs are accountable for brand health, yet in too many companies, they do not have a real seat at the table on product development decisions.

Meanwhile, the fate of the brand’s image and equity over time is largely determined by the new products, features and services in the product development pipeline. Where is the justice in this? (There is none.) More importantly, can it possibly be good for business? Not a chance. Just ask the former CMOs of Palm, Blockbuster, Kodak or those who have had to negotiate the product-related rough patches for Sony, Sears or Blackberry.

Many companies manage their brands with great sophistication and also enterprise software applications emerging that integrate such metrics and provide extensive decision support, rich analytics and a virtual collaborative environment to harness cross-functional input on product decisions at great speed.

This disconnect between brand strategy and product strategy is one of the least-noticed inhibitors of brand strength, value creation and resource allocation efficiency. Yet establishing that link (or repairing a broken one) doesn’t have to be onerous. It requires a flow of customer input shared across organizations and of monitoring ever-evolving shifts in customer needs and competitor strengths and weaknesses.

Years later, I now see that I was partially to blame for this divide. I was not insisting that product development teams use this research, explaining why, or going the extra mile to make it easily understandable and continuously available to non-marketing managers. I didn’t fully realize then that since marketing knew things about each product, feature or service, and sustainable business practices (given the growing influence of sustainable business practices), and services are all aligned on the same choice-driving attributes that have been properly defined and prioritized in brand research, products and the brand are far more likely to be truly aligned. Fortunately, there are also enterprise software applications and emerging that integrate such metrics and provide extensive decision support, rich analytics and a virtual collaborative environment to harness cross-functional input on product decisions at great speed.

Brand-aligned product development has the additional advantage of exciting new and ongoing investments in market research. When applied more aggressively beyond marketing decisions to product and innovation decisions, it fosters a culture of brand stewardship in which everyone in the company who touches products at any point in their lifecycles—from ideation and development to delivery and retirement—can see that they have a hand on the brand’s steering wheel. As a bonus, you can see that they have a hand on the brand’s steering wheel. As a bonus, you will also likely find it easier to raise money to fund brand research as the number of obvious internal benefactors multiplies.

What Can a CMO Do About the Brand-Product Alignment Gap?  

1. If you haven’t already, let your CEO and/or business unit GMs know that you and your organization have a very significant contribution to make to product development portfolio optimization. Let them know that you must have his or her full support and insistence on you having a seat at the product strategy table. Let them know that if you’re to be accountable for brand health, you must be empowered to help ensure that the millions (or billions) that your company or division spends on product development each year provide the greatest possible tailwind for what the brand aspires to be.

2. Inspire confidence among your internal peers that you’re doing everything possible with customer research and brand science to ensure that you have a deeper understanding of the drivers of brand choice across key market segments than your competitors do. Be aggressive and enthusiastic in sharing that input across functional boundaries in an easily digestible form, but with enough detail that product development teams—in conjunction with their user experience and human factor research—know what to develop.

3. Make sure the metrics are in place to measure and monitor your brand’s competitive weaknesses. This should be done in ways that tell you when it’s up to marketing to fix them, when it’s up to product development, or when it’s up to both.

4. Finally, build the strongest possible personal relationship with your senior colleagues in product development and product management. It’s up to you to take that lead as they often don’t know how much they need you long before a new or refreshed product is almost ready for sale.

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