

Organising international marketing teams – making the marketing/BD team more effective

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Whether you are the Marketing/Business Development Director in an international professional firm, or one of the members of a team trying to help the team work, there will always be tensions between global and local initiatives.... between product and client focus.... or between centralisation and decentralisation.... Whether these tensions are creative or destructive will depend partly on how you are organised (and partly on leadership and cultural issues – topics for another article!)

Is there an ideal solution? What are the structural issues to consider? Should you have service or sectoral specialists? Should you be centralised or decentralised? Which marketing specialisms do you need? There are no right or wrong answers to cover every business model, but there are issues to consider when assessing whether your structure will work for you or against you. And there are certain skills which no successful international team should now be without - and these should be located somewhere in the structure, or provided in other ways.

There are some pointers to consider in getting the balance right for your firm, but firstly.....

Service delivery or change management?

What role is expected of marketing and business development in your organisation? How far has the business evolved? The answer to this question will give some indication of the required levels of seniority in the team, and the relationships to be built with partners or directors.... Of course, every marketing and business development function must have the ability both to provide service and stimulate behavioural change – but where should the balance lie? If the structure can reinforce your roles as expert advisers and not just “support staff”, as influencers and not just deliverers, then the change management aspect may be in the ascendant.

For example, designing and implementing a global key account programme, quality programme, or a branding/differentiation strategy is change management, whilst communications and campaign support is mainly service provision. Change management requires a more senior team able to influence partners, with reporting lines direct to senior management (ultimately the CEO or managing partner), and a place on the Board or Executive Committee. “Centralised marketing is out...” may be a current policy in many multi-national firms, but it has its natural limit....

Balancing the firm versus the practice area or region

In order to keep close to the action in the business lines or practice areas and countries or regions you will need to take your lead from the current structure of your firm. If your team remains centralised whilst the firm decentralises, the marketing/ business development roles will become increasingly irrelevant and out of touch. Local business units also prefer funding their own teams rather than contributing to a large central “overhead”, even though the total cost to the firm may ultimately be higher (“own monkey” syndrome).

Picking up on the 90’s dictum “Think globally, act locally...” some roles need to be located as close as possible to the business units of the firm while other roles are now so specialist that you cannot afford to locate them in every business unit or office. For example, how many senior proposal experts does one organisation need? How many research managers, “Global Top 50” coordinators or webmasters? Laying on centralised expertise should enable the firm to recruit the best skills in the market and focus these skills where they will produce the greatest payback.

Tensions will exist between local and global initiatives. As one international marketer suggested: “..it should be a healthy tension... global synergies combined with local knowledge and entrepreneurial flair”. If managed well you can get the best out of both. If managed badly you get inactivity or duplication of activity. The main responsibility lies with the “centre” to engage others in consultation and to work at achieving buy-in.

Working the matrix

There are several dimensions to the matrix structure in most professional firms: the service/sector dimension and the local/global dimension. The matrix usually results in straight line and dotted line responsibilities for those concerned. So in a law firm, for example, the service specialist located in the intellectual property area might help run the firmwide pharmaceuticals or healthcare group, with dotted line responsibility to the fee earner concerned.

When structuring local teams in smaller offices, multi-hatting is unavoidable. In Germany, for example, a manager responsible for the Frankfurt region is likely to wear the financial sector hat for Germany, and even for continental Europe. Some small offices will lack the critical mass to have any marketing specialisms and may be served by one generalist using the support of specialists at a central or regional level for, say, high level PR, major proposal or research skills.

A sense of local ownership is vital, combined with dotted line responsibility to the global head of function. For this reason, much consultation and persuasion together with active senior management buy-in are needed in order to progress major international projects.

Building links or reinforcing silos?

Cross-selling and exploiting client relationships remain top of the issues list for many firms. The business development function can act as a positive force for integration, to help break down silos and harness the power of a firm with multiple skills and locations. This can be a tough call, when the power of global business lines and global practice areas are growing stronger and stronger in the largest firms, and marketing and business development teams are integrated within them. How can truly integrative, cross departmental activity such as global client teams or sector targeting be sustained?

The forces for breaking down silos include establishing matrix management and multiple responsibilities, using centrally based experts to work with teams and the adoption of global programmes focused on cross-departmental initiatives. (Along with these activities, many other measures will be needed, including cross-departmental appraisals, metrics and measurement along cross-departmental lines). Unfortunately, the silo mentality gets reinforced in a downturn - with an adverse effect on teamworking. Attentive management, persuasive skills, joint training and a focus on the above measures can help to stop this happening.

Sharp end skills needed ...

No team is now complete without the ability to help the partners and directors win new business – by supporting major bids, individual sales efforts and key account teams. The latter need to be resourced centrally if they are to maintain momentum, be truly cross border, and work across lines of business. Client intelligence for partners, and targeting initiatives for local clients - need to be provided locally, whether in an international office or in a significant business line, albeit using common procedures and perhaps common suppliers where appropriate.

Partners in the global BD team?

In most major firms marketing/ business development directors now head up the function in their own right.. But this does not mean that partners should not have a role in the function. They should, for example, help determine priorities, gather and feed intelligence through, use their influence on partners/directors, act as coaches and/or champions. Making good use of their skills is better than looking upon them as a threat. You should give them formal rather than informal responsibilities and make your expectations of their roles quite clear – perhaps by having an international and firm-wide (as well as domestic and practice area) aspect of their BD role written into their job descriptions.

Outsourcing isn't just for the public sector

In the desire to focus effort where it will bring greatest returns, perhaps soon a complete marketing and business development team will be hived off to provide an agreed service, contracted for and managed from outside a firm? (Arguably this is how marketing started when firms hired PR companies to do their marketing!) The business model is already being used in marketing services, particularly where the outputs and contractual terms are more easily definable.... For example, Williams Lea has already provided outsourcing for print design and production in many professional service firms. Other areas such as account planning and proposals support could be contracted out, perhaps on a regional basis, and perhaps with success related fee arrangements.

Outsourcing may ultimately be the only way in which international professional networks and alliances, with limited internal and management cohesion, will manage to create consistency of corporate identity, key account management, communications, and bidding processes. Individual offices would purchase services as they require, within agreed contract terms, to network-wide agreed standards.

Postscript

Whatever your organisation structure, an international team with openness, shared purpose and good communication will always, ultimately, be more successful than one with secrecy, divisiveness and high levels of internal competition. Teams and individuals will produce their best results when their roles are clear.... clarity of purpose, clarity of business objectives and strong (albeit “dotted line”) leadership....Get these things right, and recruit excellent people and the actual organisation structure may not matter so much! However, a good structure, involving the right people at the right levels, remains a key indicator of the likely success of a BD strategy.

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