

Shopping for Superstars

BY ANNE HOWE

MARS ADVERTISING

Although nearly everyone agrees that shopper marketing is one of the hottest subjects in marketing today, the idea of a career in shopper marketing seems to leave some people cold.

With that in mind, *The Hub* designed a survey that might provide some insights into what people love—or not—about shopper marketing as a career. The survey was fielded jointly by *Reveries.com*, Marketing Executives Networking Group and Jason Buschlen's Shopper Insights and Marketing Group

on LinkedIn. It yielded more than 300 responses and a motherlode of insight.

The most rewarding finding was that the passion point for many shopper marketers is truly *the shopper*, and the desire to improve the shopping experience, which emerged in the write-in responses in a definitive manner.

Yes, we saw a distinct interest in creating better business results. But the “real world” application of knowledge—and the direct opportunity to leverage insights to create innovative shopping solutions—are some of the more holistic elements that respondents find attractive in shopper marketing careers.

One comment that brought this point home for me was, “the ability to be creative and shape behavior.” This, to me, represents our industry purpose, especially in contrast to a comment about “encouraging mindless consumption of stuff people don't need.” I don't know about you, but that is not why I show up at work every day!

Other attractive elements to careers in shopper marketing include a desire to be at the front edge, leading integration efforts, evangelizing the value of the discipline in a broader context, fulfilling the promise that solution-based marketing leveraging insights at the shopper level can grow brand equity and sales, and the personal satisfaction derived from blazing the trail.

BUT WHO'S IN CHARGE?

On the down side, almost every aspect of the discipline has some career negativity associated with it. A few respondents noted the frustration that emerges from knowing many good strategies never make it to implementation at retail, concluding that the actual power base for the discipline is shifting from manufacturer to retailer. Many noted frustration in the lack of training programs, which is unfortunately a function prone to cutbacks when cost and profit pressures increase.

Another clear call-out was lack of clarity on where the shopper marketing function can be most effective within an organizational structure—there are as many devout advocates for marketing ownership as there are for sales ownership.

Fans of marketing ownership are focused on viewing shopper marketing as a strategic interdisciplinary function, not solely an in-store discipline that simply re-purposes promotions or tactics. But many companies house other important disciplines, such as category management and shopper insights within the sales organization. Your feedback indicates there is no single industry standard, nor should there be.

For now, perhaps we should focus on clear, visible communication strategies within CPG organizations to explain the internal shopper marketing definition, the value proposition, where it's housed, and the path to involvement. The communication of broad industry standards, while important for many reasons, may be

Opportunities for innovation and growth attract the best and brightest to shopper marketing.

What is MOST attractive about a career in Shopper Marketing? (pick as many as apply)



getting in the way of internalizing shopper marketing within individual organizations where it's growing but needs organic fertilizer to foster development of deeper roots.

SO MUCH COMPLEXITY

This survey quantified the complexity that reigns in shopper marketing. Multiple skill sets are needed, and exposure to these can be bundled as a part of career-path programs. These include retail merchandising, analytics, insights and creative ideation techniques, retail business acumen, brand strategy, sales, store experience, negotiation and communication expertise, category management and more.

Perhaps much of this complexity can be simplified by the concept of mutual respect. Not very many of us are fully developed left- and right-brainers! The longer-term future might include formal training in every skill set. But starting today, can we expand our willingness to walk in each other's shoes to value each discipline, as we create synergistic business objectives from seemingly opposing points of view?

An extremely successful and well-loved sales guy I know makes a habit of listening to Motown diva Aretha Franklin's song *Respect* on full volume on the

way to huge meetings. Here are the operative lyrics:

*I'm about to give you all of my money
And all I'm askin' in return, honey
Is to give me my profits
When you get home*

In other words: R-E-S-P-E-C-T, find out what everyone's definition of profits really is. It might be different than you think.

From your responses, I also see a place for guidance from a neutral center. Many teams could benefit by adding the skills of the "planner"—a term used to describe the crucial skill set of one who objectively listens, guides discovery, interprets, helps uncover the "a-ha" and then guides the development of the strategy and ideas that are both shopper- and retailer-centric.

This is the opposite of "he who is the highest ranked is the most right," which often is the reality of team approaches in this discipline, which could use a little more neutral and shopper-focused strategic planning!

ATTRACTING THE BEST AND BRIGHTEST

When asked what it will take to attract the best and brightest to a career in shopper marketing, 194

of you gave us specific write-in feedback. Your input can be divided into five distinct categories: executive leadership; career pathways; training programs; bigger budgets; and measurement.

Executive leadership. Attention senior executives — if you believe the benefits of integrated shopper-marketing practices help your company achieve its business plan, it’s time to speak up. Your internal organizations are seeking your endorsement and acknowledgement that addressing business objectives through the lens of the consumer as a shopper at retail is a valid business strategy.

Some are seeking that you mandate strategic integration of brand planning and go-to-market strategies with key customers into business planning cycles, including synchronization of timing. Without you to rally and focus the organization, many shopper-marketing practitioners have an uneasy feeling that what they do day in and day out doesn’t matter.

It *does* matter, especially in today’s economy. Try putting your brightest, most seasoned executives on the front lines leading shopper marketing, and be proactive in giving your organization a positive,

yet challenging, viewpoint of why shoppers matter to your bottom line. And please don’t shoot the messenger; I am providing a voice for the more than 300 people who chose to use this survey to have their opinions counted.

Career pathways. Many of you believe it’s time to add specific career-path requirements, including promotion mandates that require all senior management candidates to complete specific rotations that touch multiple disciplines in shopper marketing. The goals are to broaden acceptance and raise competencies required in the very complex triangular relationship between manufacturer, retailer and consumer as shopper.

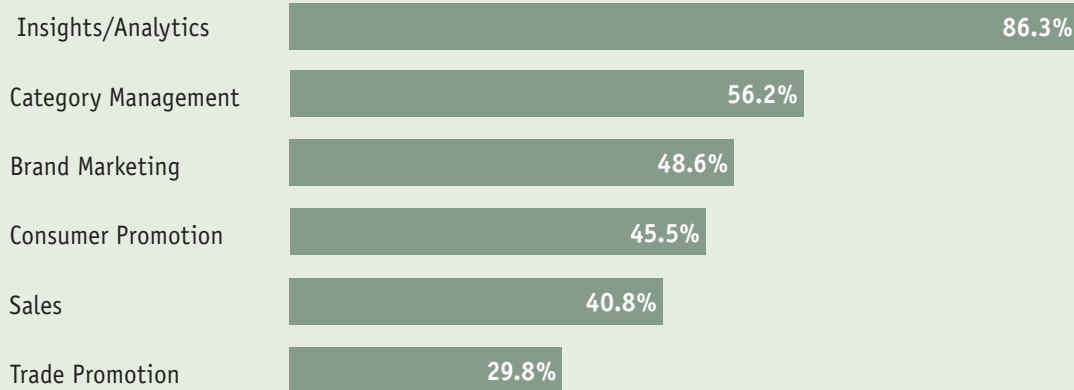
The other positive prediction made by responders is that the “next class of CEO’s” will likely have career exposure and experience in some aspects of shopper-centric marketing, thereby fostering culture shifts that are long overdue in classic packaged goods corporations.

Training programs. Not surprisingly, some respondents spoke up in favor of more formal education, even at the post-graduate level. But the right-brained had a distinct point-of-view regarding

What is LEAST attractive about a career in Shopper Marketing? (pick as many as apply)



What are the most important skills for a career in Shopper Marketing? (pick as many as apply)



training the MBA's on the benefits of anthropological understandings and the need for skills in interpretive creativity.

Is it time to adjust the balance toward design thinking, especially as we move from more tactical solutions to broader strategic shopping experience solutions? Abductive reasoning allows one to imagine what *could* be possible, and is perhaps the most exciting new element that we can add to the career skills development path in shopper marketing.

Bigger budgets. More money is hard to come by, but industry leader Procter & Gamble recently announced it will not cut its spending where shopper marketing resides. If your company can't increase budgets, at least consider requests to realign spending toward developing insights and strategies required to understand how shopping experiences can be improved. Many think keeping the dollars in classic trade budgets forces lower-level tactics and promotions to be served up as "shopper marketing" solutions because the money is in the wrong buckets.

Measurement. As a few astute respondents noted, the constant demand for shopper marketing ROI pushes us away from innovation and back into the "tactical hell" we are striving to move away from. That's because tactics can be measured today. We are working on ways to measure many other essential elements in the mix, and I hope a variety of measurement models emerge for vetting and evaluation in the next year. Deloitte Consulting LLP will shed light on this topic at the GMA meeting in September, and will undoubtedly be a key resource in evaluating options that might become standards as our industry matures.

THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT

This survey confirmed that for most, a career path in shopper marketing is not a quest for glamour or glory. It's hard work. But grab your sunglasses, because the future is bright. Especially from the agency side, it is more invigorating to be part of the solution instead of just reporting the problem.

If even only *some* of us work on action plans against some of this survey's key findings, our industry will soon be in a better place. But if we do nothing, we lose a good opportunity to attract more bright people to our industry.

Let's encourage each other to take action, so we can expand the ranks of bright people from all areas of expertise to join us on the shopper's journey.

Shoppers are culturally ingrained to be emotionally responsive to experiences and solutions that surprise and delight them. When this happens, they vote with their wallets, and brand equity, retailer loyalty and categories grow.

This industry allows us to immerse, analyze, listen, interpret, innovate, create, integrate, apply, measure and repeat. It's never boring. This is *your* story. Don't be shy about passing it around your office or adding it to meeting agendas to discuss. Join the fun! ■



ANNE HOWE is senior vice president, market intelligence for **MARS Advertising**, where she focuses on strategic development projects for the agency and its shopper marketing clients. Anne can be reached at howea@marsusa.com.