

Make or Break

A BRANDTRUST INQUIRY

Are the first 100 days critical to success in a new job?

We interviewed top marketers to find out.

Their experiences suggest those early days in a new job can make you or break you.



The first 100 days.

Each new U.S. President comes under intense scrutiny during their first 100 days in the office. Some say the outcome of the entire term in office rests on those critical first months. Is this true for anyone else starting in a new high profile position? It seems particularly so for marketing executives.

There are certainly high expectations. Everyone hopes for the best—a great new advertising campaign and record-breaking sales. But few people understand marketing realities. In the same way people blame everything on the President, so it is with marketing types. According to a 2007 study by executive recruiter Spencer Stuart, the average tenure of Chief Marketing Officers at leading consumer companies is a mere 26.8 months.

Do the first 100 days make you or break you? As the saying goes, “There’s never a second chance to make a first impression.” It may be truer than we think. Researchers have recently completed studies that suggest getting off on the wrong foot has devastating long-term consequences.*

As privileged advisors to many of the leading marketers in the world, Brandtrust wants to understand their experiences. So, we routinely interview experienced senior marketing executives as they complete their first 100 days in new positions. The following useful insights and advice were revealed through those interviews.



Start before you start.

Our research participants agreed every marketer needs to be smart about understanding and meeting customer needs. It's the most important thing a marketer does. They also believe the best marketers are driven to gather knowledge and insight about customers.

Acquiring the knowledge that informs insight takes time to collect and to incubate. Brilliant insight doesn't pop up; it builds up. So, the sooner you start the sooner you get smart.

That's why it's a good idea to become a student and customer of your new company even before starting the job. Thoughtful research and secret shopping at this stage can be extremely enlightening. It also may be the last chance to do so with any measure of objectivity. Brains get washed beginning day one.

Accelerating this "getting smart" time can be one of the most important things you do to jump start your contributions during the first 100 days. Some businesses have a good understanding of their customers. Most do not. They lose perspective. Many businesses don't know much at all about their best customers. This knowledge will help you to hit the ground running, save precious time and make you look pretty smart in the process.

Understanding customers before starting the job can give you a big advantage.

Find the bathrooms first.

You know how to do your job. You have a track record. That's why they hired you. What you don't know is how to do marketing in this new place. Our research participants told us the most stressful thing is to wake up and realize your go-to guys are still going to the old job.

You have to learn about e-mail, the phone system, the travel department, HR, business policies and all those details. Sometimes a new company will call something familiar an altogether different name. You don't even know what to ask for. You have to find the bathrooms. But what you need, more than anything, is to find out how to get things done.

Take some time before your first days on the job and create a list of what matters most to you; descriptions of things you typically need from other people and your worst worries about infrastructure and getting things done. This list should be the subject of intentional discussion with your assistant, staff and coworkers during your first days on the job. Don't be too concerned with learning every little detail as much as finding out who can help when you need to know something or get things done.

Find out how to get things done before you have an accident.



A woman in a black dress and sunglasses is looking up against a clear blue sky. In the background, a man in a suit and sunglasses and another woman in a dark suit and sunglasses are also looking up. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

Who's your daddy?

Whose bread do you need to butter? Who has the power? Who are the players that will judge whether or not you succeed in the first 100 days? Of course, it's your boss but there are always others who influence. A cynical CFO or a territorial VP of Sales can derail your train. You need to know their needs.

Once you figure it out, you'll find the key influencers often have little knowledge of what it takes to create marketing success. Some can talk a good game but few really understand the intricacies and vagaries of marketing. Almost all of our research participants are convinced very few non-marketing executives fully understand marketing or what should be expected from it. And, that this single threat represents the most dangerous obstacle during the first 100 days.

This lack of understanding causes many non-marketing execs to be skeptical and discount marketing altogether. It's no wonder since very few C-level execs arrive in corner offices via a marketing track. You shouldn't expect them to have an intimate understanding of marketing. To keep them from becoming detractors you need to take the initiative to explain plans and win them over to the value of marketing.

Identify the influencers. Know what they know and what they need.



“What we have here is a failure to communicate.”

Ironically, it seems professional marketers have a tendency to overlook the importance of communications—particularly among internal audiences.

This is because marketers too often assume coworkers and associates understand more about marketing than they do. Whatever you do, don't presume your coworkers will understand and execute your marketing programs flawlessly when you haven't flawlessly communicated the details. When marketing blames a failed program on sales and sales blames it on marketing, the source of the problem is usually poor communications.

It's nearly impossible to over-communicate. In fact, it's better to aim for just that. You need to be obsessive about explaining yourself, sharing your path to insight, teaching and training about why one approach makes more sense than another. Otherwise, don't expect people to understand your strategies, interpret your motives or appreciate “great advertising.”

And, watch the esoteric marketing lingo. Unfamiliar jargon makes people feel stupid, and people don't like those who make them feel stupid. People also don't like *ideas* offered by people who make them feel dumb. When you make them feel dumb they will demonstrate just how ineffective your programs can be.

Assume nothing. Communicate everything.

Get a little help from your friends.

Many of the marketers we interviewed, especially in the largest corporations, described feeling conflicted and confused when attempting to align their personal and corporate bearings during the first 100 days. In some cases, what was shared in the hiring process didn't square with the reality on the ground. Sure there were published corporate values and guiding statements but respondents still felt uneasy, as if they couldn't grasp a deeper sense of mission. Motivation wanes when it's difficult to know which hill to seize.

Some marketers simply let it pass but others recount experiencing indecisive feelings that inhibited their enthusiasm, creativity and performance. Others chose to confront this phenomenon head on with their bosses—some to good outcomes and others not so satisfying.

One senior marketing executive took matters into her own hands when her VP failed to provide encouragement. She set out to identify the CEO's executive leadership team and recruit a few of them to be her corporate mentors. Most of these colleagues were flattered and responsive even though they worked in other divisions and locales. Her very intentional networking has exposed her to the bigger picture and, over time, promises to be instrumental in her broader corporate aspirations.

Actively build a support network. Don't wait for it to appear on its own.



Short-leash your ego.

In these days of high turnover and brief stays in jobs, it's easy to think more about your short-term track record than the company's long term needs. More often than not, this happens without realizing it. The problem is other people in the company have their radar on for anything that implies you've lost perspective or have misdirected motives. On some level they know, even when you don't, and whatever confidence in you they may have quickly fades.

Marketers can easily appear arrogant to others. Contrary to what we may think, marketing is not God's gift to business. You probably aren't going to single-handedly save the company. Several of our research respondents recalled early career experiences when their naiveté and youthful inexperience did them in early with new job experiences. Their reflections suggest it's a good idea to listen more and pontificate less. Especially during the first 100 days.

Sometimes it looks like marketers are showing off for their agencies rather than showing up for the customer. The advertising part of marketing is sexy and interesting but it's not the most important part. Marketing execs that act like advertising execs don't inspire a lot of confidence in their business strategies.

When you make it all about you, you lose.



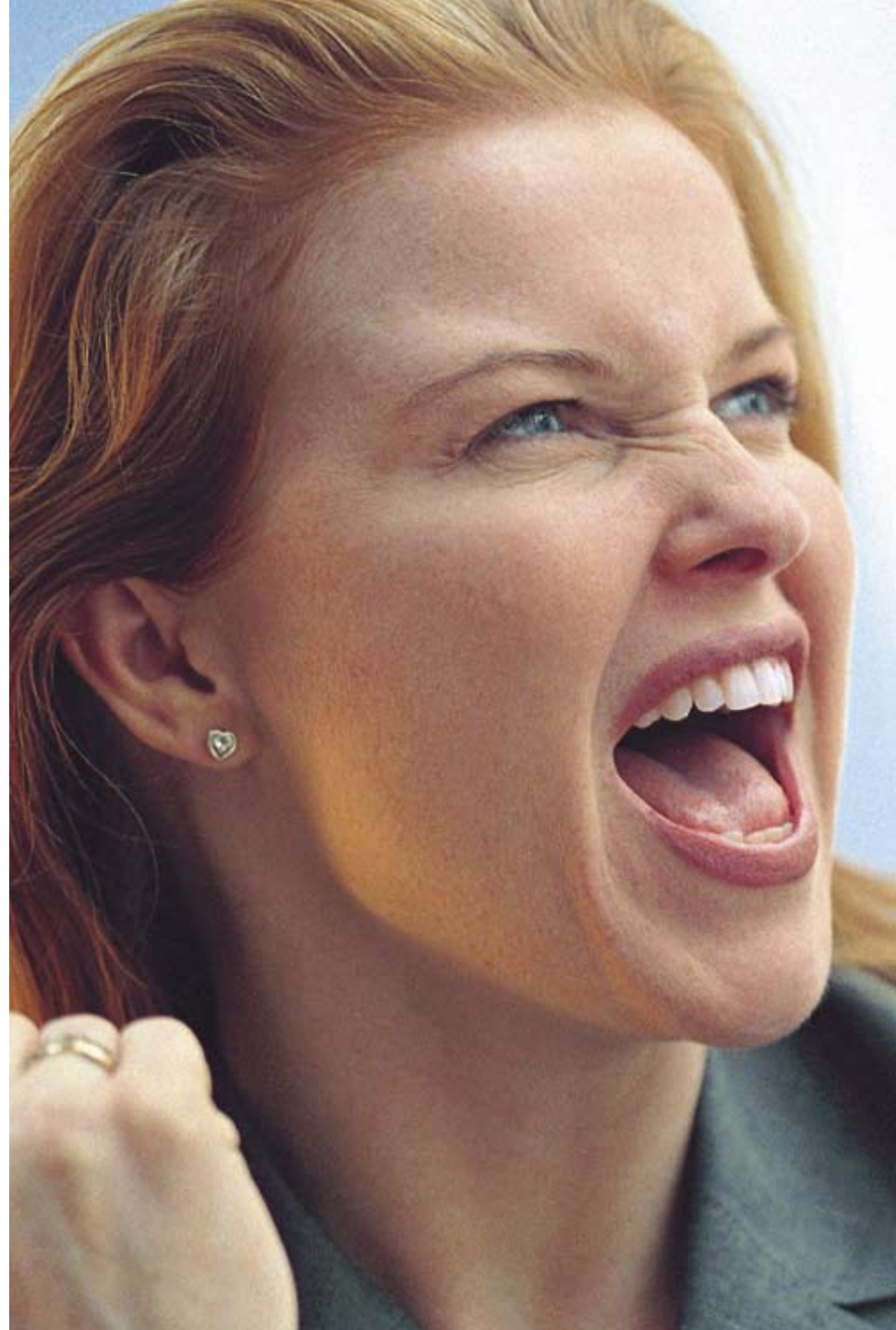
Curb your enthusiasm.

This one is hard to resist. You have ideas for change and confidence the ideas will work. A significant early success will clearly make you look good. The company will be thrilled to have hired you. Your boss will escort you down the walk of fame. A huge raise won't be far behind.

Yet, the marketing execs we have interviewed shared their track records of actually achieving this kind of early success were nada, zilch and zero. It is almost impossible to realize the immediate successes of your dreams. Striving for it can make you look impulsive, uninformed and idealistic. And the risks are excessively high.

It is much smarter to look for small victories that may offer high visibility. A well-known, long-standing problem can be a good place to start. For example, several senior marketing respondents told us about joining companies with long histories of bad blood between sales and marketing. Intentionally forging bonds and creating relationships with sales management turned out to be a welcomed quick win that led to greater future success. Seems like a no-brainer but it is a smart, attainable and high return move, nonetheless. Find the most visible problem you have the best chance of solving.

Be realistic about what you can and cannot accomplish.



Little things make a big difference.

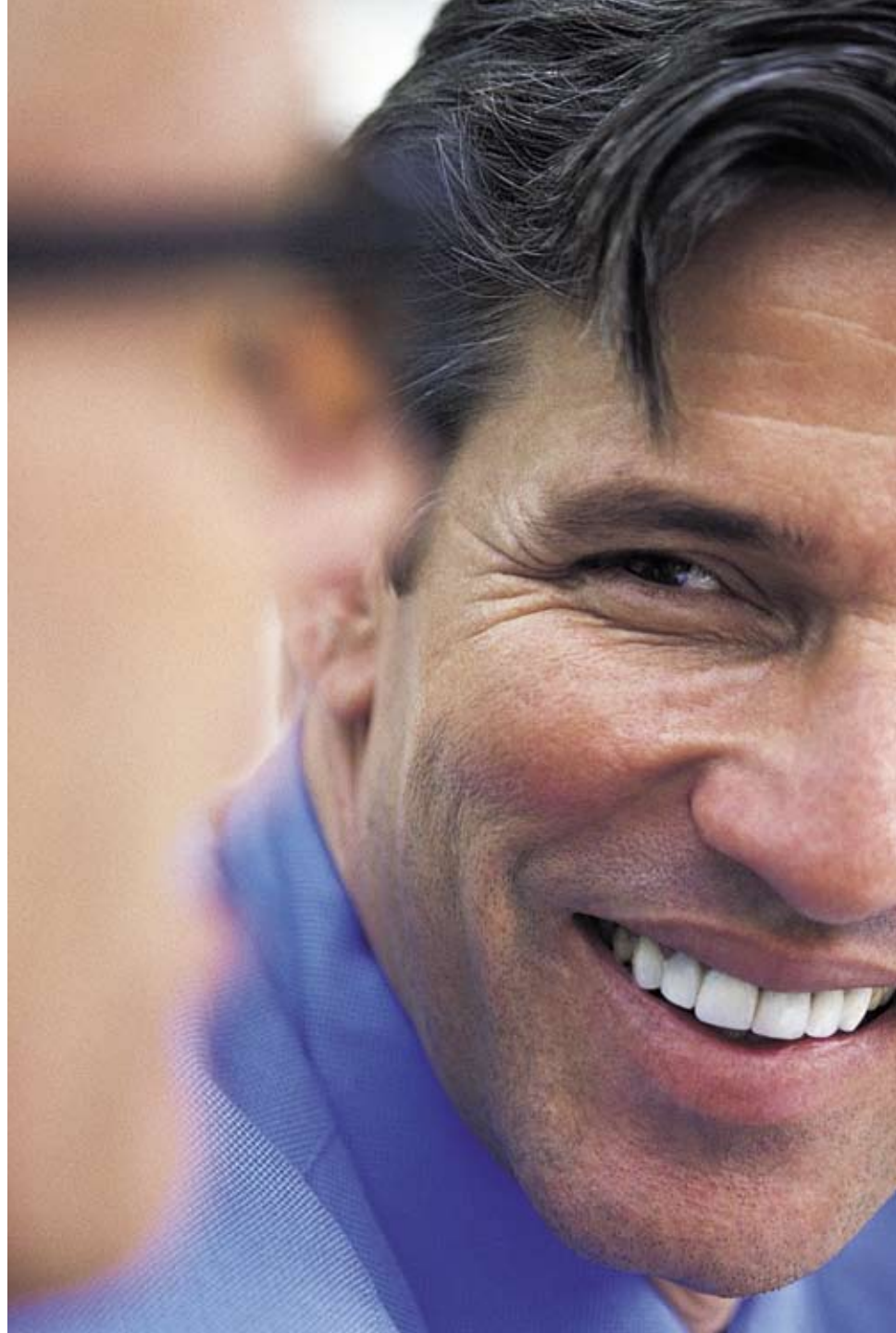
Your demeanor, reactions under pressure and the nature of your relationships all say more about you than you realize. If you treat the people around you like they really matter and can make a difference, they will.

Spend some time with the little guys in the organization. They know more than you might think. Typically they recognize what really matters. Stuff you really need to know. One of our respondents said she was quite confused about the real nature of her new companies' products until she spent some beer time with a few guys in the factory. She said, "They made it straight and clear why anyone should prefer our products."

Become acutely aware of how often you say little things like, "At my last company we did it this way." No one wants to be made to feel inferior. When it is important to share such information, simply say, "What if we did this?" There is a far better chance they will like your idea.

Showing appreciation is a little thing that can be more powerful than anything else you can do. It is the easiest and simplest way to engage others, gain their approval and enlist their support for your efforts.

Little things make you or break you.



Manage expectations.

Nearly every senior marketer who participated in our study mentioned the need to better manage expectations during the first 100 days.

Even though marketers live and die by sophisticated strategies they often don't bother with a formal plan to manage expectations in a new job. Sure you probably do it in your head but is it worth more determined effort? In fact, very few actions can contribute more to your early success in a new role.

You will be under a good deal of pressure to produce a plan and, in extreme cases, even provide results during the first 100 days. It requires, at very least, action steps and an agenda to get to the final plan. Of course, the first step in this agenda involves identifying whose expectations need to be managed. Enlist their broad feedback as you craft this interim plan. Once it is complete, share the timetables and track accomplishments along the way.

This collaboration makes it possible for colleagues to understand and accept realistic expectations because they participated in evaluating the strategies and framing your plans. This naturally creates shared expectations and deflects the full burden from you.

When everyone sets expectations, it's not all up to you.



Team up.

You have to get your team up to speed sooner rather than later. So you've got to determine their strengths and weaknesses as soon as possible. It's especially critical if you find the team lacking and need to find replacements. That's going to take longer than the 100 days you've got to succeed or fail.

Clearly, this is no simple task since you need to avoid snap judgments and give people enough time to understand you and your expectations. Someone who may have not performed well for your predecessor may respond positively to your leadership style. People usually join companies for all sorts of reasons but almost universally leave jobs because of poor relationships with bosses. You gain tremendous experience and intellectual capital whenever you can inspire a current employee to greater engagement and better performance.

There are clear indications in our study findings that creating employee engagement is the secret sauce to accelerating team dynamics and performance. Even those employees who may have negative attitudes can become motivated, engaged and productive when they are included and feel like they are contributing. Everyone needs to feel like they are a part of something. That's probably why we call them teams.

Creating engagement is the secret to get your team up and running quickly.



“No one would develop a marketing strategy without a launch plan. Yet that’s exactly what we do when we start a new job without a plan for the first 100 days. I’ve done it before without a plan. I won’t do it again.”

–Brand and Marketing VP for a leading global financial services company

ABOUT BRANDTRUST

Brandtrust specializes in helping our clients understand the emotional factors that drive consumer decisions, create trust in the marketplace and engage employees in the workplace. Understanding the real nature of consumer emotions is fundamental to success.

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Do the first 100 days matter?

Maybe more than we think.

Yet most marketers don't plan to make the most of this one-time opportunity to make a first impression.

Squandering it could make you or break you.