

The CEO as Chief Expectations Officer

By Elaine Fogel

April 27, 2004

When your CEO is Chief Expectations Officer, it can mean two things. He is doing his¹ job and has high expectations for your organization to reach its goals, as outlined in the strategic plan and annual operating plan. As Martha Stewart used to say – that's a good thing.

But, there's a second connotation. When your CEO has high expectations for the organization that often include new initiatives and directions **during** the fiscal year, long after budgets are approved, then you are at a crossroads. You must then balance between achieving your established targets and managing the delivery of new ones, possibly without additional resources. Now, you've got a challenge.

Throughout your organization, these surprise initiatives have rippling effects, but the department that typically bears the heaviest load is marketing. Often, staff in other disciplines are unaware of the amount of time it takes to develop a marketing strategy, decide on tactics, then project manage them until completion. In this high-tech world, many people assume that marketing tactics can be turned around instantly. Only we know how far from the truth that is.

There are several options, but trying to juggle **all** expectations with existing resources is not one of them. The fallout of this choice not only creates a difficult work environment, it can often cost more than the CEO may realize. Organizations that operate like this can have higher staff turnover, staff burnout, increased absenteeism, and a higher than average rate of short and long-term disability for stress-related causes.

So, what to do? **Be strategic.**

1. Review your annual plan.

Review your plan to see where the major conflicts lie. You may find that it is a seasonal issue, or one that is evident in specific months of the year.

2. Problem solve with your staff team.

Similar to brainstorming creative ideas and concepts, your marketing team is the best group to help problem solve a resolution. Set aside a half or full day to identify the issues, giving the team an opportunity to bring their areas of expertise to the table.

3. Prioritize.

Make a list of all your projects and number them according to priority.

1 = must do, non-negotiable

This covers projects like production of the annual report, an ad campaign for a planned product/service launch, and the deliverables for pre-booked events like trade shows or your annual golf tournament.

2 = should do to achieve targets/goals

This may cover tactics that help build awareness, response rates and can directly affect revenue generation. A direct mail campaign to market a specific product/service, an e-mail campaign designed to increase your customer database, or the production of new *marcom* materials, are examples in this category.

3 = nice to do, if we have resources and time

These deliverables are the ones that typically fall off the radar screen, but if you could just manage to fit them in, you're convinced that they would produce positive results. Unfortunately, they often accumulate at the bottom of the project list.

4. Prepare a report.

Once your team has identified the list of priorities, write a report for the senior marketing staff person, or in smaller organizations, the CEO himself. Provide a rationale for the decisions your team has developed. Summarize with solution options.

5. Ask for a follow-up meeting.

The marketing team's senior staff person should request a meeting with the senior management staff person responsible for marketing, or the CEO (if applicable) to review the report and determine which of the recommended solutions will be implemented. This helps identify the revised expectations so that everyone is on the same page, and both deliverables and performance are realistic.

6. Confirm the solutions in writing.

Ask for a written confirmation of the revised expectations or provide one, so there are no differences in interpretation, and there's a written record to assure your team long before their performance reviews evaluate the results.

Once you take the opportunity to problem solve, it's quite astonishing to see how projects can be broken down, delayed, outsourced or eliminated all together. Here are some ideas to keep in mind during this process.

- Use outsourced suppliers.

Whether you have an agency of record or not, you may still require additional short-term assistance with your list of deliverables. Freelancers and independent marketing agencies can help bridge the gap and maintain your critical paths. Once you've gone through the prioritizing exercise, negotiating for these necessary resources will be easier.

- Contact local colleges and universities to offer short-term student internships.

There are many good post-secondary P.R. marketing and communications programs that often have internship placements as part of their studies. Take advantage by offering a one or two-month placement to students looking for experience who can provide extra hands during your crunch periods. Even though it will require some mentorship, it is an inexpensive way to get the work done, while you provide a valuable experience to students starting out. You never know when you'll find a "star" that you'll want to hire after graduation.

- Hire long-term interns.

In some locations, there are organizations that help graduates gain experience through longer-term internship placements. This situation gives the graduate a chance to gain a positive work reference before seeking a more permanent position. Terms can be anywhere from six months to a year, with salaries or payments at extremely low rates. Again, there's mentorship involved, but when you get hard-working young people willing to prove themselves, it's well worth the time invested.

- Hire staff on contract.

When deliverables require the expertise of someone with more experience, but your budget doesn't allow for benefits or a long-term commitment, hire marketing professionals on contract for several months up to a year. Factor in the internal associated costs such as occupancy, IT and finance costs.

- Negotiate with your existing suppliers.

When you've got extra deliverables that were unforeseen during budget preparations, you'll still have additional hard costs for production. Talk to your suppliers and see where they can help out. If you're a valuable customer, they may offer some flexible options to save you money. You can double up on a planned print run, for example, and add additional materials on the same press for a lesser per unit cost.

- Show your team your appreciation.

Showing your appreciation during or after high demand periods, will go a long way in staff retention. Organize a celebration after completing a major project; give staff alternating time off to reward them; or buy them gift certificates for a local mall they can use for themselves or their families. It's not the cost here that counts, but the thought that will go a long way in keeping your team cohesive and motivated.

Whether your CEO, as Chief Expectations Officer is realistic or not, these strategies are useful during the course of our busy, multi-tasked days as marketers. It's easy to get caught up in the typical, pressure-driven environment of our profession, but taking a step back to analyze priorities and plan for them, is smart management and will keep your team healthier and happier.

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¹ *The masculine gender was chosen for this article to avoid using more cumbersome his/her references.*