

Marketing Agility: The Concept, Antecedents, and a Research Agenda

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Abstract

Changes in the way customers shop, accompanied by an explosion of customer touchpoints and fast-changing competitive and technological dynamics, have led to an increased emphasis on agile marketing. The objective of this article is to conceptualize and investigate the emerging concept of marketing agility. The authors synthesize the literature from marketing and allied disciplines and insights from in-depth interviews with 22 senior managers. Marketing agility is defined as the extent to which an entity rapidly iterates between making sense of the market and executing marketing decisions to adapt to the market. It is conceptualized as occurring across different organizational levels and shown to be distinct from related concepts in marketing and allied fields. The authors highlight the firm challenges in executing marketing agility, including ensuring brand consistency, scaling agility across the marketing ecosystem, managing data privacy concerns, pursuing marketing agility as a fad, and hiring marketing leaders. The authors identify the antecedents of marketing agility at the organizational, team, marketing leadership, and employee levels and provide a roadmap for future research. The authors caution that marketing agility may not be well-suited for all firms and all marketing activities.

Keywords

agile marketing, experimentation, iteration, marketing agility, sensemaking, speed

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The digital transformation of enterprises, emergence of new channels (e.g., social media, mobile devices), and deluge of customer data are altering the practice of marketing.¹ The way customers shop and interact with brands has changed considerably in recent years (Swaminathan et al. 2020), and researchers increasingly view shopping as a customer journey rather than a linear path to purchase (Lee et al. 2018). The challenges faced by marketing managers are highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic, with some analysts calling for a fundamental rethinking of marketing models (Boudet et al. 2020).

In response, scholarly research has advanced the need for new and flexible organizational models and recognized that marketing needs to be "agile" (Lemon and Verhoef 2016;

Moorman 2020). Marketing agility (MA) is, in fact, viewed as a key priority for achieving marketing excellence (Homburg, Theel, and Hohenburg 2020). Chief marketing officers (CMOs) also emphasize the importance of MA. For example, Theresa McLaughlin, CMO of TD Bank, notes,

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¹ We use "customers" to denote both business-to-customer (B2C) and business-to-business (B2B) customers.

Our focus as a marketing organization is on creating experiences that add value for customers throughout their entire journey. Based on what we've learned so far, agile could play a significant role in helping us deliver on that. (Morrison 2019)

Similarly, James Lyski, CMO at CarMax, the leading automotive retailer for used cars, underscores the importance of an agile approach to marketing:

If you wait till you perfect your product, you're behind the innovation curve. We use an agile development model where teams are constantly iterating. Most of the experiments they do are designed to fail. You learn a lot more from failure than success. (Berthiaume 2019)

Despite the increasing importance ascribed to MA, it is not clear what it actually is. Is it the application of agile principles to marketing from other areas, such as manufacturing and software development? Is it a key priority of marketing excellence that relies on simplified structures to pursue organic growth through a test-and-learn approach (Homburg, Theel, and Hohenburg 2020)? Is MA a fundamentally new idea? The first objective of this article is to review prior research and synthesize it with in-depth managerial interviews to propose a definition of MA and compare it with extant constructs.

In addition to the lack of a common understanding of MA, there are also growing concerns about its efficacy. For instance, a recent report recently surmised that agility is not a silver bullet, and its benefits are not realized unless “applied for the right reasons, in the right places, and in the right way” (Ahlback, Comella-Dorda, and Mahadevan 2018). Other analysts warn that MA is not the right fit for certain situations such as long sales cycles (Abramovich 2018). The second objective of this article is to identify the potential downsides of and execution challenges associated with MA.

There is also a paucity of insights about the factors that enable firms to pursue MA. For example, a survey by the Boston Consulting Group finds that even though nine of ten marketing executives feel that agility is important for the marketing function, only one of five considers their firm to be agile (Visser et al. 2018). Reflecting the urgency of this challenge, the Marketing Science Institute (MSI) has identified “Organizing for Marketing Agility” as a key research priority for 2018–2020. The third objective of this article is to draw on insights from in-depth interviews and extant literature to identify what is known about the key organizational-, team-, marketing leadership-, and marketing employee-related antecedents of MA, and to propose directions for future research on MA.

Developing the Marketing Agility Concept

Homburg, Theel, and Hohenburg (2020) identify MA as a key dimension of marketing excellence and conceptualize it “as a firm’s strategic means for executing growth activities by the marketing organization and its members through simplified

structures and processes, fast decision making, and trial and error learning.” (p. 10). Building on this definition, we first review extant literature to understand how agility is conceptualized both at the organizational and the functional levels in related disciplines.² In addition, we evaluate constructs related to adaptability, speed, and iteration that are conceptually similar to MA (see Table 1).

We complement the received view on agility with in-depth interviews of 22 managers involved in marketing, brand and product management, analytics, and consulting roles with experience in agile approaches to marketing (see Zeithaml et al. 2020). The field perspective allows us to tap into insights related to the practice of MA. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes each, and the managers had an average of 20 years of work experience and represented a wide distribution of roles and industries (see the Appendix). Synthesizing the received view with managerial interviews, we propose the following definition of MA:

Marketing agility refers to the extent to which an entity rapidly iterates between making sense of the market and executing marketing decisions to adapt to the market.

The proposed definition of MA complements the existing view by offering a more granular and process-based perspective. The starting point of this process is sensemaking of market developments to quickly assess the need for a marketing decision, receive feedback, and iterate between sensemaking and marketing decisions (see Figure 1). We propose that MA is a unique combination of four key concepts: sensemaking, iteration, speed, and marketing decisions. We next elaborate on each of these four key concepts.

Sensemaking

At its core, sensemaking is “built out of vague questions, muddy answers, and negotiated agreement that attempt to reduce confusion” (Weick 1993, p. 636). It is triggered when “members confront events, issues, and actions that are somehow surprising or confusing” (Maitlis 2005, p. 21)—a characteristic of the contemporary marketing manager’s operating environment. As such, we propose that sensemaking is a critical conceptual pillar of MA. Consider the following example:

When New York’s taxi drivers went on strike for an hour at John F. Kennedy Airport from 6:00 to 7:00 P.M. in protest of the “Muslim travel ban,” Uber responded at 6:30 P.M. by turning off surge pricing at the airport, with the stated intention of informing customers that they have travel options at normal prices (Cresci 2017). However,

² The review covered both academic journals (e.g., *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Organization Science*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Strategic Management Journal*, *Information Systems Research*, and *Management Science*) and practitioner outlets (e.g., *Harvard Business Review*, *California Management Review*, and *MIT Sloan Management Review*).

Table 1. Comparing Marketing Agility with Related Constructs.

| Construct | Definition | Emphasis On... | | | |
|---|--|---------------------|-------------|-------|-----------|
| | | Marketing Decisions | Sensemaking | Speed | Iteration |
| Marketing Concepts Related to Marketing Agility | | | | | |
| Adaptive marketing capabilities | “Vigilant market learning, adaptive experimentation, and ‘open’ marketing that mobilizes dispersed and flexible partner resources” (Day 2011, p. 188) | Yes | Yes | No | Yes |
| Market-focused strategic flexibility | “The firm’s capabilities and intent to generate firm-specific real options for the configuration and reconfiguration of appreciably superior customer value propositions” (Johnson et al. 2003, p. 77) | Yes | Yes | No | No |
| Market orientation | “Organization-wide generation of market intelligence pertaining to current and future customer needs, dissemination of the intelligence across departments, and organization-wide responsiveness to it” (Kohli and Jaworski 1990, p. 6) | Yes | Yes | No | No |
| Market-based organization learning | “A core competency pertaining to external foci...[that] is less visible than most internally focused organizational learning competencies” (Sinkula 1994, p. 37) | Yes | Yes | No | No |
| Agility in Other Organizational Domains | | | | | |
| Strategic agility | “The ability to exploit, or create to one’s advantage changing patterns of resource deployment in a thoughtful and purposeful but also fast and nimble way rather than remain hostage to preset plans and existing business models” (Doz 2020, p. 1) | No | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Organizational agility | “A firm’s ability to cope with rapid, relentless, and uncertain changes and thrive in a competitive environment of continually and unpredictably changing opportunities” (Lu and Ramamurthy 2011, p. 932) | No | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Agile manufacturing | “A manufacturing paradigm that focuses on smaller scale, modular production facilities, and agile operations capable of dealing with turbulent and changing environments” (Cao and Dowlatsahi 2005, p. 531) | No | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Supply chain agility | “Supply chain’s capability to adapt or respond in a speedy manner to a changing marketplace environment” (Swafford, Ghosh, and Murthy 2006, p. 172) | No | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Software development agility | “A software team’s ability to efficiently and effectively respond to user requirement changes” (Lee and Xia 2010, p. 88) | No | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Organizational Concepts Related to Marketing Agility | | | | | |
| Dynamic capabilities | “The firm’s processes that use resources—specifically the processes to integrate, reconfigure, gain and release resources—to match and even create market change. Dynamic capabilities thus are the organizational and strategic routines by which firms achieve new resource configurations as markets emerge, collide, split, evolve, and die” (Eisenhardt and Martin 2000, p. 1107) | No | Yes | Yes | No |
| Ambidexterity | “An organization’s ability to be aligned and efficient in its management of today’s business demands while simultaneously being adaptive to changes in the environment” (Raisch and Birkinshaw 2008, p. 375) | No | Yes | No | No |
| Improvisation | “The degree to which composition and execution converge in time” (Moorman and Miner 1998, p. 698) | No | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Design thinking | “A creative and strategic process characterized by the following hallmarks: abductive reasoning, iterative thinking and experimentation, holistic perspective, and human-centeredness.” (Beverland, Wilner, and Micheli 2015, p. 593) | Yes | Yes | No | Yes |

this change in pricing quickly escalated into a crisis. Customers voiced their criticism of Uber’s behavior using messages such as “Congrats to @Uber_NYC on breaking a strike to profit off of

refugees being consigned to Hell. Eat shit and die.” Soon, the hash-tag #DeleteUber turned into a vast protest marked by thousands of angry, emotional tweets (Collins 2017), resulting in 400,000 users

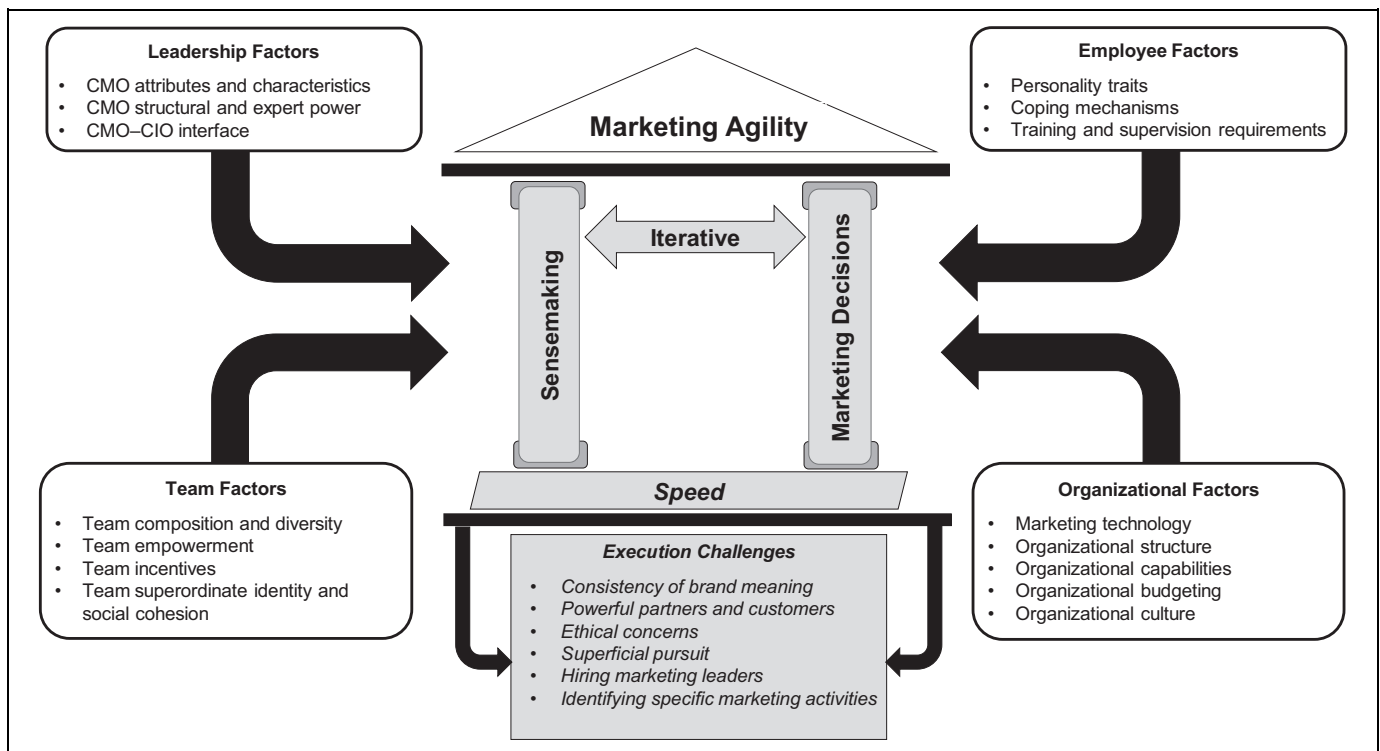


Figure 1. Marketing agility: The construct, antecedents, and execution challenges.

deleting their Uber accounts (Bhuiyan 2017). In response to the customer backlash, Uber dedicated \$3 million for the legal defense of drivers that were affected by the government policy (Isaac 2017).

At its heart, sensemaking is an entity's response to an unexpected or ambiguous development that involves noticing and bracketing the development, establishing a shared understanding of the development, and attempting to create a more ordered environment to draw further cues (Maitlis and Christianson 2014). In this sense, Uber's conduct exemplifies sensemaking as an integral part of MA by highlighting its key elements. Uber noticed an unexpected development (the strike by New York City taxi drivers), formed a potential understanding of the development (risk of being perceived as opportunistic due to higher surge prices), rapidly (within 30 minutes from the start of the strike) made a marketing decision (switched off surge pricing), iterated (by learning from customer backlash), and made another decision (allocating \$3 million in legal defense for people affected by the travel ban). It is important to note that sensemaking, per se, does not imply that the resulting marketing decision is appropriate.

Iteration

Consistent with extant views (see Table 1), the field interviews identified iteration as a conceptual pillar of MA. As noted by the vice president of marketing at a medical equipment manufacturer, MA is

the ability of any firm to be able to really quickly identify any initiatives, be able and nimble to execute them, get the feedback, and refine the initiative. . . . The rapid evolution and iterative process to perfection (if there is such a thing!) of marketing agility provides the company all the ammunition it needs to tackle the ever-changing market landscape.

Iteration implies repeatedly refining marketing decisions before relaunching or scaling them. Iteration, therefore, is quite different from being guided by a deliberate plan and implementing "preorchestrated" marketing decisions—similar to organizational improvisation (Moorman and Miner 1998). In this sense, executing iteratively or the "small-bets" approach characterizes MA. Iterations, therefore, enable marketing managers to better match the changing needs of the market. By minimizing up-front risk and recognizing that change is an ongoing phenomenon, agile marketing entities can pivot and pursue a new task if feedback suggests the need for further adaptation. Importantly, MA iterations can also reveal that pursuing a new direction is a bad idea. As noted by the digital lead at a *Fortune* 100 firm,

In one of our recent campaigns, we decided to go completely against the grain in our marketing approach and do something new, something more social and integrated with seed marketing. The first week of the campaign went very well, but the second week saw a drop, as sales were not coming. There was no precedence of this pattern so we had to quickly decide whether we stick to the plan or go back to the old approach. We were getting a lot of awareness, but our competitors had a heavily discounted offering, and our efforts for awareness in the category actually ended up helping our competitor. It was

a very hard decision, but we had to respond and change from the cool new spending to the old-fashioned approach of providing discounts through the channel The point was that we tried something new, it worked well initially, then it did not, we learnt from it quickly, and responded to it quickly too.

Speed

Both extant literature and field interviews identify speed as a key facet of agility (see Table 1). As observed by the director of marketing at an Asian retailer,

Marketing agility is about being able to adapt quickly to one's environment and to be sufficiently flexible in one's marketing strategy. It is especially important in today's world, as technology has changed a lot how we do things. The world is revolving so rapidly that things that used to take ten years to change are now taking only ten months.

In the case of MA, speed refers to the time taken by firms to sense market changes, initiate actions, gather feedback, and adjust marketing decisions. As stated by the vice president of marketing at a medical equipment firm, "The basic tenet of marketing agility is based on fast decision making on the best available information at the time." Elaborating on the importance of speed, a senior product manager contrasted MA with more traditional approaches:

Gone are the days when marketing strategy and associated marketing spend were decided at the beginning of a year and never discussed till the end of the year. We live in a very agile world now where we have to make rapid and relentless adjustments to our strategy. The rapid pace with which we move to alter our strategy more toward customer needs is what we call marketing agility.

Marketing Decisions

Although more obvious, the final distinguishing feature is the centrality of marketing decisions in MA. Our interviews suggested that MA occurs across marketing areas. For example, a senior product manager underscored the importance of agility in advertising spending:

We see lots of companies are making quick adjustments to their ad strategy and spend to win highly competitive ad space. The firm that sticks with the traditional mode of marketing is not going to get maximum benefit out of their marketing spends, whereas an agile shop is going to leave everyone behind when it comes to [return on investment] of their marketing spend.

Marketing agility also occurs in product development. As noted by a senior product manager at an automobile retailer,

Agile marketing is essentially a way in which an agile product team work through concepts and requirements to figure out the fastest and most efficient way to release a feature or functionality to the customer that helps either meet a need, test out a concept, and collect learnings that can be iterated and improved upon. It is a

way to quickly gauge if an idea has potential without getting too deep into the weeds or devoting too much development resources.

In addition to the range of marketing decisions, field interviews revealed two nuances. First, participants observed that while MA nearly always involves learning, it does not always prompt action. In the words of a country manager at a financial services firm,

There are times when you have to be agile in terms of listening and sensing, but not to respond. For us, it's brand management and social marketing; you have to be more nuanced and careful, as speed is not your ally because sometimes you have limited visibility on the background developments. As such, in these instances where you have limited visibility or there are too many factors at play and it is difficult to anticipate, then it might be better to be agile in terms of listening, sensing, and learning, as opposed to responding or taking any specific action.

Similarly, the vice president of corporate communications at a public infrastructure firm highlighted the importance of balancing actions/activities with a wait-and-watch approach:

More traditional marketing (vs. agile marketing) involves pre-planned campaigns for products/services guided by a monthly calendar. The contrast is agile marketing, which involves constant monitoring of what's happening around the firm (e.g., actions of one's competitors), and seizing the opportunity to tweak one's own campaigns Rather than just acting (and reacting to changing circumstances), it is important to watch and see, to understand one's brand, and to be cognizant of the entire ecosystem so as to know where is the sweet spot to intervene, or simply to wait.

Second, marketing decisions are not only about responding to market developments; iterative probing can also lead to proactive decisions. The digital lead of a *Fortune* 100 firm specifically noted the need to be proactive:

It has to be a balance of reactive and proactive. It can't be either only. If you are not responding, then you are not being customer centric. If you are not being proactive, then you are only following.

Agile firms thus pursue both reactive and proactive marketing decisions and also recognize that in certain situations the best decision could well be a quick decision to not act.

Levels of Marketing Agility

The proposed definition of MA uses the term "entity" to imply that this construct can occur at the level of an organization, a marketing team, a marketing leader, and an marketing employee. It is nonetheless true that agility, in its basic form, is often observed at an individual level. In common parlance, "agility" is used to describe the nimble movements of athletes, warriors, and animals. A common criticism of organizational research is that by ascribing individual attributes to collective entities (e.g., teams, business units, organizations), one

commits fallacies of anthropomorphism or personification (Walsh 1995).

In the abstract, however, constructs are indifferent to level-of-analysis because they serve as a “shorthand for a variety of phenomena that can be posited at any hierarchical level” (Morgeson and Hoffman 1999, p. 251). As such, we submit that MA as a collective construct is theoretically meaningful. A multi-level conceptualization of MA allows us to develop a richer understanding of the micro, meso, and macro behaviors associated with it.

Sensemaking at the individual, team, and organizational levels poses different challenges. Individuals make sense of “what is going on” using frames and schemas that often vary based on their functional backgrounds and experience (Harris 1994). Sensemaking in teams implies developing shared frames or jointly ascribing meaning. For agile marketing teams, sensemaking implies bridging the different “thought worlds” of employees from varying functional backgrounds. For example, Micheli et al. (2012) note that, despite using similar terms and sharing new product development goals, marketers and designers may attribute very different meanings to the same words. Thus, agility as a collective and multilevel construct is not simply the aggregation of individual or team agile actions.

Comparing Marketing Agility with Other Constructs

Marketing agility is conceptually related to several constructs in marketing and related disciplines. Table 1 provides the definitions of the related constructs and outlines their similarities and differences with MA. Agility in marketing differs from agility in other functions (e.g., software development, supply chain) because of its focus on marketing decisions (see Table 1). We next briefly outline how MA differs from related concepts in marketing and other disciplines.

We posit that MA is related to four key marketing constructs: adaptive marketing capabilities, market-focused strategic flexibility (MFSF), market orientation, and market-based organizational learning. Table 1 highlights the conceptual overlaps between MA and these marketing constructs. We note that the unique combination of four conceptual pillars differentiates MA from these constructs. For example, whereas MA explicitly emphasizes speed of marketing decisions, adaptive marketing capabilities emphasize vigilant learning but not speed. In addition, while adaptive marketing capabilities emphasize mobilization of dispersed and flexible partner resources, these aspects are not defining features of MA. It is also distinct from MFSF, as MA is focused on rapidly making sense of market developments and executing marketing decisions in an iterative manner; conceptualizations of MFSF, however, do not focus on these aspects. Furthermore, MA also differs from market orientation due to its explicit focus on speed and iteration in executing marketing decisions. Finally, while MA emphasizes iterative and rapid sensemaking and speedy execution of marketing decisions, market-based organizational learning does not emphasize these aspects.

Marketing agility is also related to higher-level constructs such as dynamic capabilities, improvisation, ambidexterity, and design thinking in other disciplines. For example, by emphasizing marketing decisions and iteration, MA differs from dynamic capabilities, even though both emphasize sensemaking and speed. Similarly, while both MA and design thinking emphasize iterations and experimentation, MA differs from design thinking due to its emphasis on speed (see Table 1).

In summary, while the MA construct is conceptually related to extant marketing and organizational constructs, it also possesses distinctive characteristics that make it theoretically rich. Arguing that there are no differences between organizational constructs that have some overlapping content would be akin to indulging in the “shades of gray” fallacy (Winter 2003).

Challenges in Executing Marketing Agility

Although MA facilitates rapid adaptation to the market, pursuing and sustaining MA also involves potential pitfalls. In this section, we elaborate on some of the challenges associated with executing MA, including those related to brand building, the marketing ecosystem, data governance issues, MA as a fad, and marketing leaders. We also outline the criteria for evaluating which marketing activities are likely to benefit from an agile approach and point to future research opportunities.

Does Marketing Agility Threaten Consistency of Brand Meaning?

Consistency of brand image is critical for maintaining strong brand associations in customers’ minds. Niessing and Aaker (2015) note that the pressure to emphasize agile marketing over core brand values is a balancing act for brand managers as it is essential to ensure consistency of a brand’s core identity. Across the interviews, several participants alluded to MA hurting customer attitudes and perceptions toward the brand. The vice president of corporate communications at a public infrastructure company cautioned,

It is important to be transparent and authentic to the world. Let the firm’s core be the Northern Star instead of just jumping on the bandwagon. The core values of the brand are what’s most endearing to consumers. Brands have to think long-term, sensing and listening, and brands have to take the driver seat in steering sales and customer management, rather than letting external forces dictate what they do.

The possibility that agile marketing actions could hurt brand meaning points to a paradox faced by marketing leaders and teams. From a sales perspective, agile marketing helps drive growth. However, from a broader, long-term perspective, fuzzy brand associations—a potential by-product of frequent experimentation—is potentially detrimental in product markets. These countervailing forces raise important future research questions for brand management, such as, What activities relating to brand management are amenable for MA? When do the

costs of managing brand image and consistency exceed the benefits of MA? How can these costs be effectively managed?

Are Powerful Partners and Customers Roadblocks for Marketing Agility?

Marketing agility might be difficult to pursue in mature industries such as consumer packaged goods (CPG) due to dependence on channel partners. For example, a senior marketing consultant we interviewed observed that it is challenging for Procter & Gamble to pursue MA in product development because of an 18-month advance notification that Walmart requires from all suppliers planning product launches. Similarly, product innovation in many industries requires close collaboration with suppliers. Thus, MA in product development is challenging unless the entire supply chain is on board.

The MA of firms that rely on the services of third-party vendors (e.g., advertising agencies, market intelligence providers) is also constrained by the speed with which the extended enterprise operates. Firms should account for this constraint when building their agency relationships. Who is willing and able to move as fast as they are? It is worth noting that this challenge may worsen if early adopters of agile marketing have the advantage of grabbing the partners that are committed to agility and leaving later entrants with partners unable or unwilling to transition to an agile environment (Day 2011).

In extending agility to the marketing ecosystem, there are formidable control and coordination problems to overcome, including monitoring, managing conflicts of interest, and ensuring accountability. These challenges raise important questions: What are the mechanisms available to extend MA to the marketing ecosystem? How should contract durations with partners be designed for agile marketing? While longer contracts with partners might help in developing shared interpretive frames that aid sensemaking, it could also prevent firms from flexing and changing rapidly as market conditions change. It seems that relational norms might play a crucial role in extending MA across partners. Future research needs to investigate the roles of formal versus informal mechanisms in extending MA to the marketing ecosystem as well as whether the efficacy of the mechanism is contingent on the nature of the marketing activity at hand (see the “Which Marketing Activities Are Likely to Benefit More from Agile Execution?” subsection).

Does the Pursuit of Marketing Agility Exacerbate Ethical Concerns?

As organizations rely increasingly on using customer data to make agile decisions, the trade-off between achieving speed and navigating data governance issues will become increasingly salient (Kane et al. 2019). Better decisions can be made with more comprehensive data that provide a 360-degree view of customers. However, in an era when data privacy concerns are assuming greater importance, the use of data for MA is likely to result in regulatory challenges. In 2018, U.S. firms

experienced more than 1,200 data breaches in which 400 million customer records were compromised (Statista 2019). The financial impact of data breaches is severe (Martin, Borah, and Palmatier 2017). Regulatory actions similar to the European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation, the California Consumer Privacy Act, and Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act laws could impede the easy access and use of data. It is conceivable that future privacy regulations could force organizations to rely on minimized and anonymized customer data. In the face of stricter regulations pertaining to data privacy and security, pursuing MA could be challenging.

At the same time, increasing pressure to innovate or launch marketing campaigns at a faster rate could tempt agile teams to overlook ethical concerns. A recent study by Deloitte Consulting found that less than half of chief executive officers (CEOs) are spending enough time and resources to manage privacy and ethical issues (Kane 2019). To ensure that the execution of MA does not violate privacy concerns, ethical guardrails are needed. This could reduce MA, but not all agree that this will occur. The chief digital officer of MetLife likens ethical guardrails to car brakes (Kane et al. 2019): “People think brakes are to make a car slow down when, in fact, the purpose of brakes is that they enable cars to go fast. The same is true with organizational ethics.” More research is needed to understand whether stricter regulations pertaining to data privacy and security make it difficult to pursue MA.

Is There a Risk That Firms Will Pursue Marketing Agility Superficially?

As reflected by the high level of interest in the business press, MA is quickly becoming corporate jargon. Yet, as with other organizational fads (e.g., quality circles, total quality management), there is a risk that firms will adopt the trappings of MA, but not its essence. For example, in an attempt to become agile, many corporations have tried to mimic Spotify’s organization structure by adopting the easier, more superficial parts such as naming their teams “squads” and “tribes” (Stanier 2019).

“Cargo cult”³ MA, or the pursuit of MA as an organizational fad, is likely to waste resources and yield poor outcomes. The superficial pursuit of MA is also a risk because the adoption of some of the cultural artifacts of MA may create an illusory sense of progress. It may also preclude a deeper and more difficult transformation. Future research on MA will need to develop training programs and organizational change approaches as well as metrics to clearly identify whether MA is operating and how it is contributing to firm performance.

³ An analogy can be drawn to the well-known “cargo cult” phenomenon, in which technologically primitive societies attempt to gain the benefits of a technology through imitating the symbols and rituals of technologically more advanced societies—such as by building airstrips, mock airplanes, and mock radios in the anticipation that planes will arrive and deliver cargo (Lindstrom 1993).

Does Marketing Agility Pose a Challenge for Hiring Marketing Leaders?

A survey by the Association of National Advertisers finds that marketers and advertising agencies are growing increasingly frustrated by the difficulty of finding the right talent (Odell 2017). The acute leadership talent shortage that firms are likely to face as they transition to MA reflects a confluence of many factors. The emergence of MA requires roles within organizations that did not previously exist. For example, roles such as social media and digital analytics managers require personnel that have not only the “hard skills” in data management and advanced analytics but also conceptual foundations of marketing such as brand management. Indeed, with the increased role of technology in marketing, agile marketing organizations find themselves competing for leadership talent with technology giants. The hiring of senior executives with technology backgrounds by firms such as Nike, Starbucks, and Chipotle to drive their consumer-direct digital strategies are cases in point (Dignan 2019). The paucity of managers with the mix of skills required by an agile marketing organization presents a unique challenge for smaller firms as they have limited resources. As such, a fruitful avenue for future research is to examine how small and medium-sized enterprises could overcome the challenge of recruiting marketing executives with the technology skills and marketing background to run an agile marketing organization.

Which Marketing Activities Are Likely to Benefit More from Agile Execution?

In this subsection, we provide insights on which marketing activities might stand to benefit the most from MA. Building on the proposed definition, the challenges in executing MA and insights from the agility stream of research, we identify four criteria to assess whether a particular marketing activity is likely to benefit from agility: market response unpredictability, activity decomposability, customer validation, and ecosystem dependence (for definitions, see Table 2). We propose that a marketing activity is best suited for agility when the market response is highly unpredictable, activity can be broken down into smaller components, it is plausible to get customer validation, and there is less need to involve external partners.

The rationale for selecting these criteria is as follows. The risk of large up-front investments is significantly more when the market response is likely to be unpredictable. Agile principles help reduce the risk by iterating through “smaller bets.” Likewise, the ability to iterate and experiment is higher when an activity can be broken down into smaller components and validated independently. Similarly, agility is beneficial if it is possible to use customers to validate preliminary ideas before getting too “deep into the weeds.” In some situations, however, customers may not be able to validate or provide feedback. Finally, if an activity requires the involvement and participation of the marketing ecosystem, the benefits of agility needs to be balanced with the increased need for coordination. In some

situations, external partners might be unable to match the clock speed (i.e., short iterative cycles) of firms, making it difficult to execute an activity in an agile manner.

Using the aforementioned criteria, we assess the benefits of agile approaches for four categories of marketing activities: content creation, product development, media buying, and marketing strategy making. As outlined in Table 2, marketing activities such as content creation, product development, and media buying are likely to benefit the most from agile principles. This assessment is based on the observation that market response unpredictability increases the risk of large up-front investments in development (i.e., marketing campaign- or product-related). Furthermore, the ability to modularize these activities and test repeatedly with customer groups increases the likelihood of delivering the “right” messages or products through the “right” media platforms (Lin, Chiu, and Tseng 2006). In contrast, marketing strategy making entails a comprehensive set of activities such as situational analysis and considerations of long-term strategic direction (Menon et al. 1999). These activities are less suited for market experimentation. As such, we propose that decisions related to product life cycle planning, brand management, and market growth strategies (i.e., organic or mergers and acquisitions) are better suited for traditional planning and control techniques.

We next elaborate on the antecedents of MA. The antecedents of MA at each hierarchical level are likely to be distinct; as such, explicating the key issues and challenges at different hierarchical levels is necessary to advance theory. At the organizational level, MA is enabled by marketing technology (Mar-Tech) factors, organization structure, organizational capabilities, the organization budgeting process, and organizational culture. The factors that drive MA at the leadership level are the CMO’s background characteristics, CMO power, and the CMO–chief information officer (CIO) interface factors. Similarly, at the team level, MA is contingent on the autonomy available to teams, the diversity of teams in terms of their functional backgrounds and skills as well as more psychological factors such as superordinate identity and social cohesion. Finally, at the marketing employee level, MA depends on both the traits of employees as well as the training imparted to adapt to changing information. Table 3 outlines future research opportunities at the organizational and other hierarchical levels.

Organizational Antecedents of Marketing Agility

While we conceptualize MA as a multilevel construct, it is likely to reside at the organizational level in the form of routines, processes, flexible structures, and cultural norms/values. Without organizational capabilities and structure, MA is likely to be fortuitous and not sustainable. For firms such as CarMax, MA is driven by the firm’s superior ability to tightly integrate two distinct aspects of MA: discovering market opportunities and developing or delivering marketing campaigns or solutions. Likewise, for firms such as Spotify, MA is supported

Table 2. Assessing the Fit Between Marketing Activities and Marketing Agility.

| Evaluation Criteria | | | | | |
|---|---|--|---|--|--|
| Marketing Activities | Market Response Unpredictability | Activity Decomposability | Customer Validation | Ecosystem Dependence | Benefits of MA |
| | <p><i>Definition:</i> The extent to which the market is unpredictable with respect to customer preferences and competitor responses. The higher the unpredictability, the greater the benefits of agility (experimenting and iterating could ensure that the solution delivered meets the market needs).</p> <p>High. Response of customers to creative content is uncertain.</p> | <p><i>Definition:</i> The extent to which an activity can be broken down into smaller components. The greater the decomposability, the greater the benefits of agility (each component can be tested and iterated on independently).</p> <p>High. Ability to break down epic campaigns into smaller stories.</p> | <p><i>Definition:</i> The extent to which it is possible to get the concept at each iteration validated from customers. The greater the ability to validate, the greater the benefits of agility (validate mock-ups or prototypes from customer groups before investing valuable resources).</p> <p>High. Ability to test and get feedback on user stories.</p> | <p><i>Definition:</i> The extent to which the execution of an activity requires the involvement of external partners/agencies. The greater the degree of dependence on the marketing ecosystem, the lower the benefits of agility (greater dependence increases coordination costs).</p> <p>High. Typically requires the involvement of ad agencies.</p> | |
| Content creation (e.g., advertising campaign, branding content, website design, social media campaign) | | | | | The inherent risk of an improper message is high because of large up-front investments, so the benefits of MA are significant. |
| New product development (e.g., customer research for idea generation, concept development, concept testing) | High. Response of customers to product ideas is uncertain. | High. The product development process can be broken down into opportunity identification, prototype design, and testing before delivery. | High. Ability to test and get customer feedback on different concepts is high. | Moderate. Might require the involvement of suppliers to ensure feasibility. | Because consumer feedback is critical for success, and the up-front investments are large, the benefits of MA are significant. |
| Media buying (e.g., omnichannel marketing, ad word bidding, search engine optimization, YouTube and Facebook ad placement) | High. Response of customers to different media vehicles or platforms is uncertain. | High. Media can be purchased in small chunks. | High. Ability to test media's conversion effectiveness by examining customer response. | High. Requires the involvement of ad agencies. | The inherent risk of a wrong media mix is high because of significant up-front media costs, so the benefits of MA are significant. |
| Marketing strategy making (e.g., product life cycle planning, planned obsolescence, multibrand strategy, market entry strategies) | High. Response of markets to marketing strategy making is uncertain. | Low. It is difficult to break down strategic choices such as product life cycle planning, brand strategies, and market entry strategies. | Low. These are strategic issues that are guided by corporate objectives, and experimenting may not be appropriate. | Moderate. Might require the involvement of suppliers or external agencies in long-term planning. | Given the nature of these decisions in setting strategic direction, the need for control outweighs the benefits of agility (experimentation and validation). |

Table 3. A Roadmap for Future Research on Marketing Agility.

| Focus | Conceptual | Empirical |
|--------------|---|--|
| Organization | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ What are the organizational factors that drive or impede data virtualization for a firm? ✓ What factors drive firms to adopt tools (e.g., machine learning, AI) that are critical to drive MA? ✓ What kinds of formal and informal mechanisms are needed to drive coordination across teams and drive MA at an organizational level? ✓ What are the lower-level capabilities required to drive MA at an organizational level? ✓ How should organizational and marketing budgets account for the unique challenges presented by MA? ✓ How do firms balance the culture that facilitates MA with other facets of an organization that require more traditional business practices? <p>Execution Challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ What are the implications of MA for brand management? ✓ Does the marketing ecosystem impede the pursuit of MA? ✓ Does the pursuit of MA exacerbate concerns over data privacy and security? ✓ Is there a risk of MA being pursued as an organizational fad? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ What incentives can be used to facilitate data sharing and transparency across business units and functions? ✓ To what extent do marketing managers within and across organizations rely on automation tools such as machine learning and AI to make marketing decisions? What is the corresponding impact of these tools on a firm's MA? ✓ How should the organization structure be designed to coordinate between marketing teams? ✓ What are the impediments in executing the discovery and delivery tracks of MA in parallel? ✓ What are the metrics to measure the effectiveness of agile marketing efforts? ✓ What is the impact of MA on stock market returns and firm risk? |
| Team | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ What are the effects of diversity in the marketing team on MA? ✓ How should incentive systems balance performance appraisal of individuals within a MA team and across multiple MA teams? ✓ To what extent should incentives be based on outcomes versus behavior for agile marketing teams? ✓ How do superordinate identity and social cohesion interact in marketing teams, and what is the combined impact on MA? ✓ How can superordinate identity and social cohesion be cultivated in situations where physical proximity is difficult to achieve (e.g., telecommuting)? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Does diversity in marketing teams aid sensemaking? ✓ How should teams be incentivized to encourage experimentation and avoid indirectly encouraging failure? ✓ Under what conditions should firms use permanent versus temporary teams to drive MA? |
| Leadership | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ What attributes and characteristics are required for CMOs to drive MA? ✓ Are CMOs with sales and/or technology background likely to be better suited for MA? ✓ What enables CMOs to distinguish between true and false brand stories? <p>Execution Challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Is hiring of the "right" marketing leaders suited for MA difficult? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Are CMOs with broader responsibilities able to make faster marketing decisions? ✓ What kind of power do CMOs need for MA? Is structural power more important than expert power for MA? ✓ What kind of skill-sets do CMOs and CIOs need to have to complement each other and pursue MA? |
| Employee | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ What are the personality traits that are likely to drive the fit of an employee in a firm that embraces MA? ✓ What mechanisms can promote functional, as opposed to dysfunctional coping strategies for employees in agile marketing organizations? ✓ How should marketing managers be trained to thrive in an MA environment? ✓ Does MA pose challenges to business schools and their training methods? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ How can marketing leaders with the right mix of marketing and technological skills be identified, hired and retained? ✓ Are the big five personality dimensions likely to predict a marketing employee's performance in an agile marketing organization? ✓ Is marketing employee conscientiousness undesirable for MA? ✓ How should marketing employees navigate multiple identities such as belonging to a team versus belonging to a functional area? ✓ How should HR develop training programs to update the skills of marketing employees? Should HR iterative cycles be synchronized with marketing iterative cycles? ✓ How should the education curriculum of business schools be designed to train entry-level marketing employees for MA? |

by an organization structure that enables knowledge sharing and integration. The structure also facilitates lateral communication between multiple teams, reduces conflicts, and enables sensemaking and speed at the organizational level. At the organizational level, MA implies developing shared interpretive frames across units, divisions, and teams (Harris 1994; Maitlis and Christianson 2014). Moreover, cultural values and norms play an important role in creating shared interpretive frames at this level, although, in reality, sensemaking might entail order or meaning negotiated through compromise (Harris 1994; Maitlis and Christianson 2014). We next discuss the role of each organizational antecedent, and for each antecedent, we offer a brief overview of relevant prior research and propose directions for future research.

The Role of Marketing Technology Factors in Enabling Marketing Agility

The technological infrastructure and processes deployed for gathering and analyzing market information are broadly referred to as MarTech. Investments in MarTech aid CMOs, marketing employees, and teams to spot opportunities and trends, experiment, and respond to or drive changes in the market. Accordingly, we explore the MarTech characteristics that are relevant and critical to developing and sustaining MA.

“Data virtualization” refers to the ability of organizations to integrate data from disparate sources and bring structured and unstructured data from multiple sources into a unified, logically virtualized data layer for decision making (Demirkan and Delen 2013). Much of the time and resources in a data-rich marketing environment are invested in data identification and “ETL” tasks (i.e., extraction, transformation, and loading of the required data). Inaccessibility of relevant and timely data is a significant barrier to pursuing MA. The best value from MarTech can be realized when the heterogeneous data sets are integrated and underlying relational patterns uncovered in a timely manner. However, as we have noted, these data sets typically exist in silos controlled by different functional groups. The data hoarding tendency creates data quality issues, as each functional group may rely on its own data sets for decision making. Data virtualization not only enhances the speed at which the data can be accessed, it also makes data democratic—that is, easily accessible to all employees.

Data–tool–task fit. With the availability of high-dimensional data and the added complexity of nonnumeric data such as images, text, video, and audio, the selection of the appropriate tool for driving decisions assumes greater importance (Urban et al. 2020; Wedel and Kannan 2016). The choice of the right analytics tools for the type of data at hand is important in enabling firms to exploit the different types of data available to them. Data analytics tools that are geared toward analyzing structured data may not be suited for analyzing unstructured data (Ghasemaghaei, Hassanein, and Turel 2017). Firms are increasingly using machine learning and deep learning tools

to address these limitations. According to a recent study, three out of four firms that have adopted these tools have, on average, experienced a 10% improvement in customer satisfaction owing to their ability to act rapidly to changing customer needs (Columbus 2018). These tools are often superior in their ability to handle a larger number of numeric and nonnumeric features as well as to process real-time data at significant speed. At the same time, a simple tool that can run a needed classification model or produce a specific report with a few clicks might be better suited for some marketing tasks than a complex tool. More generally, the fit between the data, tool, and task at hand is critical in improving the effectiveness of analytics at achieving agility (Ghasemaghaei, Hassanein, and Turel 2017).

Future research priorities. There are several challenges related to MarTech that firms must confront. In a traditional marketing organization, the intelligence gathered through market research often resembles the “waterfall approach,” in which a series of tasks such as objective definition, hypothesis formation, research design, data collection, data analysis, and report generation are performed sequentially (Barabba and Zaltman 1990). This approach can hinder the achievement of MA. The compartmentalized approach to intelligence generation creates silos: users of business intelligence (e.g., brand managers, marketing managers) on the one side and entities that generate the insights (e.g., the data science teams, data warehousing teams, data owners) on the other. Research has found that market intelligence usage is greater in informal organizations than in large formally organized firms (Deshpandé 1982). The siloed process limits feedback of marketers (end users), making the intelligence-gathering process less adaptable to rapid changes. Furthermore, the intelligence generated is often not viewed as a “shareable” resource, as groups or individuals hoard data.

There are two areas for future research. First, we need to understand the organizational impediments to achieving data virtualization and therefore MA. Previous research has shown that trust is the most significant predictor of market research utilization (Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpandé 1992). Additional research is needed to understand the factors that engender trust, facilitate democratization of data, and discourage data hoarding. Research on how the incentives/rewards and metrics used to assess the performance of different functional units influence their willingness to share data is likely to be valuable. Second, while tools that leverage machine learning and deep learning principles are valuable for generating marketing micro campaigns, its actual use by marketers for decisions is not without challenges. Marketing employees are often averse to using algorithms that they do not understand (Dietvorst, Simmons, and Massey 2015). This reluctance raises important questions such as what are the managerial and organizational factors that impede the adoption and use of MarTech tools? In this context, increased transparency of the algorithms and increased feedback from marketing teams could increase trust and greater use of MarTech tools for rapid marketing decisions.

The Fit Between Organization Structure and Marketing Agility

What are the organization structures that are well-suited for enabling MA? A key requirement of MA is that the autonomy of teams should be preserved and knowledge integration across the organization should be exploited. The organization design adopted by Spotify is a case in point. Spotify relies on a distinct organizational form to achieve MA in product development. Instead of a hierarchical or multidivisional organization structure that clusters employees based on functional expertise, Spotify uses small cross-functional teams (see Figure WA1 in the Web Appendix). The core organizational unit is an autonomous “squad” that is responsible for a discrete aspect of the product (Mankins and Garton 2017). For example, a squad might be responsible for a particular feature of the product, such as the display cover of an album, and comprises employees with skills needed to design, develop, test, and release. Each squad has a product owner who is responsible for the vision of the feature, prioritizing the product backlog and setting goals for each iteration.

At a higher level are “tribes,” which are a collection of multiple squads working in related areas (e.g., music player, or backend infrastructure) (Mankins and Garton 2017). The members of squads within a tribe are often colocated, and each tribe has a lead who is responsible for creating the environment for its squads and extracting the best value from them. The organization structure of Spotify also facilitates lateral formal and informal communication (e.g., through alliances, chapters, and guilds; see the Web Appendix).

Fundamentally, flexible structures that promote cross-functional collaboration and cross-pollination of knowledge are crucial for enabling MA at an organizational level. While marketing is better equipped to probe and detect trends because of its boundary-spanning role, the actions required for adaptation might straddle several functional areas (e.g., marketing, manufacturing, supply chain, sales). As a result, a cross-functional team is the most disaggregate unit for executing MA. The precise composition of a cross-functional team depends on the nature of the task at hand. For example, a team tasked with redesigning the online customer experience of returning products could comprise employees with experience in marketing, sales, logistics/supply chain, and user experience designers. Similarly, a team tasked with price optimization could comprise employees with experience in analytics/artificial intelligence (AI)/machine learning tools, sales, logistics/supply chain, and marketing.

At an organizational level, because it is important to develop shared interpretive frames (i.e., sensemaking) of how the activities of different teams impact financial metrics, it is necessary that the organization structure enables frequent interactions and coordination. To this end, firms need to use both formal and informal coordination mechanisms to manage dependencies across teams, thereby allowing for MA at the organizational level. Formal coordination mechanisms refer to periodic meetings of multiple teams (i.e., “scrum

of scrum meetings”) to ensure that teams, while pursuing different proximal goals, share at least one common distal goal (i.e., consistency in marketing strategy). Informal coordination mechanisms refer to organic, casual, and personal communication between members across teams in the organization. The informal coordination mechanisms could foster communities of interest and leverage best practices. A natural question for future research, therefore, is what is the right balance between formal and informal coordination mechanisms to foster MA?

The Role of Organizational Capabilities in Driving Marketing Agility

Marketing agility can be viewed as both improvisational and a dynamic- or higher-order capability that facilitates learning—what is sometimes called “learning to learn.” What are the specific processes or routines that enable some organizations to be better at MA than their competitors? To offer ideas, we profile CarMax, a used car retailer that is well known for bringing an agile approach to marketing in automotive retail (Overby 2017). CarMax uses self-directed product teams comprising seven to nine marketing, operations, and information technology (IT) employees.⁴ While teams are presented with a problem, they are not instructed on how to solve the problem. The teams use a “test-and-learn” approach to ideate and deliver the best possible result.

However, CarMax’s advantage appears to lie in its execution of MA—this is where it shows superior capabilities and learning ability. The company uses a dual-track approach for executing MA (see Figure 2). The first track, referred to as the “discovery track,” focuses on ideating, prototyping, and validating ideas for the product or campaign, whereas the “delivery track” (or “development track”) focuses on turning those ideas into an actual product or campaign. Although MA emphasizes iterations and speed, time gaps between iterations are possible if the ideas are poorly defined or not validated. The uniqueness of MA at CarMax is that the firm allows the discovery and delivery tracks to operate in parallel. A key benefit of the discovery track is that ideas are validated with prototypes or mockups before they are developed or built. As a result, expensive failures are avoided. In particular, CarMax validates ideas by gathering feedback on whether customers find the ideas to be usable or valuable. CarMax involves the development or delivery employees in discovery sprints to ensure that the delivery personnel can actually build the product or execute the campaign.

The validated ideas from the discovery track are prioritized and essentially become the product backlog or the storyboard for the delivery track. The delivery track works on the validated ideas or stories from the backlog and performs its sprints on testing and learning about usability and getting the features

⁴ We conducted an in-depth interview with a senior product executive at CarMax to understand the company’s unique processes and routines.

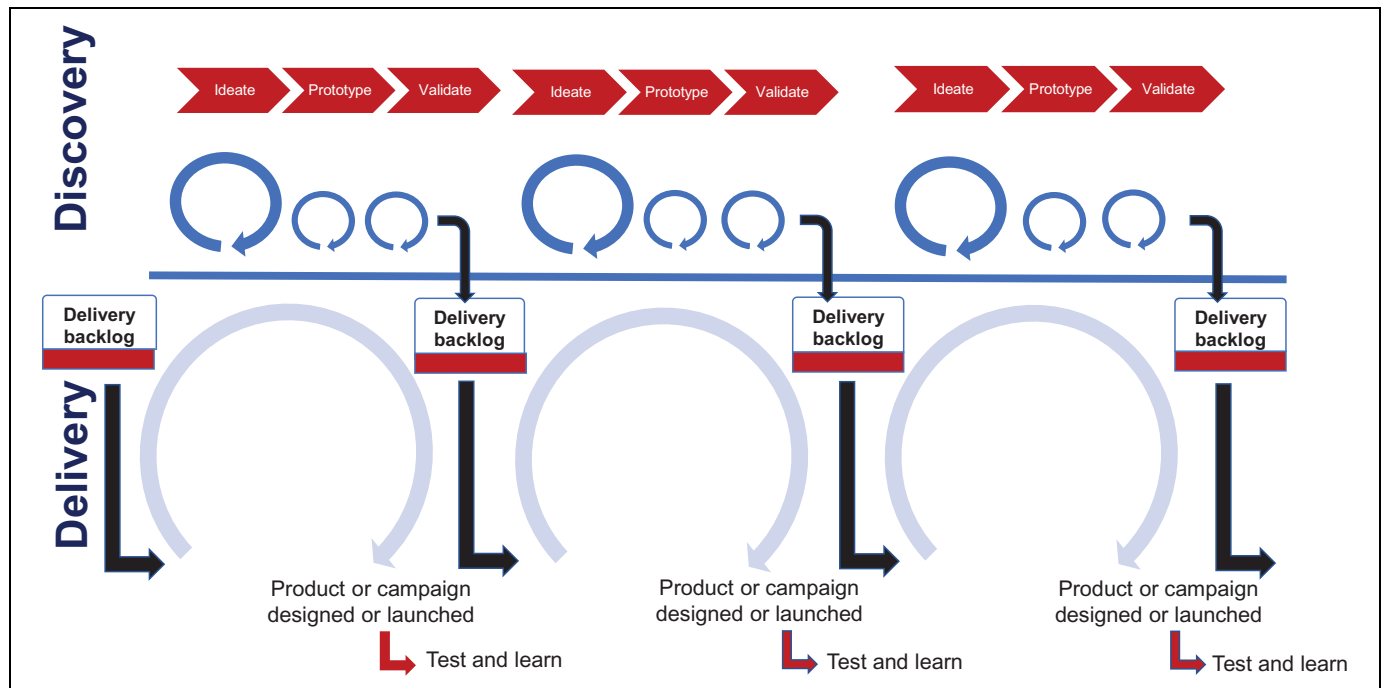


Figure 2. An illustration of dual-track marketing agility at CarMax.

right. The ability to integrate discovery and delivery/development has enabled CarMax to increase the speed of delivering products and messages validated by the market. As a result, the risk of the campaign or product failing is minimized to a great extent. Importantly, CarMax pursues agility in both product development (e.g., remote appraisal tool, online home delivery tool) and advertising or marketing campaigns (e.g., with external agencies for marketing messages).

We encourage future research to further investigate the types of lower-level capabilities that aid (or impede) the discovery and delivery processes of MA. In a digital, social media, and mobile marketing environment, the ability to capture and apply data from a variety of venues to sustain the ideas storyboard in the discovery track is potentially a specialized capability. Without a steady flow of stories and ideas in the discovery track, the delivery storyboard or backlog could dry up and the speed of marketing decisions could diminish considerably. Similarly, the ability to correctly prioritize ideas in both discovery and delivery backlogs could be a specialized process capability that helps in further increasing the speed of executing the “right” marketing ideas. Finally, a crucial aspect of MA is validating ideas before expensive resources are committed in the delivery track. Thus, the ability to identify the “right” users or customers to validate ideas generated in the discovery track could also be a distinct lower-level capability.

The Role of Organizational Budgeting Processes in Enabling Marketing Agility

An important area of inquiry is understanding the importance of funds and resources to sustain MA. If marketing budgets

continue to be developed using a traditional marketing budgeting process where resources are often tied to channel-, product-, and market-specific objectives, MA is not feasible. We propose that an agile marketing budget, for example, should try to tie resources to goals (e.g., increase brand awareness by 1%, increase retention by 5%) and the business value they generate. The specific channel, product, and market to accomplish the goal should be tactical and should emerge on the fly. This change should enable marketing leaders to move resources fluidly across channels, products, and markets. However, we caution that tracking and measuring the performance of agile marketing efforts is likely to be challenging. For example, with the customer’s path to purchase becoming nonlinear, “last click” is an unreliable metric for evaluating the success of individual digital marketing campaigns. It is imperative, therefore, that the measurement of agile marketing reflect a clear understanding of the role of different campaigns at different stages of the customer’s purchase journey and how they interact with each other. Against this background, the following research questions are promising and worthy of future research: (1) How should agile marketing budgets be developed? (2) What are the measures for evaluating the performance of MA campaigns? and (3) How are these measures related to business value?

The Role of Organizational Culture in Enabling Marketing Agility

The marketing literature has identified organizational culture as being manifest, inter alia, through shared values, beliefs, and norms (for a review, see Moorman and Day [2016]). For

example, Gebhardt, Carpenter, and Sherry (2006) identify six values reflected in behavioral norms that are critical to a market-oriented culture: the market as the *raison d'être* of the organization, collaboration, respect (and empathy), keeping promises, openness, and trust. Other research, examining learning cultures, has found that cultures that emphasize learning and development are associated with higher innovativeness (Hurley and Hult 1998). It is likely that the importance of these values would extend to an agile marketing culture as well given that MA can be viewed to subsume market orientation and to emphasize adaptation to the market through learning. However, the dimensions that distinguish MA, namely an emphasis on speed and the iterative nature of learning, imply that other cultural values will also be central to an agile marketing culture. In particular, we posit that these key values are likely to include speed and the embrace of uncertainty and discovery. These latter values map onto the dimensions of iteration and sensemaking of MA.

In addition to studying the values associated with market-oriented and learning cultures, the marketing literature has also examined how different cultures emerge at the intersection of two dimensions along which cultural values can be mapped: an external versus internal orientation and a favoring of formal versus informal processes (the “competing values framework”; Moorman 1995). Given the focus of MA on information acquisition we would expect an agile marketing culture to be relatively externally oriented; likewise, given the focus of MA on information flow, we would expect an agile marketing culture to depend on relatively informal processes.

Consistent with the posited importance of the aforementioned values to an agile marketing culture, our interviewees expressed the belief that MA is dependent on a culture that is not beset by established rules, procedures, or extensive up-front planning and control, but where executing tactics before they are fully fleshed out and in the face of incomplete information is embraced and seen as a basis for learning. For instance, a senior vice president of analytics at a B2B services firm stated that “agile requires a culture of building an experimental mindset.” Other executives evoked the importance of a culture where acting quickly in the absence of complete information is prized by contrasting it with the culture associated with a more traditional marketing organization. For instance, when contrasting between the culture of a traditional CPG marketing organization with the culture required for MA, a senior marketing consultant remarked,

Most mature companies in the CPG space like to have consistent repeatable processes to grow the business. For example, [a CPG firm] has a lot of systems in place to repeat innovation. This is often slow. It builds rigidity and makes it hard to deviate from the process. Agility is tough for mature CPG businesses.

Reflecting on the importance of values and norms establishing the embrace of uncertainty and learning, the digital lead at an IT product and services firm commented,

If you have to become agile, you have to empower people that are capable, unafraid, and be willing to learn that you will make mistakes. . . . For example, in our organization one of the key things we are working on is the language we use. Specifically, we don't call adverse outcomes as “failures,” we call them “learnings.”

In addition to being viewed in terms of values and norms, culture also takes the form of cultural artifacts (Homburg and Pflesser 2000; for review, see Moorman and Day [2016]). Mirroring this view, agile practices have often been accompanied by artifacts such as daily, short (typically 15-minute) stand-up meetings (i.e., where participants actually stand during the meeting) and open work environments (Aghina et al. 2018). Likewise, the terminology used to describe agile processes, such as “sprints” to refer to iterations and “scrums” to refer to meetings (Cohn, Sim, and Lee 2009), reflect the value placed on speed and iteration. Accompanying titles, such as “scrum master” and “product owner,” can also be viewed as artifacts. Furthermore, although not specific to agility, to encourage the embrace of acting under uncertainty, large organizations such as Procter & Gamble and Tata have instituted “heroic failure awards” and “dare to fail” awards (Morgan 2015).

Future research priorities. A key future research priority is to investigate how an agile marketing culture can be created and sustained. Gebhardt, Carpenter, and Sherry (2006) identify a four-stage organizational change process in the development of a market-oriented culture that starts with a mass mobilization led by senior management. Although the establishment of an agile marketing culture can likely arise via a similar process, it is plausible that an agile culture could emerge in a more piecemeal fashion. This question is important to consider because (1) agile practices can be manifest at lower levels than the whole organization, such as at the level of the individual project team, and (2) MA is likely to be more limited than market orientation in the breadth of its relevance to the organization or marketing function; to wit, some marketing processes (e.g., product life cycle planning, brand building, highly regulated activities) are not amenable to or would gain little value from rapid iteration and might even be harmed by it. Therefore, it would be interesting for future research to consider how an agile culture might initially arise at the level of individual teams or projects and subsequently spread outwards to other (relevant) parts of the organization. Such a process would not negate the importance of top management in fostering culture, but it might suggest a different process through which organizational transformation might occur than that identified by Gebhardt, Carpenter, and Sherry (2006).

A related question for future research is how agile parts of the organization might interact with nonagile parts of the organization. To elaborate, because agility is not well-suited to some marketing activities (e.g., brand building, product life cycle planning) as well as to many nonmarketing activities (e.g., accounting, human resources [HR]), to the extent that elements of an agile marketing culture (e.g., valuing speed)

bleed into these activities it might be harmful. At the same time, activities suited to agile marketing necessarily impinge on activities, such as brand building, that are less suited to agile marketing. Thus, organizations need to ensure that activities and processes that are not built to be agile are guided by individuals that understand agile marketing culture and have the ability to support and interface with agile marketing teams. In summary, how to manage the interactions between the agile and nonagile parts of the organization is an important question for future research.

Team Antecedents of Marketing Agility

In this section, we examine the team-level factors that are effective in driving and supporting MA. In particular, we discuss both organizational characteristics of teams (i.e., team composition and diversity, team empowerment, incentive structures) and team-related psychological factors (i.e., superordinate identity and social cohesion) that may play a role in fostering MA.

The Roles of Team Composition, Empowerment, and Incentives in Marketing Agility

Team composition and diversity. Cross-functional teams are a mainstay in marketing—from sales and advertising (e.g., Lynch and West 2017) to new product development (e.g., Haon, Gotteland, and Fornerino 2009) and customer relationship management (e.g., Peltier, Zahay, and Lehmann 2013). Previous research has suggested that diversity in teams facilitates rapid, real-time information exchange particularly when the tasks and technologies involved are complex (Carbonell and Rodriguez 2006; Conboy 2009). The availability of diverse viewpoints and enriched “schemas” may also enable teams to engage in improved sensemaking (Beverland, Micheli, and Farrelly 2016; Wright et al. 2000). Furthermore, the exchange and cross-fertilization of diverse knowledge and perspectives can spark creative ideas and processes, allowing teams to uncover and test novel marketing ideas (Gilson and Shalley 2004).

As such, diversity is a critical facet for the ability of marketing teams to drive MA. However, too much diversity could lead to information overload, resulting in the reliance on simplifying heuristics (e.g., status quo bias) or falling back on more familiar decision-making processes (Andrews and Smith 1996; Van de Ven 1986). Although such reliance may allow decisions to be made more quickly, it could also result in less iterative learning, as well as less effective sensemaking. This is because, teams, driven by their desire for certainty and avoidance of complexity and ambiguity, suppress further (albeit necessary) enquiry and become tunnel-visioned (Wright et al. 2000).

Team empowerment. The importance of team autonomy in enhancing performance may be traced back to the work of sociotechnical systems theorists, whose interventions frequently involved the creation of autonomous or self-

managing work groups (Clegg 2000; Manz and Stewart 1997). From this perspective, increased autonomy for teams acts to reduce bureaucratic constraints, enabling team members to more effectively identify and respond to new situations. In marketing and sales, the empowerment of teams and employees is particularly advantageous when the issues at hand are not highly structured (Perry, Pearce, and Sims 1999)—conditions that may be expected in complex and uncertain situations where MA is vital. Indeed, field interviews indicate that for teams to adopt MA, they need distributed empowerment (i.e., the autonomy for accessing resources and making decisions is decentralized and assigned to team members as opposed to a designated leader within a team). Such empowerment of resource access and decision-making authority allows teams to respond to market forces and make marketing decisions promptly. As noted by a senior product manager in retailing,

They (i.e., agile firms) are wired to think in an agile fashion and they help teams achieve this by empowering them to come up with the solution that best addresses the pain point or fixes a problem. The “empowering” aspect helps a team act like a start-up and not be shackled in phase-gate type processes that act more as road blockers.

Notably, while broad organizational guidelines are essential to ensure that different teams follow the same organization-wide strategy consistently, it is also necessary to avoid the stipulation of overly specific task-level guidelines.

Rewards and incentives. In the pursuit of MA, sensemaking and iterative learning are inevitably accompanied by their share of setbacks. As such, incentive structures that account for the high probability of failures are needed. Prior research on the role of risk-encouraging incentives in product innovativeness and the creativity of marketing programs (e.g., pricing) in product development teams suggests that incentives should encourage teams to take appropriate risks without penalizing them for minor failures (Im, Montoya, and Workman 2013; Sarin and Mahajan 2001). An incentive system that only rewards positive performance without protecting teams from taking risks and learning from failures is likely to inhibit MA. In the absence of an appropriate incentive system, teams may be overly fastidious in ensuring that they “dot all the i’s and cross all the t’s” before developing or designing minimally viable campaign or product ideas. Thus, incentives that promote risk taking are an important form of external stimulus that promotes an experimentation mindset and rapid iteration.

Future research priorities. In addition to potentially exacerbating intrateam conflict, diverse teams (vs. individuals) are also prone to making polarizing decisions (Isenberg 1986; Myers and Lamm 1976), rendering it difficult for them to respond swiftly to changing marketing situations. Information overload resulting from too much (perceived) functional diversity may lead teams to fall back on the use of heuristics and other familiar yet suboptimal decision models, which could have divergent effects on speed, iterations, and sensemaking. Thus, future

work could examine the potentially opposing effects of team diversity on different dimensions of MA as well as brainstorm ways to help marketers better manage the resultant trade-offs that arise from these opposing effects.

Additional research is also needed on the type of incentive structures that organizations would have to design and implement to foster MA. In particular, how should rewards be distributed among team members, and on which criteria should these team rewards be based? To what extent should incentives depend on outcomes (to spur teams to make the best marketing decisions possible), and to what extent should they be process-based instead to encourage MA actions? Critically, how can firms encourage risk taking and experimentation within teams without also indirectly encouraging failure? More research is also needed on how incentives should balance short-term goals versus long-term goals and individual performance versus team performance.

The Roles of Superordinate Identity and Social Cohesion in Marketing Agility

Superordinate identity. Superordinate identity refers to the degree to which members identify with the team (and not only with their functional areas) and perceive an individual stake in the team's success (Sethi, Smith, and Park 2001). While teams with a low superordinate identity tend to retain their entrenched functional identities and biases, those with a high superordinate identity are more likely to perceive intrateam similarities and are more willing to accept the divergent attitudes and perspectives of members from other functional areas (Pinto, Pinto, and Prescott 1993). Consequently, a high degree of superordinate identity in a team promotes greater project ownership and thus greater cooperation and more effective sensemaking, such that members can more openly and effectively integrate and construct from diverse functional perspectives within the team and make more cogent marketing decisions. At the same time, marketing decisions can be made more rapidly due to a greater sense of shared responsibility and higher motivation for greater responsiveness to changing marketplace circumstances. Therefore, the more the members of a team share a superordinate identity, the greater their MA is likely to be.

Social cohesion. Social cohesion refers to the strength of interpersonal ties among team members, or how closely members bond with one another at a social level (Brockman et al 2010). Sethi, Smith, and Park (2001) found an inverted U-shaped relationship between social cohesion and the innovativeness of new consumer products. In the same vein, Brockman et al. (2010) document mixed effects of interpersonal cohesion within teams on both external new product performance (profitability and market success) and internal team sentiments (team member satisfaction). While a high degree of social cohesion can foster superordinate identity, reduce conflict, and help teams create shared mental models and engage in tacit knowledge transfer (Huckman and Staats 2013), too much cohesion could lead to "groupthink" and consensus and

conformance seeking (Janis 1972). In the context of MA, although the latter effects could lead to faster marketing decisions, they could also impede sensemaking and inhibit improvisations.

Future research priorities. As teams become more global, interactions more computer-mediated, and telecommuting more prevalent (especially in the post-COVID-19 "new normal"), physical proximity—an important antecedent to building superordinate identity and social cohesion—may be lacking (Pinto, Pinto, and Prescott 1993). How can superordinate identity and social cohesion be effectively cultivated in cases where physical proximity is difficult to achieve, especially given that the longevity of teams is significantly compressed today (Hadida, Heide, and Bell 2019)? Relatedly, under what conditions would it be beneficial to have temporary versus more permanent cross-functional teams? On the one hand, permanent cross-functional teams should, in general, aid MA because stability may facilitate a team's learning and developing shared interpretive frames. On the other hand, temporary teams may be preferred for one-off tasks, especially if there are concerns that permanent teams could demonstrate a tendency for "groupthink" (Janis 1972). Furthermore, it is also important to examine how teams can balance superordinate identity and the potential negative effects of social cohesion, given that the latter can limit the expression of dissenting views and the challenging of preexisting assumptions, thus inhibiting the discovery of novel linkages that are essential to drive MA.

In cross-functional teams, difficulties in coordination and learning are magnified because there is a need to bridge the thought worlds of different functions. Building on sensemaking, Beverland, Micheli, and Farrelly (2016) propose a three-step "resource sensemaking" process—exposing, co-opting, and repurposing—to facilitate cross-functional perspective taking and help teams overcome functional barriers (e.g., between marketing and design) in new product development. Future research could investigate whether these processes help strengthen team cohesion and enable sensemaking within agile marketing teams.

Leadership and Employee Antecedents of Marketing Agility

In this section, we elaborate on factors that enable marketing leaders and employees to pursue MA. Specifically, we discuss the attributes of marketing leaders, the role of CMO power and the CMO-CIO interface issues that enable or inhibit MA. In addition, we highlight the role of marketing employee personality traits, training, and coping mechanisms to drive MA.

Leadership Attributes and Marketing Agility

The role of leaders in driving MA cannot be overemphasized. Extant research suggests that marketing leaders are likely to need three sets of characteristics to drive MA (Doz and Kosonen 2008). First, senior leaders need to have strategic

sensitivity: the sharpness of perception of, and the intensity of awareness and attention to, strategic development. Second, there must be unity among senior leaders to make bold, fast decisions, without being bogged down in “win-lose” politics. Finally, senior leaders should have the ability to reconfigure capabilities and redeploy resources rapidly (Doz and Kosonen 2008). In addition to these capabilities, marketing leaders face unique challenges. The role of a CMO is often ambiguous in organizations. For example, a “test-and-learn” mindset requires CMOs to be accommodative of far greater ambiguity in decision making (Whitler and Morgan 2017).

Future research priorities. The preceding discussion suggests that it is critical to identify the characteristics and attributes of a CMO that are likely to drive MA. Given that MA requires constant experimentation and refinement, it is plausible that CMOs with prior experience in sales are better suited to drive MA because sales personnel are frequently required to engage in adaptive selling to respond to the differing characteristics of prospects (McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006). At the same time, CMOs are also expected to make sense of the high volume of market and customer data and distinguish between true and false brand stories. Marketing responses to false brand stories or rumors need to be swift, as false news tends to propagate faster in a digital world due to its greater perceived novelty (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018). It is plausible that some CMOs are more adept at understanding and using AI tools (e.g., scoring web pages, predicting the reputation of the source, using Heat AI for predictive sensing) to assess the plausibility of online brand stories. As such, CMOs with prior technology and analytics experience are better suited to drive MA.

The second area that warrants additional research is whether marketing leaders or departments have the requisite structural power to mobilize or redirect resources and therefore drive MA in their organizations (Feng, Morgan, and Rego 2015). One indicator of a CMO’s structural power is their level of compensation. Chief marketing officers are rarely among the organization’s highest-paid executives (Rajgopal and Srivastava 2020), and this lack of CMO structural power might impede the process of attracting resources for MA. In addition to lower structural power, marketing executives also often have narrow lines of responsibility (i.e., lower expert power), increasing the need to coordinate with other executives and slowing down marketing decisions. Recent evidence indicates that corporate activities that once belonged to marketing are being taken over by more able, better-trained parts of the organization, and marketers are reduced to a narrow communications role instead of facing research, strategy, product, and pricing decisions (Ritson 2020). In this sense, the CMO’s ability to get buy-in from the rest of the top management team leaders is instrumental in leading agile marketing to be embraced across the organization.

For example, it is noteworthy that the CMO of CarMax has a broad range of responsibilities and is also part of the executive officer team (i.e., holds the executive vice president title). The

CMO currently manages the company’s marketing functions, including customer insights and strategic direction; advertising; CarMax.com; branding; creative; digital; store marketing; targeted marketing; media, public, and community relations; and internal communications (Auto Remarketing 2014). As such, one conjecture is that CMOs with an enterprise-wide role are better able to make speedier marketing decisions compared with CMOs with more tactical roles (e.g., communications and advertising). Therefore, we encourage future research to examine the following questions: Do CMOs need structural power (e.g., executive title) for organizational buy-in and to sustain MA at the organizational level? Are CMOs with broader lines of responsibility (vs. CMOs with narrow lines of responsibility) better able to pursue MA?

The third area that warrants more research is the CMO–CIO interface and its implications for MA. The interdependencies between CMOs and CIOs are heightened in an agile marketing environment. While the CIO manages the technology that enables the collection, integration, security, and access to the firm’s data, the CMO typically manages the marketing-related data analysis, interpretation, and program development (Whitler, Boyd, and Morgan 2017). Often, customer-related digital activities are divided between IT and marketing, effectively splitting decision making between the two functional leaders.

The experience of CarMax reveals that a collaborative relationship between marketing and IT has contributed to its transformation to a company that delivers customer-centric innovation at greater speed. CarMax adopted agile marketing in 2014 with the appointment of a new CMO and CIO (Overby 2017). Although the marketing assets of CarMax before 2014 were superior customer service and an incredible amount of customer data, the transformation to a technology firm focused on delivering a customer experience happened subsequently. Prior to 2014, the relationship between marketing and IT was a traditional customer–supplier relationship. The marketing group felt constrained by the speed with which IT operated.

The complementary backgrounds of the CMO and CIO—the former with a passion for data/analytics and the CIO with a master’s of business administration in Marketing and prior experience as the founder of a MarTech company—helped in aligning the two functions to foster technology-enabled experimentation and implementation. The IT group reviewed its architectural choices and adopted a public cloud approach to host the development of customer-facing systems (Overby 2017). The complementary backgrounds allowed the different thought worlds of marketing and IT to be bridged and enabled sensemaking at the CMO–CIO level. In addition, the two leaders colocated marketing and technology employees in a shared space and involved them in all product teams to realize these benefits at a team level.

Drawing on the CarMax example, we encourage future research to address the following research questions to understand the implications of the marketing–IT interface for MA: (1) What are the skills and experiences of CMOs and CIOs that are complementary? (2) Do complementary background skills and experience between CMOs and CIOs aid MA? and (3)

Does cross-functional involvement (i.e., CMOs involved in technology procurement decisions and CIOs involved in marketing campaigns) promote MA?

Employee Attributes and Marketing Agility

What are the attributes of employees who are likely to thrive in an agile marketing organization? Although there is little specific research on the topic, given the importance of MarTech for MA, we can surmise that knowledge and comfort with technology tools will be essential. Likewise, given the importance of making decisions in the face of uncertainty, we can surmise that individuals high in the Big Five personality trait of “openness to experience” would be a natural fit for MA given that openness is related to curiosity and appreciation for novelty (McCrae and Costa 1987). It is also important to understand how employees respond to and cope with ambiguous and potentially stressful situations that are inherent in an agile environment. Prior research has delineated a variety of ways in which people respond to stress, including problem-focused coping, targeted at problem solving, and emotion-focused coping, aimed more at alleviating the negative feelings associated with the situation (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Some of these strategies may be functional, such as planning or active coping (i.e., “taking active steps to try to remove or circumvent the stressor”; Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub 1989, p. 268). Others, such as the venting of emotions, denial, and mental disengagement, are more dysfunctional.

Future research priorities. Although, as discussed, openness is a well-established trait associated with embrace of the unknown, future research should consider how other personality traits would suit employees to an agile marketing environment. Counterintuitively, we posit that high conscientiousness might actually be detrimental to performance in an agile marketing environment. Previous research has noted that organizations generally prize conscientiousness in employees because they tend to be disciplined, organized, and task-focused (Barrick, Mount, and Judge 2001). In turn, conscientiousness is the personality factor most associated with professional success (Barrick, Mount, and Judge 2001).

Paradoxically, however, high conscientiousness might be a bad fit for an agile marketing organization in which uncertainty, speed, and iteration (task-switching) are the norm. This is because conscientious people thrive on structure, order, thoroughness, and attention to detail. Indeed, Oswald et al. (2017) found, to their surprise, that higher conscientiousness was associated with lower adaptability; they attributed this finding to the need of conscientious individuals to be thorough and methodical and, therefore, to perceive situations that demand multitasking and adaptation as “threatening and stressful” (p. 82). Subsequent research has found conscientiousness to be negatively associated with both the preference and ability to adapt and be flexible (Robert and Cheung 2010). Likewise, Sander et al. (2016) found that individuals with high conscientiousness performed poorly in a multitasking assignment;

they surmised, “A conscientious individual is likely to have difficulty switching tasks without adequate time to ensure a thorough and detail-oriented approach to task completion” (p. 53). As such, we expect that rapidly iterating between sense-making and decision making is likely to be difficult for highly conscientious individuals.

At the same time, given that conscientious individuals tend to be dutiful, one might wonder whether instructing them to be agile could, in fact, lead them to become highly agile? Although this prospect is superficially appealing, it seems that the uncertainty, swiftness, and task-switching key to agility may be fundamentally at odds with their nature. Thus, it seems unlikely that instructing highly conscientious employees to be agile will be sufficient to make them highly agile (though, with effort, they might become agile to some degree; see the subsequent discussion on adopting an agile mindset). Regardless, this question is an important one for future research to resolve.

In addition, more research is needed on the tools or training that can enhance employees’ performance in an agile marketing environment. Previous research has found that training individuals to adopt a mindset relative to the task at hand can positively influence their performance on the task (Cutts et al. 2010). Thus, the ability of training to inculcate different mindsets in employees, particularly mindsets related to speed and iteration, could be examined in relation to effects on employee performance in agile environments.

With respect to skills training for agile marketing that involves new technologies, at least a core group of marketing employees should be trained on various AI tools, such as machine learning (e.g., Heat AI for social listening, natural language processing and scoring social media content for credibility). In terms of process, HR personnel need to abandon their annual or quarterly planning cycles and adopt shorter retrospectives to assess training needs. A retrospective is a regularly cadenced (e.g., biweekly) meeting with employees or teams involved in a particular project or initiative to review how things have gone since the last retrospective. The time between “retros” needs to be short to allow new training ideas to be tested and reviewed (Gothelf 2017). In addition to training marketing employees for technological skills, HR also needs to expose marketing employees to tools, concepts, language, and artefacts of other disciplines and expand their thought worlds for better sensemaking.

Furthermore, entry-level marketing employees may also not have the requisite skills to operate in an agile marketing organization. This is in part because business school curricula do not appear to emphasize either the basic MA features we have outlined or the technical tools that tend to accompany agile marketing in many organizations. Among other efforts, the marketing curriculum can be improved to ensure that students are trained to use these technology tools (e.g., Campaign Monitor for email campaigns, Hootsuite for social media and marketing campaigns, HubSpot for customer relationship marketing, and Google pay-per-click ad campaigns for search engine marketing). Beyond tools, marketing curricula might increase the adaptability of students to agile marketing organization by

introducing exercises and simulations that train students to make sense, iterate, and work fast in learning about and responding to marketplace events. Such activities could highlight the risks and rewards of MA. At the most extreme, marketing curricula could provide less structured and less well-defined syllabi and assignments with evolving objectives so that students are trained to iterate and adapt. That said, critical questions remain. How frequently should the curriculum for marketing courses be refined, and how can faculty be incentivized to do so? What are the training requirements to enable frequent and rapid adjustments to marketing course curricula? More research is needed to understand how business schools can more effectively educate students for jobs in an agile marketing organization.

Furthermore, employees need to be trained to cope with stress that may accompany working in an agile marketing organization. Frequent cycles of failed experimentation may lead marketing employees to resort to more dysfunctional coping strategies, such as emotional venting and denial (Mick and Fournier 1998). As such, it is critical to identify specific mechanisms (e.g., training, staff appraisal, incentives) that could shift marketing managers toward more problem-focused coping (i.e., coping strategy aimed at problem solving) and effective sensemaking, rather than dysfunctional coping strategies. Relatedly, several additional questions arise for future research. For example, what are the ways to instill an elevated sense of control in marketing employees given that they are likely to experience failure more often than success? What are the ways to promote a monitoring (i.e., “seeking out information about one’s situation and its potential impact”) instead of a blunting (i.e., “dealing with an impending stressor by attempting to distract oneself from it”) coping strategy (Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub 1989, p. 275)? More importantly, how can organizations train marketing employees to be ambidextrous and switch between coping strategies when the need arises, such as from active coping (i.e., taking active steps to respond to a stressor) to restraint coping (i.e., holding back and waiting for the right opportunity to respond)?

Finally, it is important to consider both the positive and negative impacts of MA on employees. Among MA’s likely benefits to employees include quick implementation of their ideas, less bureaucracy, and validation through customer testing rather than on the basis of a high-ranking manager’s opinion, often dubbed “HIPPO” (“Highest Paid Person’s Opinion”; Gallagher 2012). These factors might increase employee engagement. A potential downside of MA to employees, particularly those that have thrived in a more traditional marketing organization, is that it might threaten their identity. For most employees, their role and position at work is not just a job but also a central aspect of their identity. Notably, an emphasis on data, analytics, and “test and learn” is likely to be threatening to employees whose skills are suited for a more traditional marketing culture (Leung, Paolacci, and Puntoni 2018; Mick and Fournier 1998). Likewise, a potential threat to their sense of identity, in an agile marketing organization, employee roles are likely to be less well-defined and to shift depending on the team to which they are assigned. Future research should examine the

impact on employees of working in an agile marketing organization.

Marketing Agility and Firm Performance

As noted previously, the business impact of MA is not a given, and the benefits realized are likely to be contingent on several factors. Given our process-based conceptualization of MA, we discuss the potential impact of MA on both product-market outcomes and stock market metrics and offer directions for future research.

Product-Market Performance

What are the likely market performance benefits of MA, and under what conditions are these benefits likely to be muted? While academic research on the performance effects of MA (and agility in general) is currently lacking, anecdotal evidence suggests that the time to market is shorter for agile marketing firms (Aghina et al. 2020). For example, Canada’s TD Bank has embraced agility in its digital marketing function. Using two-week design sprints over three months, the bank was able to cut costs by 30% and reduce campaign turnaround times from four months to two weeks (O’Brien et al. 2020). While such anecdotes illuminate the promise of MA in accelerating time to market, such benefits are likely to be limited by several factors, depending on context. For instance, significant reduction in time to market may not be feasible in industries where purchase cycles are longer and more complex. Likewise, the extent to which time to market is reduced would vary depending on fit of the marketing activity for MA (see Table 2). Finally, the benefits of shorter time to market may be negligible if firms and/or the marketing ecosystem do not possess the competencies to consistently identify, prioritize and test the “right” ideas.

Some anecdotal evidence also suggests that MA could have a positive impact on customer satisfaction (Aghina et al. 2020). We expect the impact of MA on customer satisfaction to have both positive and negative aspects. On the one hand, because marketing campaigns and products are developed through iteration and validation with customer groups, the campaign or product is likely to be in sync with market needs. As such, customer satisfaction is likely to be higher. On the other hand, the impact of MA on customer satisfaction could be muted if employee satisfaction turns out to be lower. As noted in the preceding section, the impact of MA on employee satisfaction could be either positive (e.g., better engagement because of autonomy in decision making) or negative (e.g., identity and/or coping concerns). Similarly, the impact of MA on the brand meaning for consumers needs to be managed carefully. This is because while frequent experimentation with marketing messages could increase brand differentiation, it could also dilute brand meaning or diminish brand relevance over time. Future empirical research, therefore, could investigate the impact of MA on a multitude of product-market outcomes and the contingencies associated with these relationships.

Stock Market Performance

What is the value relevance of agile marketing for stock market performance? It is worth noting that publicly listed firms frequently announce their adoption of MA or disclose the marketing experiments they pursued. For example, Ford Motors announced in 2018 that it is adopting a “more agile marketing model” that could potentially save more than \$150 million in its marketing spending (Schultz 2018). Similarly, Google announced in 2014 that it ran several A/B tests to decide on the precise shade of blue to be used in the advertising links for Google search and Gmail. Furthermore, it was reported that this agile marketing initiative netted Google incremental revenues of \$200 million (Hern 2014). Future research, therefore, could use the event-study method to test whether such announcements have value relevance for stock markets. There is some support for the expectation that investors and analysts are likely to respond positively to specific elements of MA such as speed of marketing decisions. For example, Lim et al. (2018) find that firms that are slower to preannounce price increases in response to their competitors are likely to experience lower abnormal returns.

Given the increasing importance of considering risk implications of marketing decisions (Han et al. 2017), future research could also assess the impact of MA on the risk of stock returns as reflected in investor uncertainty. For example, our in-depth interview with CarMax revealed that the process

of iterations and validation in both the discovery and delivery aspects of campaigns results in a bad concept or poor delivery getting weeded out before the campaign or product is launched. If so, firms with higher MA are likely to have lower investor uncertainty. However, if firms tweak their marketing decisions frequently, the volatility of stock returns could increase. Clearly, a systematic and detailed investigation of the impact of MA on investor uncertainty is warranted.

Conclusion

The 2018–2020 MSI Research Priorities highlight the need to study how organizations should change internally and interact with their environment to cope with rapid changes. The ongoing COVID-19 crisis brings into sharp focus the need for marketers to be ready to change and flex quickly as things shift (Moorman 2020). Against this backdrop, our study explicates the concept of MA—a theoretically rich, multidimensional construct which is sufficiently distinct from that of agility in other functions and other conceptually related organizational constructs. Our study develops a research agenda pertaining to the organizational, team, marketing leadership, and employee antecedents of MA. We, however, also caution that there are numerous challenges in executing MA and as such it may not be well-suited for all firms and marketing activities.

Appendix. List of Interviewees.

| No. | Title | Industry | Exp | Function | Duration |
|-----|---|-------------------------|-----|---------------------------------------|----------|
| 1 | VP Learning and Talent Management | Tourism and Hospitality | 25 | Marketing & Human Resource Management | 90 |
| 2 | VP Corporate Communications | Public Infrastructure | 17 | Marketing & Corporate Communications | 90 |
| 3 | CEO | Retailing | 40 | General Management | 60 |
| 4 | Director of Marketing | Retailing | 20 | Marketing | 60 |
| 5 | Senior Marketing Consultant | Consulting | 25 | Consulting | 60 |
| 6 | Managing Director | Consulting | 25 | General Management | 30 |
| 7 | Senior Product Manager | Retailing | 12 | Marketing | 30 |
| 8 | Senior Product Manager | Retailing | 12 | Marketing | 60 |
| 9 | VP Marketing | Medical Equipment | 20 | Marketing | 45 |
| 10 | VP Marketing | Chemicals | 20 | Marketing | 60 |
| 11 | Senior Product Manager | Retailing | 20 | Marketing | 45 |
| 12 | Chief Brand Officer, VP Global Marketing | IT Products & Services | 24 | Sales & Marketing | 35 |
| 13 | Global Integration Lead | Chemicals | 21 | Marketing | 30 |
| 14 | Manager Content Marketing | IT Products & Services | 13 | Marketing | 35 |
| 15 | Director Market Access | Healthcare | 15 | Marketing | 30 |
| 16 | Director Business Development | Food | 25 | Sales | 30 |
| 17 | Senior VP Analytics | B2B Services | 20 | Marketing | 30 |
| 18 | Industry Solutions Lead | IT Products & Services | 13 | Strategy & Business Development | 35 |
| 19 | Technical Sales Professional | IT Products & Services | 5.5 | Sales | 45 |
| 20 | Regional Business Leader for Retail and Consumers | IT Products & Services | 25 | General Management | 30 |
| 21 | Digital Lead for E-Commerce and Digital | IT Products & Services | 12 | Marketing | 30 |
| 22 | Country Manager | Financial Services | 18 | General Management | 45 |
| 23 | Senior Director Regional Client Management | Financial Services | 26 | Business Development | 30 |

Notes: VP = Vice President, CEO = Chief Executive Officer; Exp = number of years of experience; Duration = time for each interview in minutes.

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