



## The Evolving Role of the Law Firm CMO (2015-2026)

**Dramatic Expansion of Responsibilities:** Over the past 5-10 years, the Chief Marketing Officer role at Am Law 200 firms has transformed from a traditional marketing communications position into a **strategic, revenue-driving leadership role**. As Baker McKenzie's global CMO Angela Petros observes, "*The role of a law firm CMO has evolved dramatically over the last 10 years*" – CMOs are now expected to be **strategic partners to the firm**, with diverse skills aimed at driving client demand and revenue, not just managing the brand <sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup>. This evolution is fueled by **client expectations, technological advancements, and competitive pressures** that demand more from law firm marketing and business development functions <sup>1</sup>. In short, CMOs have moved from the back office to a seat at the boardroom table <sup>3</sup>, often contributing to or even **leading firmwide strategic planning** initiatives <sup>4</sup>. Many now carry titles like *Chief Business Development Officer* or *Chief Client Officer*, reflecting expanded mandates in **business development and client relationship management** in addition to traditional marketing <sup>5</sup>. It's increasingly common to see marketing and BD roles **combined under one leader** ("CMBDO") as firms recognize the close intertwining of these functions <sup>6</sup>. Law firm CMOs were among the first in the legal C-suite to take on **client-facing roles**, such as engaging directly with clients on service feedback, innovation, and value – a precedent now influencing other operational chiefs in law firms <sup>7</sup>.

**New Skills and Focus Areas:** The modern legal CMO must bring skills that weren't priorities a decade ago. **Business acumen and financial fluency** are now essential – firms want CMOs who understand how to "sell" the firm's services and who can coach lawyers in winning work and growing client relationships <sup>2</sup>. In practice, this means **teaching partners business development (BD) skills**, identifying cross-selling opportunities, and focusing marketing efforts on *revenue-generating activities* rather than just branding <sup>8</sup> <sup>9</sup>. **Technology savvy** has become crucial as well: roughly 70% of law firm CMOs now guide firm-wide technology and AI adoption, acting as a bridge between innovation initiatives and client service enhancements <sup>10</sup>. Indeed, *technology adoption is the top strategic priority* at many firms going into 2026 <sup>11</sup>. CMOs are expected to evaluate and implement tools like client relationship management (CRM) systems, marketing automation, and analytics platforms – and, more recently, **AI-powered solutions**. Marketing teams are often leading firm efforts on artificial intelligence, participating in task forces on how generative AI should be integrated into legal work <sup>12</sup>. Many marketing departments have even been **early adopters of AI tools** within their firms – using AI to draft and refine content (e.g. website copy, client alerts), assist with RFP responses and pitches, gather competitive intelligence, and analyze client data <sup>13</sup> <sup>14</sup>. "*We are part of firmwide task forces evaluating how AI should be integrated... Our team was the first to use an AI tool... for content generation,*" one law firm marketing leader noted, underscoring the CMO's role at the forefront of innovation <sup>13</sup>.

**Beyond Marketing – Integration with BD, Client Experience, and Innovation:** In 2025, a successful law firm CMO is as much **chief revenue officer and innovator** as they are brand steward. Law firm marketing leaders are increasingly tasked with overseeing **client experience programs, pricing and proposal strategy, and even innovation teams**. One major shift has been the expectation that marketing leaders directly contribute to **business development outcomes**. As industry recruiter Michael DeCosta puts it, legal

marketing has gone from “scapegoats to G.O.A.T.s” – firms now *celebrate* marketing/BD professionals for driving growth, whereas in the past they were often undervalued <sup>15</sup> <sup>16</sup>. Today’s CMOs help shape *go-to-market strategy* for practice groups and the firm as a whole <sup>17</sup>. They mine data and client feedback to advise lawyers on which industries or “key client” initiatives to prioritize. They are also expected to be **change agents for innovation** in client service. For example, CMOs increasingly collaborate with Chief Innovation or Knowledge Officers to pitch new tech-driven solutions to clients. Joe Palermo (former CMO turned COO at Crowell & Moring) noted that *clients now ask to speak with law firms’ innovation teams*, wanting to know how firms are using technologies like AI to be more efficient – a conversation unthinkable for marketing staff a decade ago <sup>18</sup> <sup>19</sup>. In sum, the CMO role has **expanded well beyond traditional marketing**: it now encompasses strategic planning, business development coaching, client feedback programs, and guiding innovation – all aimed at strengthening client relationships and firm competitiveness. As Angela Petros succinctly said, “*CMOs now need a diverse set of skills to be strategic partners... driving interest, demand, and revenue*” <sup>2</sup>.

**Drivers of Change:** Multiple forces are driving these changes in the legal marketing C-suite. **Client expectations** are a primary factor – since the ACC Value Challenge (2008) and rise of corporate procurement in legal services, law firm clients demand more value, efficiency, and industry knowledge from their firms <sup>20</sup> <sup>16</sup>. Firms have realized that marketing and BD professionals can help meet these expectations by gleaning client insights and tailoring services accordingly. As Joe Palermo observed, clients now expect lawyers and their support teams to “*look around corners*” – to know the client’s industry and business challenges before they ask <sup>21</sup>. This pressure has cascaded to marketing teams, who must equip lawyers with actionable market intel and client-focused messaging <sup>21</sup>. **Technology** is another driver: digital marketing, social media, and data analytics have opened new avenues (and complexities) for law firm marketing. The proliferation of legal tech and AI tools promises efficiency but also requires new expertise to implement responsibly, so firms lean on their marketing/BD leaders to guide these efforts <sup>13</sup> <sup>14</sup>. Finally, **competition** – not only from rival law firms but also Big Four accounting firms and alternative legal service providers – has forced firms to sharpen their marketing and business development strategies. Leading firms see sophisticated marketing as a competitive advantage and are investing accordingly (e.g. “*the most successful firms are putting more distance between themselves and others*” by leveraging top CMOs <sup>22</sup>). In this ultra-competitive market, law firm CMOs have become “*central players in firm strategy, technology adoption and business development*,” rather than peripheral support <sup>23</sup>.

## What Makes a High-Performing Legal CMO?

**Strategic Impact and Revenue Focus:** The standout law firm CMOs are those who drive **tangible business results** – in particular, client growth and firm profitability. In surveys and industry commentary, law firm leaders consistently say they want a CMO who is a **revenue-generator**, not just an events planner <sup>5</sup>. Job descriptions increasingly define the role’s primary objectives as *acquiring new clients, expanding work from existing clients, and boosting profitability* <sup>5</sup>. Greg Fleischmann, a veteran legal marketer, notes that firms today often insert “business development” or “client” into the CMO’s title because they expect that focus on “*clients, clients, clients*” <sup>24</sup> <sup>5</sup>. Exceptional CMOs embrace this mandate – they align marketing and BD activities directly with **sales outcomes**. They use data and market research to identify high-potential industries or clients, and they orchestrate campaigns and coaching to win that business. According to one expert, “*Identifying clients of strategic importance and helping to grow their profitability...is the most meaningful opportunity [for a CMO] to influence the firm’s financial performance.*” <sup>25</sup> High performers measure their success in metrics like new matter origination, increased client retention, and cross-selling results – not just

media hits or website traffic. In doing so, they *lift marketing from a support function to a core part of the firm's sales engine*, which separates them from average performers.

**Big-Picture Thinking + Execution:** Top-tier CMOs also distinguish themselves by their ability to **integrate the full spectrum of marketing, business development, and communications** into a coherent strategy. They see how all the pieces – branding, PR, thought leadership, events, CRM data, alumni outreach, client feedback, etc. – connect to support the firm's growth goals <sup>26</sup>. Average marketing leaders might excel at one facet (e.g. running seminars or handling PR crises) but struggle to tie activities to business outcomes. By contrast, high-performing CMOs maintain a *holistic view*: for example, they ensure that even "softer" marketing efforts (social media, sponsorships, rankings submissions) ultimately serve a larger BD objective, such as enhancing the firm's credibility in a target market <sup>27</sup>. Crucially, they balance **strategic vision with executional savvy**. Earlier generations of law firm CMOs were sometimes long on ideas but short on implementation, which led to frustration in firms <sup>16</sup>. Today's successful CMOs marry creativity with operational skills – they not only craft innovative marketing strategies but also build the processes and team capabilities to execute them. They know how to manage budgets and deploy marketing technology effectively. In short, *excellence lies in being both visionary and operational* – setting a strategic course and delivering results.

**Interpersonal "Soft" Skills – Influence and Partner Management:** Perhaps the biggest factor separating exceptional legal CMOs from average ones is mastery of **soft skills**, particularly in navigating a law firm's unique culture and politics. Law firm CMOs typically **do not have formal authority over partners** (who are owners and often resistant to taking direction). Therefore, the ability to "*influence without authority*" is paramount. High-performing CMOs build trust and credibility with partners through consistent value delivery and savvy communication. They act as **consensus builders** and internal consultants, rather than top-down managers. For example, when rolling out a client feedback program or a new CRM system, an effective CMO will win over skeptical lawyers by highlighting how it serves *their* personal business goals, often leveraging pilot successes and partner champions. Greg Fleischmann noted that CMO searches can fail when stakeholders aren't aligned on the role – effective CMOs avoid this by **aligning expectations up front and managing them continuously** <sup>28</sup> <sup>29</sup>. They have the **political acumen** to handle strong personalities and to diplomatically push back when needed. As one recruiter observed, the "*terms 'marketing' and 'business development' can mean so many things... firms might see a CMO as either the coming of a messiah or a waste of money*" <sup>30</sup> – a great CMO clarifies their purpose and gets everyone on the same page early, often by establishing clear goals and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) with firm leadership <sup>31</sup>.

Key soft skills include:

- **Communication and Education:** Top CMOs are excellent communicators who can translate marketing ideas into the language of lawyers. They **educate partners** on modern marketing and client development concepts in a non-threatening way. Many act as coaches to individual rainmakers or practice groups, tailoring their approach to each personality.
- **Relationship-Building:** Successful CMOs invest in **one-on-one relationships** with influential partners and firm leaders. By understanding each partner's practice and concerns, they become trusted advisors rather than outsiders. This trust is what opens the door for marketing to be included in strategic decisions. Indeed, CMOs who "see themselves as part of the leadership team" and are *openly appreciated by key partners* are far more likely to thrive and stay in their roles <sup>32</sup>.
- **Influence and Diplomacy:** Influencing a partnership requires **EQ (emotional intelligence)** and patience. For instance, when introducing a bold marketing idea, a skilled CMO will often cite how a

competitor firm succeeded with it (since law firms “race to be second” in adopting new ideas) <sup>33</sup>, easing fears of being too different. They also know when to compromise and when to stand firm based on the firm’s culture.

As a result of these soft skills, the best CMOs manage to embed themselves in the firm’s fabric. They gain a “**seat at the table**” where it counts – not just in title, but in actual influence on strategy. Joe Palermo’s experience is instructive: coming from a marketing/BD background and rising to a firm’s COO, he notes that being given “*a seat at the table with our board*” and having input on firm strategy and even partner compensation decisions was transformative <sup>34</sup>. “*Partners... really need to rely on business professionals to help run the firm... that's only increased [over time]*,” he says <sup>35</sup>. High-performing marketing officers position themselves as exactly that kind of indispensable business professional. In firms that **fully embrace** this approach – granting the CMO voice and authority – the CMO can truly excel <sup>36</sup>. In contrast, an average CMO might remain sidelined as just a service department head, unable to shift the firm’s trajectory.

**Background and Experience – Legal Industry vs Outside:** A perennial question is whether the best law firm CMOs come from *within* the legal industry or are recruited from *outside*. In practice, both paths can produce stars, but there are trade-offs. Recent trends show a mix: **more firms are promoting “homegrown” marketers into the CMO role**, valuing their understanding of the firm’s culture and the trust they’ve built internally <sup>37</sup>. In 2024, for example, over twice as many firms filled the CMO position by internal promotion versus the prior year <sup>38</sup>. This reflects a realization that an internal candidate can often hit the ground running and navigate partner dynamics more effectively, having “*understand[ing] the culture and know[ing] the partners*” <sup>37</sup>. These insiders typically continue a successful strategy but seek to “amp it up” with incremental improvements <sup>37</sup>. On the other hand, roughly an equal number of firms opt to **bring in new CMOs from other firms or industries** when they want fresh perspectives or a change in direction <sup>39</sup>. In fact, executive search consultants report a “*recurring theme*” of law firms seeking talent **outside the legal industry** under the perception that “*better*” or more innovative marketing leaders may be found there <sup>40</sup>. Firms have hired CMOs out of consulting, financial services, Big Four accounting, tech companies, and other professional services where marketing and sales are more mature disciplines <sup>41</sup> <sup>42</sup>. These outsiders often bring sophisticated marketing techniques and a results-oriented mindset that can energize a law firm’s approach.

However, the **ideal profile may be a blend** of both: someone with outside perspective *and* an appreciation of law firm nuances. In reality, many firms insist on at least some prior law firm or professional services experience even when recruiting externally – recognizing that “**when faced with critical decisions... the demand for [CMOs] with a strong background in law firm experience remains**” alongside the desire for fresh ideas <sup>43</sup>. The need to balance these contrasting demands is an ongoing challenge in hiring <sup>44</sup>. Notably, earlier in the 2010s there was skepticism about whether long-time legal marketers could evolve into true BD strategists. A 2016 analysis observed that it was a “*commonly held view*” that many who “grew up in law firm marketing” struggled to make the leap to strategic business development – either due to their communications-focused skillset or because partners wouldn’t accept them in a strategic role <sup>45</sup> <sup>46</sup>. This led some firms to hire from outside. Today, that stigma has faded a bit as many legal marketers have broadened their expertise, and firms have gotten better at selecting and grooming talent. *Successful legal CMOs come from a variety of backgrounds*, but they all share the ability to **translate their prior experience into the law firm context**. Whether an ex-consultant or a 20-year law firm veteran, a high-performing CMO in 2025 is one who can gain the confidence of the partners, set a strategic vision for marketing/BD, and execute on initiatives that drive the firm’s success. In short, the specific background is less important than the **mindset and skillset** the individual brings. As industry data shows, CMOs who feel they are “*making an*

*impact*" and are treated as part of the leadership are the ones who tend to thrive and stay, regardless of where they came from <sup>32</sup>.

## Current Priorities and Challenges for Law Firm CMOs (2025–2026)

**Top Strategic Priorities:** Entering 2025–2026, law firm CMOs are focused on a core set of strategic priorities that reflect both opportunities and pressures in the market. A recent survey of nearly 100 legal marketing leaders identified several **dominant priorities** across firms of all sizes <sup>23</sup> <sup>47</sup>:

- **Technology & AI Adoption:** Embracing new technology is *the* leading priority. **Technology adoption now tops the list of law firm strategic priorities**, beating out even practice growth initiatives <sup>11</sup>. About 70% of marketing leaders say their department has taken on a greater role in guiding tech adoption (particularly AI) at their firms <sup>10</sup>. This means CMOs are spending significant time evaluating tools, training attorneys and staff, and developing policies around technologies like generative AI. Most law firms are still in **early stages of AI adoption**, and CMOs are helping steer their firms through this early phase <sup>48</sup> <sup>11</sup>. In fact, **larger firms** (100+ lawyers) are further along – all respondents who reported AI in “wide use” were at firms with 100+ attorneys – whereas many smaller firms have made little to no investment yet <sup>49</sup>. For marketing chiefs, the challenge is twofold: how to leverage AI internally for efficiency (e.g. automating content drafts, compiling research) and how to position the firm’s use of AI as a benefit to clients. They must also manage *risk perceptions*; clients are sending mixed messages – some forbid AI use on their matters, others demand to know the firm *is* using AI to be efficient <sup>50</sup> <sup>19</sup>. Navigating these expectations is very much on CMOs’ minds. As one CMO put it, the legal industry is still figuring out AI’s impact, but “*we know it’s here to stay and we know that we need to keep up on it*” <sup>19</sup>. Expect CMOs in 2026 to be even more involved in **driving innovation** – from piloting AI tools to collaborating with CIOs and Chief Innovation Officers on client-facing tech solutions.
- **Business Development & Revenue Growth:** Unsurprisingly, **winning new business and growing client relationships** remain top priorities. According to industry reports, firm leaders increasingly charge CMOs with *directly impacting revenue*. This translates to initiatives like **key client programs, cross-selling campaigns, and industry-focused marketing**. In the LMA/Above the Law 2025 survey, “actively building out key practice areas” was second only to tech as a strategic priority for firms <sup>11</sup>. CMOs are often the architects of those growth plans – identifying which practice teams to bolster and devising marketing/BD strategies to gain market share. **Coaching attorneys on business development** has also emerged as a critical activity. In fact, legal CMOs say that some of the most effective ways to drive business include “*coaching lawyers on business development*”, alongside producing high-quality content and branding <sup>51</sup> <sup>52</sup>. Many CMOs now run formal training academies for partners and associates on topics like consultative selling, networking, and client service. They also play a role in **client feedback and experience**: gathering client input (through interviews or surveys) to identify improvement areas and opportunities, which is then fed back into firm strategy. In short, the modern CMO’s remit firmly includes **revenue responsibility** – a shift from a decade ago when marketing roles were more about support than sales enablement. This priority also means CMOs are evaluating *client profitability* and market economics more closely, working with finance teams to target the right kind of work for growth.
- **Content and Brand Differentiation:** Even as digital channels proliferate, **content marketing remains king** in legal marketing strategy. CMOs overwhelmingly report that *thought leadership*

*content and strong branding* are among the **most effective tools for attracting and retaining clients** <sup>53</sup>. In 2025, law firm CMOs are prioritizing **quality over quantity** in content – aiming to produce insightful, client-relevant articles, white papers, webinars, and podcasts that set their firm apart in the market. The challenge is how to scale this content production without sacrificing quality. Many are investing in content teams or outsourcing specialist writers, and some are utilizing AI to generate first drafts of routine content which humans then refine <sup>54</sup> <sup>14</sup>. **Brand building** and raising the firm's profile (and its lawyers' profiles) is also a key focus. This includes everything from managing the firm's social media presence to ensuring the firm and its attorneys get positive visibility in rankings, awards, and press mentions. However, CMOs are also **reassessing traditional marketing activities** for ROI. For example, a significant number of CMOs now cite *directory rankings and award submissions* as one of the **least effective activities** in terms of bringing in business <sup>53</sup> <sup>55</sup>. Many are experiencing “awards fatigue” – recognizing that while such rankings have some PR value, they rarely translate to client work. Thus, a priority is to **trim or optimize low-value activities** (like being more selective and story-driven in pursuing awards <sup>56</sup>) and reallocate resources to higher-impact areas like client-facing content and targeted events.

- **Collaboration and External Partnerships:** Interestingly, **resource management** has become a priority by necessity. With the scope of marketing/BD expanding, CMOs know their internal team cannot do everything. The 2025 CMO survey showed that firms commonly **rely on external vendors or consultants** in areas such as PR/media relations (57% of firms), broader communications support (27%), and directory submissions (25%) <sup>57</sup> <sup>58</sup>. Top marketing leaders are focusing on how to effectively **collaborate with outside specialists** to extend their team's capabilities. The mindset has shifted from viewing vendors as a budget drain to seeing them as *partners* that can be tapped for high-stakes projects or expertise in niche areas <sup>57</sup> <sup>59</sup>. This allows the internal team to focus on firm-specific “client priorities” while still covering all bases <sup>60</sup>. In 2025, a CMO's priority is often establishing a flexible stable of external resources and knowing when to deploy them (e.g. hiring a crisis communications consultant if a reputational issue hits, or using a content agency to scale thought leadership during a busy period) <sup>61</sup> <sup>60</sup>. Relatedly, **internal collaboration** is key – CMOs prioritize working closely with other administrative leaders (IT, finance, HR, etc.) to ensure marketing initiatives align with firm operations. For example, rolling out a new experience management database for pitches might involve partnering with IT and Knowledge Management; pursuing a client team initiative might involve HR for training and finance for budgeting.

**Major Challenges (“What Keeps CMOs Up at Night”):** Alongside their priorities, legal CMOs face significant challenges in 2025–2026. These are the issues that often **keep them up at night**, as revealed by surveys and anecdotal reports:

- **Meeting Rising Expectations with Finite Resources:** Law firm marketing leaders are doing “*more than ever*”, and many feel the strain of **limited resources** relative to their mandate <sup>57</sup> <sup>62</sup>. While most firms have increased marketing/BD budgets in recent years (a majority of CMOs reported budget growth above inflation <sup>63</sup>), those increases may not fully keep pace with the expanding scope. CMOs worry about **being spread too thin** – juggling strategic planning, tech projects, content demands, BD coaching, and day-to-day tasks. The need to **prioritize** effectively is a constant challenge. As one survey analysis put it, with expanded responsibility comes the need to “*prioritize, communicate effectively and prepare for the unexpected.*” <sup>64</sup>. The “unexpected” could be anything from a sudden economic downturn (demanding rapid pivot in marketing strategy) to an unforeseen PR crisis. High on the list of worries is also **talent management**: recruiting, training, and retaining

skilled marketing/BD professionals. The broader war for talent affects marketing teams too – CMOs lose sleep over keeping their best team members engaged and ensuring they have the new skills (e.g. data analytics, AI fluency) that modern legal marketing requires <sup>65</sup>.

- **Proving ROI and Gaining Partner Buy-In:** Another perennial challenge is demonstrating the **return on investment (ROI)** of marketing initiatives to skeptical partners. Many CMOs are preoccupied with **metrics and accountability** – establishing KPIs for marketing efforts and then showing progress on those. This is partly defensive (to justify budgets) and partly strategic (to focus on what works). They know that some lawyers still question large marketing expenditures (“*Why are we allocating \$500,000 for a CMO while our revenue is declining?*” was a common refrain in years past) <sup>66</sup>. Although that attitude is changing as CMOs prove their value, the “*spotty track record with CMO retention*” in law firms historically often stemmed from unclear expectations and perceived lack of ROI <sup>67</sup> <sup>28</sup>. To address this, many firms and CMOs now agree on concrete performance indicators upfront <sup>31</sup>, but delivering on those is the challenge. CMOs worry about how to attribute new business to their team’s efforts (especially for long-sales-cycle services like big law matters) and how to quantify improvements in client satisfaction or firm reputation. This ties into the **partner buy-in** issue: winning over partners to actively participate in marketing and BD is not easy. Lawyers are busy with billable work and often averse to activities outside their comfort zone. “*Competitive pressures are calling on partners to become more engaged in tactical business development than ever,*” notes one consultant, yet many partners still hope someone else will “do BD” for them <sup>68</sup> <sup>69</sup>. CMOs lose sleep figuring out how to motivate and equip their lawyers to consistently engage in marketing efforts – whether that’s writing thought leadership or simply following up with prospects.
- **Navigating Firm Leadership and Politics:** While many CMOs now have greater involvement in firm leadership, **firm politics** can still be a minefield. A challenge cited by experienced marketing leaders is managing the sometimes conflicting agendas of **firm leadership vs. individual partners**. For example, firm management might push a firm-wide branding campaign, while influential partners care only about promoting their own practice – the CMO gets caught in the middle. Additionally, some CMOs are **not fully included in strategic decision-making**, which hinders their effectiveness. Roughly 40% of marketing chiefs in one survey did *not* rate their firm leadership as highly aware of their strategic value (rating 3 or below on a 5-point scale) <sup>70</sup> <sup>71</sup>. Being sidelined can be frustrating and is a recipe for turnover. CMOs worry about **securing and maintaining a “seat at the table.”** They also remain cautious of becoming a *scapegoat* if the firm hits a rough patch – a vestige of the old mentality where marketing was blamed for dips in business. In short, *internal stakeholder management* – from executive committee members to the most curmudgeonly senior partners – remains a delicate challenge. The CMOs who lose sleep over this are often working on building stronger relationships and proving quick wins to convert doubters. On the flip side, in firms where the CMO is truly seen as part of the leadership team, this challenge is mitigated; tellingly, CMOs who feel “highly valued as strategic thinkers” comprise about 60% of respondents in 2025 (with higher scores at larger firms) <sup>63</sup>, but that leaves a notable portion still striving for full acceptance.
- **Keeping Up with Rapid Change (esp. AI):** The pace of change in marketing tools and client expectations is itself a challenge. Many CMOs are candid about the fact that **AI and data analytics**, while exciting, are areas they are learning in real-time. “Future-proofing” the marketing function is an explicit concern <sup>64</sup>. This means continuously upskilling the team (e.g. training staff on new AI-driven research tools or content generators) and staying ahead of marketing trends. For instance, if clients flock to a new social media platform or if SEO algorithms change, the marketing team must

adapt quickly. CMOs worry about **missing out on the next big thing** or falling behind more tech-savvy competitors. Part of this challenge is also filtering hype from reality – CMOs are bombarded with pitches for the latest martech software or analytics service, and they must decide what actually adds value. They are also thinking about **data privacy and compliance** as they adopt new tools (especially with varying regulations and client sensitivities around AI). In essence, the modern CMO must be a **continuous learner**, and that in itself can be exhausting when added to the day-to-day workload.

- **Managing Crises and Reputation:** While not a daily activity, **crisis management** lurks as a background worry. Interestingly, just before 2025, many legal marketers ranked “crisis communications” near the bottom of their priorities (perhaps reflecting a period of stability) <sup>72</sup>. But as one commentary noted, reputational risks are *ever-present*, and a sudden crisis (like a high-profile lawsuit against the firm or a social media flare-up) can thrust the CMO into the spotlight <sup>73</sup>. So a challenge is to maintain **crisis readiness** – having plans and training in place – even if it’s not top-of-mind day to day. CMOs fret over whether their leadership team is prepared to handle bad news messaging, or if the firm’s culture of secrecy might hamper a swift public response. Ensuring that firm leaders (and attorneys) are media-trained and that the firm’s messaging is consistent in a tough moment is a burden the CMO quietly carries <sup>73</sup> <sup>74</sup>.

In summary, the current environment presents a **mix of opportunities and headaches** for legal CMOs. On one hand, they have a broader platform and more resources than ever to make an impact – firms are investing in growth and looking to marketing/BD to lead the way <sup>75</sup> <sup>76</sup>. On the other hand, the role has never been more complex, with CMOs acting as *strategists, technologists, coaches, and chief communicators* all at once <sup>77</sup>. The ability to **stay focused on strategic priorities (tech, client growth, content)** while deftly managing the associated challenges (**resources, ROI proof, politics, change**) is what defines the successful legal marketing leader in 2025–2026. As one industry piece concluded, “*today’s CMOs are not just marketers – they are strategy shapers, technology guides and business development partners*”, and they must prioritize and collaborate accordingly to succeed <sup>64</sup>.

## Organizational Positioning: Influence, Reporting Lines, and Tenure

**Seat at the Table – Reporting Relationships:** Where the CMO sits in the firm’s organizational chart can speak volumes about their actual authority. Traditionally, many law firm CMOs **reported to the Chief Operating Officer (COO)** or another administrative director, reflecting a view of marketing as a support department. However, this model is **increasingly outdated** in Am Law 100 firms. Now, it is more common for the CMO to report **directly to the firm’s chairperson or managing partner**, often alongside reporting to an executive or management committee <sup>78</sup>. A Major, Lindsey & Africa study noted that in big firms today, the CMO typically reports to the *chair and a committee or managing partner* – with only a dotted-line to the COO for coordination – which underscores that marketing is seen as a strategic function, not purely operational <sup>78</sup> <sup>79</sup>. In many firms, the CMO is an **officer-level role** included in the top management circle. For instance, when Gibson Dunn hired a new CMO in 2021, the firm’s chair explicitly stated she would be “*an integral member of the firm’s leadership team*” helping drive firm strategy <sup>80</sup>. That kind of messaging signals to the partnership that the CMO has clout. Similarly, firms known for innovation often place their CMO on par with other C-suite executives – some even include them (or the combined CMBDO) on the **firm’s Executive Committee or Management Committee**. This high placement is critical for CMOs to be effective: it gives them access to information and the ability to influence decisions (e.g., weighing in on which new practice to invest in, or how to respond to a market threat).

That said, **reporting lines still vary** across the Am Law 200. In some conservative firms, a CMO might still report to a COO or even a committee of partners (like a marketing committee) rather than the managing partner. Those structures can sometimes dilute the CMO's voice. The **trend**, though, is toward closer integration with firm leadership. It's telling that *more than half of CMOs are now directly involved in firmwide strategic planning*, and nearly 20% actually lead drafting the strategic plan <sup>81</sup> <sup>4</sup>. You can't get much closer to the center of power than writing the firm's strategy document. This involvement suggests that, in practice if not always formally, many CMOs are treated as part of the inner circle on guiding the firm's direction.

**Authority vs. Advisory Role:** Despite improved positioning, a CMO's actual **authority** can range from substantial to quite limited. In the best-case scenario, the CMO is empowered to make decisions or set policies in areas of marketing/BD without needing constant partner approval. For example, they might have discretion over the marketing budget (within reason), the ability to hire/fire within their team, and the mandate to enforce brand guidelines or client feedback processes firm-wide. Some firms explicitly give the CMO **decision rights** on marketing expenditures or campaign strategies, treating them as the expert. In other cases, the CMO's role is more of an **influencer or advisor** – they can make recommendations, but partners or committees make the final calls. As Reuters observed, the CMO role can vary widely: at some firms the marketing leader is a "*top-level tactician*" and true strategist, while at others they are "*relegated... to working on client pitches and press releases*" with little voice in larger decisions <sup>82</sup>.

Often, the degree of authority correlates with the firm's culture and the managing partner's philosophy. Progressive, business-oriented firm leadership tends to **delegate more authority** to their CMO. They trust the CMO to run with initiatives that align with strategy (and hold them accountable for results). More traditional partnerships may still expect the CMO to get buy-in for every major initiative, functioning essentially as an *internal consultant* who must persuade partner committees to act. Many CMOs find creative ways to exert influence even without formal authority – for instance, by forming cross-functional task forces or pilot programs that demonstrate value. But without leadership backing, a CMO can be hamstrung. That's why **firm leadership's attitude toward marketing** is so pivotal (more on that in the next section).

**Navigating Partner Politics and Governance:** Law firm CMOs quickly learn that **political navigation** is part of the job description. Because partners are owners, any CMO initiative can be subject to debate or resistance if key partners aren't on board. High-performing CMOs invest significant energy in **internal diplomacy** – meeting with influential partners individually, looping in skeptics early, and securing "sponsors" among partner leadership for major projects. They also educate partners on how marketing & BD tie into firm strategy, aiming to turn doubters into allies. Still, "partner politics" can present challenges like *initiative fatigue* (partners tired of new marketing programs), territorialism between practice groups, or the classic tension of short-term billable focus vs. long-term marketing investment. CMOs must frequently **justify expenditures** and initiatives in terms partners appreciate (growth, revenue, client satisfaction). As mentioned, one red flag is if partners view the CMO as a **scapegoat** for slow business – savvy CMOs counter this by sharing credit for wins and transparently reporting on efforts, to create a sense of shared responsibility.

Firm governance structures also matter. In firms with a powerful Executive Committee or a large Partnership Board, CMOs often have to **pitch ideas multiple times** to multiple stakeholders. If the firm has a Marketing or Business Development Committee (comprised of partners), the CMO typically serves as an advisor to that committee, and a lot of internal lobbying happens there. A common strategy for CMOs is to have a few well-respected partners as **champions** on such committees who will advocate for marketing

initiatives to the broader partnership. The CMOs who navigate politics best often have a deep well of **patience and resilience** – they understand change is slow in law firms and don't take pushback personally. Over time, as they notch successes, they gain political capital that makes future initiatives easier to get approved.

**Tenure and Turnover:** A notable aspect of law firm CMO roles is the **tenure length** and turnover rate. Historically, there was concern that law firm CMOs had very short tenures – anecdotes of 18-month stints were common pre-2010s <sup>83</sup> <sup>84</sup>. However, data suggests that the situation has improved and **stabilized in recent years**. A snapshot of Am Law 200 firms a few years ago found the average top marketing professional's tenure was about *5 years and 8 months*, virtually the same as it had been in 2015 <sup>85</sup>. This is notably longer than the average CMO tenure in the corporate world, which hovers around 3.5–4.5 years at large companies. In other words, despite some headline-grabbing turnover, many law firm CMOs do stick around long enough to implement multi-year strategies. By 2017, consultants were saying it's "*now fair to dispel the myth of 'churn' at the CMO level in law firms*" given the data <sup>85</sup> <sup>86</sup>. They credited better hiring (using recruiters who know the market) and firms being more methodical in choosing the right talent for this increased stability <sup>86</sup>.

That said, **turnover is still a reality**, especially when the role's expectations aren't met. In 2024, BTI Consulting reported that *31% of law firm CMOs made a career move in the past year* – up from 28% the year prior <sup>87</sup>. This included moves such as switching firms or leaving the industry. Such a volume of movement indicates that while many stay ~5 years, a significant number also depart earlier due to various factors (better opportunities, cultural mismatches, leadership changes, etc.). The **typical tenure** one can cite is roughly 3–5 years at a given firm, with some outliers who have been in place 10+ years and others who depart within 1–2 years if things go awry <sup>88</sup>. As Greg Fleischmann noted, "*you hear about churn... in some cases one to two years if you're lucky*," when the fit or alignment is poor <sup>28</sup>. On the other hand, there are veteran law firm CMOs who are practically institutions at their firms, having weathered many managing partner administrations. Those longer tenures usually signal that the CMO has become embedded in firm leadership and consistently demonstrates value.

**What influences tenure?** Common factors include: **Firm leadership support** (CMOs stay longer where they feel valued and part of the team <sup>32</sup>), **clear objectives/KPIs** (so they're not constantly fighting about priorities <sup>31</sup>), and **opportunity for impact**. In fact, CMOs report that the ability to *make an impact and be part of leadership* are bigger reasons to remain or take a job than compensation <sup>89</sup> <sup>90</sup>. When those elements are present, tenure tends to lengthen. Conversely, new CMOs often exit if a new managing partner comes in with a different vision (leadership turnover can prompt CMO turnover), or if the role ends up being more limited than advertised. Also, because the legal CMO market is hot (as discussed next), some departures occur simply because another firm made a very attractive offer. In conclusion, while not as volatile as a decade ago, the law firm CMO position still requires **proving oneself and the role's value** to ensure longevity. The encouraging news is that more firms are "finding their footing" with marketing leadership and avoiding knee-jerk firings <sup>86</sup>, and more CMOs are in it for the long haul as genuine members of firm leadership.

## Compensation and Market Competitiveness

**Compensation Ranges:** Law firm CMOs at major firms are **very well-compensated**, reflecting their importance and the competitive market for talent. At the upper end, the **global or chief marketing & BD officers at top 50 Am Law firms** can command salaries in the **high six figures, even reaching around \$1**

**million.** A 2021 report noted that at some of the 50 largest firms, CMO/BDO paychecks ranged from about **\$550,000 up to \$1,000,000 per year** <sup>91</sup>. This was corroborated by multiple industry insiders and was attributed to both a tight talent market and increasing recognition of the value these leaders bring <sup>92</sup>. For the broader Am Law 100, a common range cited (excluding a few ultra-elite “white shoe” firms) is roughly **\$400,000 to \$600,000 all-in** (including bonus) for a Chief Marketing or Business Development Officer <sup>93</sup> <sup>94</sup>. This figure was reported in 2016 and remains a useful benchmark, though by 2025 it’s likely trended upward toward the higher end of that range or beyond. Even mid-sized firms (outside the Am Law 100) often pay their top marketing executives in the mid-to-high six figures. For example, a firm around the Am Law 150–200 range might pay a CMO something like \$250k–\$400k depending on location and scope, but top-tier biglaw sets the market tone.

It's worth noting that law firm CMO compensation has **outpaced inflation and even outpaced some partner compensation in certain cases**. One LinkedIn news piece observed that C-suite salaries (including CMOs) at Am Law 200 firms have grown so much that they can exceed the pay of junior partners at those firms <sup>95</sup>. This indicates how firms are willing to invest in professional leadership. In terms of **relative positioning**, CMOs are often “compensated on the high side of the C-suite” within law firms <sup>93</sup>. They are frequently in the same neighborhood as Chief Financial Officers or Chief Operating Officers, and sometimes more if they carry BD responsibilities that directly tie to revenue. The justification, as one article put it, is that even a \$500k CMO is worth it if they help win one big client engagement, which can easily yield multiples of that in revenue <sup>94</sup> <sup>96</sup>. Firms increasingly see this as a **direct ROI investment**.

**Market Competitiveness:** The market for experienced legal marketing leaders is **extremely competitive** heading into 2026. There is something of a **talent crunch**, as demand exceeds supply of individuals who have the requisite mix of legal industry savvy, modern marketing skills, and leadership ability. In late 2021, recruiters noted that the “*Big Law war for talent isn’t just about lawyers*” – there was a flurry of top-level marketing hires and salary increases <sup>97</sup>. Jennifer Johnson of Calibrate Legal (a recruiting firm) reported that in major markets, in-house legal marketing salaries jumped by ~20% from 2020 to 2021 <sup>98</sup>. Both she and another recruiter described 2021–2022 as “**incredibly busy**” for CMO and senior BD searches, to the point where search firms had more requests than they could handle <sup>99</sup>. This trend has continued: roughly **5–10% of Am Law 100 firms are looking for a new marketing leader at any given time** <sup>67</sup>, which means there are always multiple opportunities for top talent.

A few factors drive this competitiveness. One is the **increased recognition of the role’s value** – firms that never had a true CMO before are creating the role, and firms that do have one are raising the bar for the caliber of person they want. Another factor is **turnover** and musical chairs: as discussed, about a third of CMOs might change positions in a year <sup>87</sup>, and every vacancy kicks off a competition among firms to attract a proven leader or rising star. Recruiters have noted that law firms (and the candidates) are becoming “**pickier**” – firms want more strategic, proven leaders, and CMOs are doing more due diligence on firms before jumping <sup>100</sup>. This selectivity can prolong searches (it’s not unusual for a CMO search to take 6–12 months). It also means **top candidates often have multiple offers** or are willing to decline offers if a firm doesn’t check the right boxes. In fact, CMOs are “*turning down more inquiries and offers than ever*” unless they see the right fit <sup>32</sup>. They’ll stay put if their current firm offers them a real leadership role and support <sup>32</sup>. From the firm side, this means if you want to lure a top CMO, you must offer not just a competitive salary, but also the *authority and environment* for them to succeed (more on that below).

**Notable Firms and Strong Marketing Functions:** Some law firms are especially known for having **strong marketing and business development functions**, often correlating with strong leadership in those roles. While much of this reputation is anecdotal, industry commentary and moves provide some examples:

- **Baker McKenzie** – As a large global firm, Baker McKenzie has invested heavily in marketing and BD. Their Global CMO (Angela Petros) speaks publicly about advanced strategies (focusing on client needs by region, upskilling the team in AI, etc.) <sup>1 65</sup>, indicating a forward-thinking marketing function. Baker's size and centralized approach to brand management often make it a leader in law firm marketing trends.
- **Gibson Dunn** – The firm made headlines by recruiting a high-profile CMO from outside (Katherine Peters from McKinsey, formerly at Sullivan & Cromwell) and explicitly positioning her in firm leadership <sup>101 80</sup>. This suggests Gibson Dunn's leadership is serious about marketing's role in firm strategy. A firm that publicly touts its CMO as helping “ensure our continued growth and success” <sup>80</sup> sends a message that marketing has clout there.
- **Foley & Lardner** – Foley was highlighted for embracing a **bold, innovative marketing culture**. Their CMO hire in 2021 (Koree Khongphand-Buckman) was drawn by the firm's willingness to “shake things up... to better serve our clients” and to use **digital techniques to enhance traditional marketing** <sup>102</sup>. Foley's openness to experimentation and digital marketing investment gave it a reputation as a progressive marketing environment in Big Law. A CMO at Foley has the mandate to push new ideas, which is attractive to top talent.
- **Fish & Richardson** – Similarly, Fish's new marketing chief in 2021 (Melanie Green) praised the firm's “forward-thinking culture” and the chance to develop new client engagement initiatives <sup>103</sup>. Firms that encourage *new client service initiatives* and innovation in marketing (especially in a specialized area like IP law for Fish) tend to have strong, empowered marketing teams.
- **Orrick** – Orrick has long been known for innovation (both in practice and operations). Its Chief Communications and Marketing functions have been quite integrated with firm strategy, and the firm's CAO noted that one challenge for CMOs is the breadth of the role compared to corporate settings <sup>104</sup>. Orrick's business-minded approach likely means their CMO/BD leadership is well-aligned with firm management (Orrick has a *Chief Client Officer* role as well).
- **WilmerHale, Crowell & Moring, and others** – Some firms demonstrate their commitment by elevating former marketing/BD heads into broader operational roles. For example, Crowell & Moring's COO (Joe Palermo) came from a marketing/client development background <sup>105 106</sup>. Such career trajectories signal that those firms highly value business professionals and perhaps have a more inclusive leadership style.

In general, **firms that are frequently recognized for innovation, client focus, or growth often have strong marketing leadership behind the scenes**. Conversely, firms that have churned through multiple CMOs in short succession or keep the role low-profile may struggle to build a top-tier marketing function. The market is small and CMOs talk; a firm known to empower its marketing team will attract better candidates. As Jenna Greene noted, “*every law firm says*” they want proactive marketing, but firms like those above *actually invest in it and give the team the resources and latitude* to be proactive <sup>107</sup>. That's what sets the leaders apart.

**Overall Market Outlook:** The legal marketing leadership market has matured to the point where **the best CMOs can almost choose their firm**. Firms find themselves not only competing on money, but on demonstrating a **culture of support for marketing and BD** to land a great CMO. We see a bit of a virtuous cycle: the most successful firms (in growth and client service) tend to attract the best CMOs, and those CMOs in turn help those firms distance themselves further from competitors <sup>22</sup>. Recruiters advise firms to “*perform due diligence on your current attitude toward Marketing and BD*” if they want to attract top talent <sup>108</sup> – meaning firms must take a hard look at whether they truly give marketing a strategic role. As we’ll discuss next, there can be a gap between what firms *say* they want in a CMO and what they *enable* that person to do. Bridging that gap is crucial in this competitive market.

In terms of **compensation trends**, expect continued upward pressure on CMO salaries for large firms, especially for those with hybrid roles (Marketing + Business Development + sometimes Client Experience). The rarity of individuals who have excelled at this level keeps prices high. Also, as more firms bring in outsiders with corporate or Big Four backgrounds, they often must match or exceed corporate pay scales. It’s not unheard of now for a law firm CMO to make what a Fortune 500 marketing executive makes, especially when considering bonuses. The market for **top law firm marketing talent is as competitive as it has ever been**, reflecting the high stakes law firms place on growth and differentiation in a challenging legal landscape.

## What Firms Say They Want vs. What They Actually Need (Reading Between the Lines)

Despite detailed job postings and lofty rhetoric, there is often a **disconnect between law firms’ stated wishes in a CMO and the reality of the role** or firm culture. Understanding this gap is key for both candidates and the firms themselves.

**Unrealistic Job Descriptions:** Many law firm CMO job descriptions read like a “**wish list for a unicorn**”. Firms say they want a **visionary strategist, a proactive change agent, a digital guru, a PR whiz, a lawyer-whisperer, and a data analyst** – all in one person. It’s not that such well-rounded professionals don’t exist, but even the best will have strengths and weaknesses. If a job posting enumerates *every possible responsibility* (from high-level strategy to minute tasks like updating the website), it can signal that the firm hasn’t **prioritized what it truly needs**. For instance, some firms might *say* they want bold innovation, but then also insist the CMO personally handle event planning and directory submissions. This could be a red flag that the firm is looking for a “*messiah*” to magically fix all marketing issues without proper structural support <sup>30</sup>. Greg Fleischmann pointed out that firms sometimes view a new CMO hire as *the solution*, which can be dangerous if internal alignment and realistic goal-setting aren’t addressed <sup>28</sup>.

**Everyone Wants “Proactive” Marketing... But Will They Empower It?** One common refrain is that firms claim they desire a marketing team that is “*more proactive*” and strategic. As one newly minted CMO quipped, “*Every law firm says they want their marketing team to be more proactive and every marketing team member wants to be proactive*”, “**It’s a matter of finding the firm that is willing to invest... by giving them the right initiatives, structure and resources.**” <sup>107</sup> This quote (from Christie Caceres) highlights the crux: **firms often talk the talk but don’t walk the walk**. If a firm’s posting emphasizes innovation and growth but the **firm has a history of under-investing in marketing**, a candidate should probe whether the firm will truly fund new initiatives or allow changes to the status quo. A green flag is when a firm explicitly mentions *resources* and support (e.g., “will have budget and team to execute programs”) or when firm

leadership, in interviews, talks about *specific ways they want marketing to drive strategy*. A red flag is vague language like “do more with less” or an overemphasis on “hands-on execution” in areas that could be delegated – this might imply they are not prepared to bolster the team and want the CMO to shoulder everything.

**Reporting and Authority Clues:** One should **read between the lines** on reporting structure in job postings. If a posting says the CMO **reports to the Managing Partner and is part of the senior leadership team**, that’s a strong sign the firm views the role strategically (a green flag). If instead it says **“reports to the COO”** or a lower-level administrative position, and there’s no mention of involvement in firm strategy, that could be a red flag that the role is more siloed or operational. (Admittedly, some firms with COOs still give CMOs strategic roles, but absence of any mention of strategic input is telling.) Candidates often ask in interviews: *Will I have a seat at management meetings? Will I be involved in business planning?* If the answers are fuzzy, the firm might say they want a strategic CMO but *actually* intend to keep them in a narrower lane. As Greg Fleischmann noted, success hinges on firms getting all stakeholders aligned on the CMO’s key objectives upfront <sup>28</sup>. If a firm hasn’t done that homework (for example, if in interviews partners give different answers about what the CMO’s focus should be), it’s a warning sign of internal disconnect.

**Buzzwords vs. Reality:** Law firms often include the latest buzzwords in CMO postings – “*data-driven*,” “*innovative*,” “*collaborative*,” “*thought leader*,” etc. Candidates should verify the **reality behind those words**. For instance, if “*data-driven marketing*” is touted, does the firm actually have decent data infrastructure (CRM, marketing analytics), or will the CMO be expected to build from scratch and struggle to get attorneys to use CRM? If “*innovative*” is emphasized, what’s the firm’s track record? Some firms profess innovation but, as one CMO joked, “*Law firms race to be second. If you have a new idea, the first question is ‘Who else is doing it?’*” <sup>33</sup>. A firm with that mindset may not truly support a trailblazing marketing strategy – they’ll want someone to implement *safe, proven tactics*. A **green flag** is when a firm can point to specific innovative marketing or client initiatives they have tried (even if modest), indicating openness. A **red flag** is when a firm markets itself as wanting change, but their questions to the candidate revolve only around traditional tasks (like “How many RFPs did you handle?”) rather than strategy or ideas. That might suggest they *actually* just need a very competent tactical manager, not a strategic change agent.

**Culture and Partner Engagement:** Perhaps the biggest disconnect can be **firm culture**. Job postings rarely say, “*By the way, some of our partners don’t believe in marketing.*” But that sentiment exists in pockets. One must infer from clues: Has the firm had long gaps without a CMO? Did the last few CMOs have short tenures? Is there evidence the partners value marketing (e.g., do partners actively participate in marketing efforts like speaking at events, producing thought leadership)? During the hiring process, savvy CMO candidates pay attention to **how partners treat them**. BTI Consulting noted that top candidates increasingly do “*due diligence*” on firms, looking at **leadership’s attitude toward marketing, partner EQ (how they treat you in interviews), and the questions they ask** <sup>109</sup>. If during interviews, partners show up late, seem dismissive, or ask only rudimentary questions, it may indicate low respect for the role (a red flag). Conversely, if the managing partner talks about how marketing will *partner* with lawyers and asks sophisticated questions about strategy, that’s a green flag that the firm is mature in its expectations. One CMO search consultant advises being wary of firms with “knee-jerk” searches – e.g., they lost a big client and suddenly think hiring a star CMO will fix it, without addressing underlying issues <sup>28</sup>. Consistency and thoughtfulness in the hiring process often mirror how the firm will integrate the CMO later.

### **Common Disconnects to Watch:**

- *Firms say:* "We want someone to drive change and innovation."  
*Reality to check:* Will they **back you up when resistance comes?** If the firm has a very consensus-driven partnership, "driving change" might be slow. A candidate should ask how the firm handles new initiatives and whether leadership will mandate changes or make participation optional. Also, is the firm willing to invest in new technology or programs the CMO proposes? Innovation requires budget and top-down endorsement.
- *Firms say:* "We expect the CMO to deliver results in client growth."  
*Reality to check:* Do they give the CMO **access to clients or input on client teams?** If a firm wants client growth, a green flag is when they involve the CMO in key client team management or client feedback initiatives. A red flag is if partners say "stay away from my clients, just market generally." Successful BD requires collaboration; a firm that walls off marketing from client contact isn't walking the talk. Also, check if the firm has the infrastructure to track and credit marketing's contributions (so results can even be measured).
- *Firms say:* "We value marketing and consider it strategic."  
*Reality to check:* **Who does the CMO report to and how is success measured?** As mentioned, reporting to the top and having clear KPIs (aligned with firm strategy) are signs they mean it. If the firm has never had a CMO on the executive committee or if marketing success is vaguely defined (or not tied to firm goals), then the role might actually be more limited.
- *Firms say:* "Must work with firm leadership and partners to ..." (implying limited authority).  
*Reality to check:* **Is this a support role or leadership role?** Sometimes descriptions carefully phrase things to avoid saying the CMO will *lead* anything ("will support practice leaders in marketing efforts"). That may hint the firm expects the partners to really lead BD and the CMO to assist. Not inherently bad, but different from a CMO who is empowered to initiate and lead. A candidate should clarify whether they are expected to merely facilitate partners' individual marketing or to drive firm-wide programs proactively.

### **Red Flags When Evaluating Opportunities:**

- **High Turnover History:** If the prior CMO (or a string of them) lasted only a year or two each, find out why. It could indicate unrealistic expectations, cultural clashes, or lack of support. A firm that refers to prior CMOs as not having delivered, without acknowledging systemic issues, might be looking for a scapegoat rather than fixing the environment.
- **Lack of Firmwide Strategy:** If a firm doesn't have a clear strategic plan or refuses to share it, the CMO may struggle. A CMO role without alignment to a firm strategy is set up to chase random requests (the dreaded "random acts of marketing"). Green flag is a firm with a solid strategy who wants the CMO to help execute and evolve it <sup>3</sup> <sup>4</sup>. Red flag is a firm hiring a CMO to "figure out our strategy" without partner buy-in – that's a tall order for any new hire alone.
- **No Interview with Managing Partner:** If during the hiring process a candidate doesn't get to meet the managing partner or key power brokers, that's a bad sign. It suggests the firm doesn't consider

the position important enough for leadership's time, or leadership is not truly invested in the hire. Given the level, top management should be involved.

- **Overemphasis on Cosmetic Aspects:** If a job ad or interview spends more time discussing updating the website or planning events than talking about clients and growth, the firm might *think* they need a strategic CMO but *actually* want a marketing communications manager. As Greg Fleischmann warned, some firms reduce marcom and PR to "hygiene" activities and don't connect them to strategy<sup>26</sup>. If the firm's leaders downplay the importance of brand, communications, or thought leadership (seeing them as not directly linked to revenue), they might undervalue key parts of the CMO toolkit<sup>27</sup>. That could signal a potential struggle for the CMO to get support for those functions.
- **"Invisible" Marketing Team:** If the job description or interviews make little mention of the existing marketing/BD team or resources, probe that. It could mean the team is very lean or not functioning well. A great opportunity might have a strong team to lead; a tough one might imply the CMO will have to build a team from scratch or operate largely solo. Neither is impossible, but understanding the true starting point is crucial.

#### **Green Flags (What to Look For):**

- **Leadership Endorsement:** The firm's leadership articulates exactly how they see the CMO contributing to firm success. E.g., "*Our CMO will be part of crafting our five-year plan and will work closely with the management committee on growth initiatives.*" Or the firm's chair in a press release says the CMO will "*help drive our vision and strategy*"<sup>80</sup>. These are strong signals that the CMO won't be a marginal player.
- **Clear KPIs and Expectations:** If the firm can convey concrete goals (e.g., "within 12 months, develop a firmwide client feedback program" or "increase cross-selling revenue by X%"), it shows they have thought through the role. Also, it protects the CMO from being pulled in too many directions by partner whims<sup>29</sup> <sup>110</sup>. A defined mandate is a big green flag.
- **Partner Involvement and Openness:** Look for signs that partners are already engaged in marketing efforts – e.g., the firm touts partner thought leadership, or partners participate in pitch training, etc. In interviews, if partners express willingness to change and learn (like asking "How can we better support your efforts?"), it bodes well. One CMO said she was attracted by a firm's desire to "*use digital techniques to enhance traditional marketing*"<sup>102</sup> – indicating the partners were open to new approaches.
- **Stable or Growing Team and Budget:** If the firm has grown its marketing budget and team recently, that's a positive sign of investment<sup>63</sup> <sup>111</sup>. A firm that froze or cut budgets repeatedly might not truly empower the new CMO. Many firms now budget 2-3% of revenue for marketing/BD<sup>112</sup>; if a firm is in that range or higher, it reflects commitment.
- **Cultural Fit and Personal Chemistry:** Ultimately, an often undiscussed but critical factor is **chemistry with the firm's leadership**. In a successful placement, the CMO and managing partner (and key partners) develop mutual respect and rapport. Green flag if during interviews you feel heard, respected, and excited by their vision (and they by yours). That intangible fit can make all the

difference between a role where you're constantly fighting upstream versus one where you're rowing together.

In conclusion, law firms in 2025 know the *buzzwords* of what a great CMO should be, but not all have created the *conditions* for a CMO to actually perform at that level. A savvy candidate – and enlightened firm leaders – will focus on removing those disconnects. For firms, this means **ensuring internal consensus and support** for the marketing leader and being realistic about change. For candidates, it means doing due diligence, asking the tough questions, and watching for red or green flags. As one recruiter advised, both CMOs and firms should assess their situation with “cold, steely eyes” <sup>100</sup> – a frank look at whether the firm truly embraces marketing and whether the CMO can truly make an impact there. When the match is right, the CMO can transform from perceived “scapegoat” to actual “G.O.A.T.” (Greatest of All Time) as Caldwell’s article cheekily put it <sup>15</sup>, driving significant success for the firm. But when a firm’s needs and culture don’t align with what they claim to want, both parties risk disappointment. Therefore, reading between the lines and aligning expectations is the final, crucial ingredient in defining – and securing – a successful Am Law 200 CMO in 2025–2026.

**Sources:** Recent industry surveys and expert commentary provide the factual basis for the above analysis, including the Legal Marketing Association & Above The Law’s 2025 CMO Survey <sup>81</sup> <sup>113</sup>, insights from law firm leaders and recruiters reported by Reuters <sup>91</sup> <sup>114</sup>, and thought leadership from legal marketing consultants and search firms <sup>37</sup> <sup>6</sup>. These sources collectively highlight how the CMO role has evolved into a strategic linchpin and what it takes to excel in this challenging but rewarding position.

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<sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup> <sup>8</sup> <sup>65</sup> Baker McKenzie's Angela Petros Speaks with Asian Legal Business About the Evolving Role and Demands of Law Firm CMOs | Newsroom | Baker McKenzie

<https://www.bakermckenzie.com/en/newsroom/2025/04/angela-petros>

<sup>3</sup> <sup>4</sup> <sup>10</sup> <sup>23</sup> <sup>47</sup> <sup>52</sup> <sup>53</sup> <sup>55</sup> <sup>56</sup> <sup>57</sup> <sup>58</sup> <sup>59</sup> <sup>60</sup> <sup>61</sup> <sup>62</sup> <sup>64</sup> <sup>73</sup> <sup>74</sup> <sup>75</sup> <sup>77</sup> <sup>81</sup> <sup>113</sup> PR and Content: From Strategy to Story – What the 2025 CMO Survey Reveals About Legal Marketing’s New Priorities | Poston Communications - JDSupra

<https://www.jdsupra.com/legalnews/pr-and-content-from-strategy-to-story-2569847/>

<sup>5</sup> <sup>9</sup> <sup>24</sup> <sup>25</sup> <sup>26</sup> <sup>27</sup> <sup>28</sup> <sup>29</sup> <sup>30</sup> <sup>31</sup> <sup>67</sup> <sup>104</sup> <sup>110</sup> What Law Firms Want from CMOs: Observations From the Field - Greg Fleischmann | Lowenstein Sandler LLP

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