



## How to Hire a Rock Star Chief Marketing Officer

### The ten qualities you should look for when interviewing potential CMOs for your start-up.

Hiring a chief marketing officer (CMO) can be one of the most important decisions you make as a start-up CEO. The right CMO can build a world-class marketing team that will not only help you acquire more customers, but also strongly enhance the perception and brand value of your company.

However, despite its importance, the CMO role is often misunderstood. CEOs, particularly first-time founders, often end up hiring the wrong person. Here's a checklist of traits you should look out for in a great CMO, with sample interview questions to facilitate your decision-making process.

#### 1. Strategic mindset

Too many founders and CEOs confuse strategy with goals. Having a goal for your company doesn't mean you have a strategy. Your strategy is how you drive your mission. Great CMOs get this. They are able to see the big picture and see where the industry is going, what competitors are doing and what the market wants. More importantly, a great CMO understands the synergy between each marketing component (product, brand, content, communications, social media, pricing, distribution, growth and user acquisition).

*Sample interview questions:*

1. Tell me about a company whose marketing

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strategy you admire and why?

2. What was your marketing strategy at your previous company? What was your rationale?

3. Describe the target audience for your previous company. Why did you go after that audience? How did you position your product or service?

You may also ask your CMO candidates to describe their best scaling strategies and how they combined various marketing functions to deliver on their goals.

#### 2. Adaptability

Adaptability is one of the most important skills for a start-up CMO. Markets change, competitors act in ways you didn't anticipate and, all of a sudden, it's a whole new ball game. Great CMOs can think on their feet and adjust their strategy if the product upgrade is delayed by six months. They can switch target audiences if you realise that your product resonates more with mothers in their 40s than with young women. They love a challenge and embrace change with energy, confidence and a positive mindset.

*Sample interview questions:*

1. Have you ever had to overhaul your strategy in

light of new business conditions? How did you do it? What was the result?

2. What's the most unpredictable thing you've ever done?

3. What do you do to push yourself out of your comfort zone?

Pay particular attention to candidates who have successfully switched industries. Steer clear of candidates who have been with the same company for the last ten years.

### 3. Leadership

Great CMOs are able to motivate, inspire and lead people. In many cases, CMOs are also the public faces of the company. In dire situations, great CMOs can rally the troops, assuage their fears and fill them with the purpose to carry on.

*Sample interview questions:*

1. Tell me about a particular crisis your company or your team faced. How did you handle the situation? What did you learn?

2. What's the most unpopular stance you've ever taken? Why?

3. What was the most challenging conflict you've ever had to manage between two people or two teams? How did you handle it?

### 4. Emotional intelligence

The best CMOs usually have high levels of emotional intelligence. Not only are they self-aware, but they can also read the feelings of others. They are self-confident and optimistic. They are also skilful mediators, natural ambassadors and diplomats who know how to diffuse the most challenging situations.

*Sample interview questions:*

1. What's the most difficult situation you've ever had to manage regarding someone on your team?

2. What would people say are your greatest strengths? Any areas of improvement?

3. Describe a situation where teams you managed struggled to collaborate. How did you handle the situation?

### 5. Management ability

The CMO role is one of the most complex in management today. The CMO has to manage large teams across multiple disciplines from brand

management to user acquisition to communications to product marketing. Great CMOs are able to identify and hire people who are smarter than themselves (in their respective areas), as well as manage and retain them. Their success depends on their aptitude to build a strong team to execute their marketing vision.

*Sample interview questions:*

1. How would people who have worked for you describe your management style?

2. What do you look for in the people you hire?

3. Would you ever hire an amazing employee knowing that they might not work well in a team environment?

### 6. Intuition

Most CMOs struggle with excess data. Great CMOs know which metrics matter but also trust their gut when they have to make a decision amidst ambiguity. In a data-centric world, it's easy for CMOs to suffer from analysis paralysis. Great ones cut through the noise, ask smart questions, look at the data and then decide partly based on what their gut tells them.

*Sample interview questions:*

1. Can you describe a situation where the facts and data could have led you to make a decision that could have landed either way? How did you resolve this dilemma?

2. Have you ever made a decision that went against your gut feeling? What was the result? What did you learn?

3. How have you handled situations where a more analytically minded peer argued against your intuitive recommendation?

### 7. Ability to take charge

Great start-up CMOs are not afraid to enter the fray, in contrast with corporate CMOs for whom diplomacy and collaboration are paramount. The start-up CMO also needs these corporate skillsets (or the ability to grow into them) but must be ready to roll up his or her sleeves to get things done. This is particularly true as a stop-gap measure in high-growth environments, where it also helps set a leadership example. As a CMO, I've written blog posts, sent emails and even created graphics. That said, if you expect your CMO to do grunt work for the next two or three years, you probably aren't ready to hire one.

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### Sample interview questions:

1. Have you ever been in a situation where someone on your team couldn't deliver and you had to jump in?
2. Would you rather leave something important pending while you hire a great person to do it? Or would you risk doing it yourself, learn from the experience and then hire someone better to do it in the future?
3. How do you decide whether to let people figure things out of their own or do the task yourself? (Great CMOs will only take over when the situation demands it.)

## 8. Curiosity

Great CMOs have a growth mindset. Though they might not know everything about search engine optimisation, user acquisition or content marketing, they want to understand how these strategies work, how they fit into the bigger picture and how they can be improved. Great CMOs are always looking for ways to improve themselves, their teams, their tools and their processes.

### Sample interview questions:

1. Tell me about a time you went out of your comfort zone. What did you learn?
2. What is the most profound book you've read recently? Any takeaways?
3. If you had the time, what marketing skill would you like to improve? Why?

## 9. Sales acumen

In this day and age, marketing is all about sales. Great CMOs constantly think about how to find or retain more customers at every step of the marketing process. They are natural salespeople who sell without selling. They seek to build customer relationships based on deep-seated needs, such that when a contract needs to be signed or a product purchased, it is just a simple formality.

You only need one question here, to yourself: Are you fired up about hiring this person after meeting them?

## 10. Experience

A CMO title is earned through experience. Although your candidate may not have been a CMO before, the person does need at least 10 to 15 years' experience, a deep proficiency in one or more areas of marketing and a thorough understanding of

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how all the different pieces fit together. A great CMO can take your company to a whole new level and should be one of the most important hires you make.

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