



Two Key Building Blocks for Creating a Marketing Dashboard

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Not having the right information means that you'll have to base your business decisions more on instinct and intuition than on facts. That risky approach should be avoided whenever possible.

What information do you need to make those critical decisions, and how do you obtain it? Having the right information readily available in a manageable and comprehensible format is essential for success. That's why a dashboard is invaluable.

What Exactly Is a Dashboard?

Stephen Few, author of *Information Dashboard Design*, defines a dashboard as "a visual display of the most important information needed to achieve one or more objectives; consolidated and arranged on a single screen so the information can be monitored at a glance."

A well-designed dashboard provides summarized data via a graphical format and alerts users to performance values significantly above or below expectations. Once you have the right *metrics, data, and analytics*, you can develop a multilevel dashboard to manage and report on performance. This article examines two of those three key building blocks: data and analytics.

Many marketing organizations recognize the need for a marketing dashboard. They have reporting capabilities within their marketing automation, campaign management, Web analytics, and customer relationship management (CRM) systems. Although those reports may provide transactional information, they often do not make a connection between marketing activities and business impact, which is one of the key functions of a marketing dashboard.

If you want to learn how to be able to both communicate Marketing's contribution to generating value for the organization and make strategic course adjustments, continue reading.

The Making of an Actionable Dashboard

Accountability leads to better decisions. Marketing's performance must be measured, tracked, reported on over time, and adjusted when needed. Accountability means monitoring and reporting, and marketing reporting typically takes the form of a performance dashboard.

Dashboards work only if they are tied to a structured action process. They must do more than just measure marketing; they need to be used to foster strategic decisions and enable course adjustments.

A good dashboard is a visual representation that demonstrates Marketing's alignment to the business, Marketing's contribution to the business, and Marketing's ability to reach its performance targets in terms of results, time, and cost.

To produce the dashboard, you will need to be able to perform the appropriate analytics. To perform analytics, you must have data.

Building Block: Data

Acquiring data is not the challenge many organizations are facing these days. Information overload is a part of everyone's life. The trick is to gather essential information without getting bogged down by information that isn't helpful.

The best way to do that is to align business outcomes with your marketing efforts so you can focus on metrics that matter to you and the rest of the leadership team. Those outcomes and associated metrics are the foundation for your dashboard. Everything on the dashboard should, in some way, tie back to those outcomes and metrics, and show how well Marketing is moving the needle.

Successful use of metrics and analytics to get the answers you need requires the proper gathering, storage, and analysis of the significant data. For many companies, data access and management is often the biggest challenge in the adoption and use of metrics.

Many organizations struggle with data accuracy, integrity, and consistency. The sheer amount and varied types of data only compound the issues of consistency and accuracy. If that is one of your challenges, you will need to address it before you take your dashboard into production. Once you understand your data, you'll be able to connect and use it to construct a dashboard, perform analytics, and, ultimately, make better decisions.

Building Block: Analytics

Though businesses claim they believe in the concept of using analytics to drive decisions, [a Bloomberg Businessweek Research Services study](#) of 930 businesses across the globe in various industries found that only one-in-four organizations believes its use of business analytics has been "very effective" in helping to make decisions.

Though more than half of the companies in the survey said they rely heavily on data and metrics to make decisions, many admitted that intuition and business experience still tip the scale in decision-making.

In 2005, Tom Davenport, Don Cohen, and Al Jacobson shared the results of their work in the area of using analytics to create a competitive advantage. Their work resulted in the well-known book *Competing on Analytics: The New Science of Winning* (Davenport and Harris, 2007). The book discusses how high-performing enterprises use sophisticated, quantitative, and statistical analysis and predictive modeling as the basis for their competitive strategies.

Despite that, marketing professionals remain challenged by analytics. We often encounter three questions from marketers on the topic:

1. What is meant by analytics?
2. What do we need to be successful with analytics?
3. How can Marketing use analytics?

The first question can be answered by turning to a common definition. Analytics are algorithms or advanced techniques, including mathematical ones, that are applied on large volumes of data to glean useful and actionable insight. Business analytics requires that data analysis guide decision-making and address business issues and strategies. Businesses use the insights derived from analytics to optimize internal processes and reduce the amount of time required to solve problems and make decisions.

Though analytics may not fully replace experience and knowledge, it certainly provides insights and nuance that should be taken into consideration. The answer to the first question provides the answer to the third question: Marketers use analytics to translate data into actionable insights that help drive marketing and customer strategies and optimize marketing efforts.

Once you have your data, analytics, and metrics, you have the building blocks for creating your dashboard. The test-and-learn approach we often apply to various marketing initiatives also applies to creating a dashboard:

- **Start with a pilot, and create an alpha version.** You will learn a lot about your metrics, data, and analytics capabilities and processes in this step.
- **Address the gaps, and create a beta version.** Float this version with some key stakeholders, and solicit their feedback and input.
- **Adjust, and go into a more formal pre-production process.** At this stage, you should begin to think about process adoption, internal skills development, automating data feeds, and evaluating business intelligence and dashboard software.

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Always keep in mind that for your dashboard to be an accurate representation of your organization it may need to change over time. Your dashboard must be able to keep up with anything that will affect your marketing efforts.

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