From Alignment to Integration: How CMO Relationships with Top Management Shape Organizational Performance

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Abstract
Despite marketing's mandate to drive growth, Chief Marketing Officers remain the shortest-tenured executives in the top management team and are often marginalized in strategic decision-making. This article addresses this paradox by moving beyond how marketing is structured within organizations and focusing instead on how Chief Marketing Officers relate to their peers across the executive team. Previous research has shown that organizational structure and strategic positioning shape marketing's influence, but it is increasingly clear that Chief Marketing Officers can realize their potential only when they achieve effective integration with other members of the top management team. Adopting a semi-structured literature review methodology, the article synthesizes insights from academic research and leading business publications to examine the organizational impact of these relationships. The review examines five key relationships: the Chief Executive Officer–Chief Marketing Officer partnership, where joint vision and shared accountability drive above-average growth; the Chief Financial Officer–Chief Marketing Officer collaboration, where trust in marketing capacity depends on demonstrating return on investment; the Chief Information Officer–Chief Marketing Officer relationship, critical for leveraging customer data and digital technologies; the sales–marketing alignment, where integration improves lead quality, forecasting and revenue; plus board-level representation and customer experience management, where Chief Marketing Officers act as orchestrators of enterprise-wide value. Collectively, these findings reveal a progression from alignment to integration, a stage in which Chief Marketing Officers act as organizational leaders, shaping strategy, growth, and customer experience. The article proposes an integrative model of Chief Marketing Officer-led cross-functional collaboration, with implications for both academic research and managerial practice.

Keywords
Strategic Marketing Integration; CMO Leadership; Cross-Functional Collaboration; Top Management Alignment; Organizational Performance.

Introduction

Chief Marketing Officers (CMOs) are tasked with driving growth, yet remain the shortest-tenured executives in the top management team, a paradox that places marketing leadership at a crossroads. Across industries, marketing is formally entrusted with delivering growth, customer insight, and brand value, yet in practice, its strategic influence is often fragile. Their average tenure is significantly lower than that of other management roles, a reflection of ambiguous mandates, conflicting expectations, and limited control over core strategic levers such as product, pricing, and corporate strategy (Whitler & Morgan, 2017). This paradox illustrates that structural alignment alone does not guarantee marketing's integration into strategic decision-making.

What matters equally, if not more, are the ties between Chief Marketing Officers and their peers across the top management team. Without strong partnerships, marketing may be aligned in principle, but isolated in practice. Alignment ensures functions avoid conflict, but integration changes the game: it embeds shared accountability, joint metrics, and co-ownership of outcomes, conditions linked directly to superior organizational performance. For CMOs, achieving integration means moving from being a specialist voice to becoming a collaborative orchestrator who connects the perspectives of finance, technology, sales, operations, and governance.

This shift also reflects broader debates in marketing scholarship about the discipline's strategic identity. Academics argue that marketing has suffered from a long-standing identity crisis (Sheth & Sisodia, 2015), while others see the current period as an opportunity for a marketing reinvention (Grönroos, 2023).

Marketing's role is also being reframed, considering its potential societal contributions, with calls for better marketing for a better world, aligning organizational performance with broader stakeholder impact (Chandy et al., 2021). These perspectives underline why relational integration is essential: marketing cannot fulfill its strategic and societal potential if it remains structurally marginalized.

Building on the above observations, this article examines five relationships that are central to the effectiveness of the Chief Marketing Officer: the partnership with the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), the collaboration with the Chief Financial Officer (CFO), the integration with the Chief Information Officer (CIO), the alignment with sales, and the emerging dynamics of board-level representation and customer experience orchestration. Across all five, the evidence points to a consistent progression from alignment toward integration, the stage where marketing becomes embedded in organizational decision-making and governance.

The central objective of this article is to understand how Chief Marketing Officer relationships with the above-mentioned executive peers shape marketing's integration within the top management team and, ultimately, organizational performance. To address this objective, the article adopts a semi-structured literature review methodology following Snyder (2019), which allows for both analytical rigor and the inclusion of practitioner insights alongside academic evidence.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The methodology section describes the review process and source selection criteria. The following section synthesizes findings across the five key relationships, tracing the progression from alignment to integration. A proposed integrative model is then presented, followed by conclusions and directions for future research.

Methodology

This article uses a semi-structured literature review methodology, following the guidelines proposed by Snyder (2019), to systematically identify, select, and synthesize relevant sources. This approach provides rigor while allowing sufficient flexibility to capture both academic perspectives and business insights, which is essential given the evolving nature of research on CMO relationships within the top management team.

To provide analytical focus to the semi-structured literature review, this article is guided by the following research questions:
RQ1: How does the Chief Marketing Officer's relationship with other C-Level executives facilitate the integration of marketing within the management team?
RQ2: How does the CMO's interaction with other executives influence organizational decision-making?
RQ3: What is the relationship between cross-functional integration involving the CMO and organizational performance outcomes?

These questions frame this literature review by focusing on how CMO relationships within top management shape integration and, overall, organizational outcomes.

The review process began with database searches conducted primarily in Web of Science, using keyword combinations such as "Chief Marketing Officer", "marketing leadership", "management collaboration", "CEO–CMO", "CFO–CMO", "CIO–CMO", and "sales and marketing alignment." The initial corpus was refined using inclusion criteria that emphasized English-language peer-reviewed articles in the fields of business, management, and economics. This refinement reduced the scope from several thousand results to a targeted set of studies directly addressing marketing's strategic integration and its collaboration with other management functions. To complement this academic foundation, additional sources were drawn from leading business insight platforms, including Harvard Business Review, McKinsey, BCG, Bain, and MIT Sloan Management Review. These contributions were selected based on credibility, recency, and direct relevance to the research themes, ensuring that both theoretical and applied perspectives were represented.

To strengthen methodological validity, insights from recent reviews of cross-functional integration were also considered. This ensured that the coding and synthesis process captured the interdependencies among executive functions that are central to the article's argument. The final dataset consisted of approximately

125 publications, balancing peer-reviewed academic publications with business-oriented analyses. Thematic deep-dives focused on recurring patterns that reflect how CMOs achieve alignment or integration within top management, including partnerships with CEOs, collaboration with CFOs, integration with CIOs in the digital domain, coordination with sales, and emerging issues such as board-level representation and customer experience orchestration, narrowing the references list to 36 academic and business articles.

This approach provides a robust basis for analyzing the progression from alignment to integration, positioning the CMO not merely as a standalone function, but as a cross-functional leader whose relationships shape organizational performance.

From alignment to integration: the role of management relationships

The capacity of Chief Marketing Officers (CMOs) to influence organizational performance is increasingly shaped by their relationships across the top management team. While alignment offers clarity and prevents conflict, integration represents a higher stage of collaboration, in which accountability, key performance indicators, and decision rights are shared across functions. This section synthesizes findings from both academic and business literature to examine five key collaborations: the CEO–CMO partnership, CFO–CMO collaboration, CIO–CMO integration, sales–marketing alignment, and the role of boards and customer experience orchestration.

a) CEO–CMO partnership

Among all management relationships, the partnership between the Chief Executive Officer and the CMO remains the most decisive. When these two leaders operate with a shared vision for growth and customer value, marketing's role extends far beyond brand management into strategic leadership. Evidence shows that organizations in which CEOs and CMOs define marketing responsibilities together are more than twice as likely to achieve above-average growth compared to organizations where expectations remain ambiguous (Brodherson et al., 2023).

In many cases, however, misalignment persists. CEOs may believe marketing's territory is clear, while CMOs report differing expectations for their roles. This perception gap contributes to the CMO's short average tenure, which remains the lowest among top management roles (Whitler & Morgan, 2017). Recent insights suggest that the CEO–CMO relationship is beginning to recover, with some academics describing a renewed importance to the CMO's role, as CEOs increasingly recognize the need for customer-centric growth strategies (Bettati et al., 2025).

Additional research shows that expectations often diverge from what is written in job descriptions, as implicit requirements placed on CMOs exceed formal mandates (Whitler, 2023). These misalignments contribute directly to turnover rates, which are higher when new CEOs join organizations (Nath & Mahajan, 2017). At the same time, the CMO's influence is strengthened in organizations where CEOs themselves have marketing backgrounds or where the top management team collectively has more marketing experience (Brower & Nath, 2018).

b) CFO–CMO collaboration

The relationship between CMOs and Chief Financial Officers (CFOs) is frequently characterized by tension, as finance leaders often evaluate marketing through a cost lens rather than as an investment in growth. This debate is central to CMOs' ability to secure budgets and authority. Research emphasizes that CMOs must frame their contributions in financial terms, translating brand equity, customer engagement, and market share into metrics that resonate with the financial decision-makers (Monier et al., 2013).

When marketing leaders succeed in building credibility with CFOs, the relationship evolves from alignment to integration. Alignment occurs when CMOs can justify their expenditures against agreed objectives, while integration occurs when CFOs and CMOs co-develop performance measurement systems that link marketing activities directly to revenue and profit outcomes. A comprehensive review of the marketing–finance collaboration confirms that shared accountability improves organizational performance, while inconsistent metrics reinforce perceptions of marketing as an expense that can be easily cut (Edeling et al., 2021).

Business perspectives reinforce these findings, offering tactical approaches for marketers to communicate financial value, for example, by linking campaigns to pipeline metrics, customer lifetime value, or contribution margins (Magill et al., 2019). Academic evidence further supports the need for robust financial models, as organizations that demonstrate marketing's impact through empirical metrics are more likely to preserve investments in periods of crisis (Hanssens & Pauwels, 2016). Together, these insights emphasize that integration at the marketing–finance collaboration level is not optional, but essential for CMOs to achieve credibility.

c) CIO–CMO integration

The rapid growth of digital platforms, data analytics, and artificial intelligence, as well as marketing's heavy reliance on customer data, personalization tools, and omnichannel platforms, has increased the interdependence between CMOs and Chief Information Officers (CIOs). However, this convergence has also produced conflicts over decision-making rights, technology budgets, and data ownership.

Studies highlight that unresolved tensions between CMOs and CIOs often result in fragmented systems and inconsistent customer experiences (Ariker & Perrey, 2014). By contrast, integration occurs when the two functions co-own governance mechanisms for customer data, collaborate on technology roadmaps, and align on digital investment priorities (Ariker et al., 2014).

Academic research expands this view by framing the CIO–CMO collaboration as a continuous challenge to boundaries, in which each function defends its authority while negotiating shared ownership of digital initiatives (Bourne, 2025). Emerging studies also highlight the role of artificial intelligence in reshaping this relationship, as AI-powered tools redefine decision rights and expand the range of analytics-driven customer engagement (Labib, 2024; Tadimarri et al., 2024).

These developments suggest that CIO–CMO collaboration is no longer a question of efficiency, but of strategic survival. Organizations that fail to integrate risk underutilizing digital assets, while those that achieve integration position marketing and IT as co-leaders of enterprise-wide digital transformation.

d) Sales–marketing alignment

The collaboration between sales and marketing has long been a focus of organizational research, given its direct impact on revenue performance. Misalignment between the two functions is common: sales teams often prioritize immediate revenue, while marketing seeks to build long-term brand equity and customer engagement. These differences frequently contribute to poor lead quality, inconsistent messaging, and inaccurate forecasts.

Academic research shows that when sales and marketing operate in silos, performance suffers, but when they achieve integration, organizations experience substantial improvements in revenue outcomes (Peterson et al., 2015). Managerial research provides additional guidance, arguing that organizations must build integrated marketing and sales engines to compete effectively, particularly in B2B markets (Andersen et al., 2022). Academic research also confirms that integration follows a staged model, moving from undefined to defined, to aligned, and finally to fully integrated configurations (Biemans et al., 2022). This literature reinforces the point that integration is not a static outcome, but a dynamic progression that shapes organizational performance.

e) Boards, operations, and customer experience

Beyond the top management team, two additional dynamics shape marketing integration: board-level representation and customer experience orchestration. Despite growth being a top business priority, boards of directors rarely include members with senior marketing experience. Studies show that fewer than 3% of board members have executive-level marketing backgrounds, and CMOs are rarely regular participants in board discussions. This absence limits marketing's influence on long-term strategy and reinforces its tactical image (Bettati et al., 2025).

At the same time, responsibility for customer experience is often dispersed across multiple functions, from operations and service to product development and digital. This fragmentation produces inconsistent customer journeys and undermines organizational coherence. CMOs are uniquely positioned to orchestrate customer experience, given their oversight of brand, insights, and communications, but only if they achieve integration with peers across the executive team. When this succeeds, marketing moves from being one function among many to acting as the custodian of customer value, coordinating touchpoints across the organization (Brodherson et al., 2024).

Recent business work reinforces this, noting that customer experience is everyone's responsibility and that leadership alignment is essential to ensure consistency across functions (Hinds and Gupta, 2023). Academic contributions extend this perspective by analyzing the marketing–operations collaboration and showing how tighter integration between these functions improves delivery, quality, and profitability (Tang, 2010). Together, these insights confirm that customer experience and operational effectiveness cannot be managed in isolation and that CMOs must orchestrate integration at both strategic and operational levels.

Toward an integrative model

The evidence reviewed highlights a clear progression in how CMOs relate to other executive functions. Organizations tend to evolve from alignment, where marketing's role is clarified, and conflict with peers is minimized, toward integration, where accountability, metrics, and governance are shared across boundaries. Integration, rather than just alignment, is the stage at which marketing achieves its potential to shape organizational outcomes.

This progression is significant because alignment, while necessary, remains insufficient to guarantee marketing's strategic influence. Alignment offers coordination and clarity, but it does not alter fundamental decision rights. Integration, by contrast, embeds marketing within the organizational backbone, ensuring that CMOs co-own outcomes with peers in finance, technology, sales, and even the chief executive.

The CEO–CMO partnership illustrates this trajectory. Alignment is established when the chief executive and the marketing leader agree on the scope of responsibilities and clarify expectations. Integration occurs when they co-develop strategic objectives, share accountability for performance indicators, and jointly review customer insights. Therefore, integration emerges when CEOs deliberately position CMOs as central actors in shaping corporate strategy, with marketing perspectives embedded across all major decisions (Brodherson et al., 2023). This progression also explains why organizations that lack shared accountability between CEOs and CMOs often see higher turnover, as unclear mandates weaken trust and shorten tenures (Whitler & Morgan, 2017).

The relationship with Chief Financial Officers demonstrates a similar pattern. Alignment is reflected in CMOs' ability to justify expenditures against agreed objectives. Integration occurs when CMOs and CFOs collaborate on financial models that translate marketing investments into quantifiable business outcomes, reframing marketing from discretionary spending to a long-term investment in growth (Monier et al., 2013). Recent empirical work further confirms that marketing's influence increases when organizations adopt integrative measurement frameworks that bridge marketing and finance (Hanssens & Pauwels, 2016). These findings also resonate with broader configuration theory, which shows that performance depends on fit across multiple elements of organization, including metrics and decision systems (Vorhies & Morgan, 2003).

Digital transformation has made the CMO–CIO relationship one of the most consequential for organizational performance. Alignment occurs when marketing and IT coordinate on digital tools and platforms without competing over budgets. Integration is achieved when both functions operate under joint governance mechanisms, share technology roadmaps, and collaborate on data ownership and analytics. At this stage, customer insights are no longer fragmented, but these are managed holistically, enabling organizations to design seamless customer journeys (Ariker & Perrey, 2014). Therefore, integration emerges when CMOs, working with CIOs, leverage technology not only to improve marketing efficiency but to drive enterprise-wide digital transformation. This echoes earlier insights into the importance of marketing organization design (Workman, Homburg & Gruner, 1998) and the fit between marketing structure and business strategy (Olson et al., 2005; Lee et al., 2015), which remain relevant in the digital age.

The evolution of the sales–marketing relationship also illustrates this progression. At the alignment stage, sales and marketing agree on responsibilities and reduce the friction that has historically characterized their interaction. Integration is achieved when the two functions operate within common systems, co-develop revenue targets, and coordinate forecasting processes, leading to improvements in lead quality, conversion rates, and forecasting accuracy (Peterson et al., 2015). Therefore, integration emerges when sales and marketing function as a unified growth engine, seamlessly coordinating demand generation and customer engagement while adapting together to changing market conditions.

Beyond individual relationships, the dynamics of board representation and customer experience orchestration extend the model into governance and enterprise design. Alignment occurs when CMOs are consulted on board-level issues or coordinate selectively across departments on customer touchpoints. Integration is achieved when boards actively incorporate marketing expertise into deliberations and when CMOs lead cross-functional efforts to harmonize customer journeys. At the same time, integration is visible when CMOs are central in shaping governance decisions related to growth and customer value, serving as the architects of organizational coherence (Bettati et al., 2025). This evolution also applies to customer experience, where CMOs move from clarifying their role in shaping communications to co-leading initiatives with operations to ultimately orchestrating consistent, integrated experiences across all touchpoints (Brodherson et al., 2024).

Taken together, these findings suggest that CMO effectiveness depends not only on functional expertise but also on the ability to progress from alignment to integration across relationships with CEOs, CFOs, CIOs, sales leaders, and boards. Recent studies confirm that CMO presence in top management teams positively correlates with organizational performance, particularly when integration mechanisms are strong (Nikolov et al., 2022). This empirical evidence adds weight to the conceptual progression proposed here. Integration represents the stage at which marketing becomes embedded into decision-making and governance, transforming it from just another function into a central driver of organizational performance.

Conclusions

This literature review highlights that marketing's contribution to organizational performance depends not only on structural positioning, but, to a growing extent, on the level of integration achieved between the CMO and other members of the top management team. While alignment in the management team ensures role clarity and coordination, integration embeds marketing into strategic decision-making, enabling shared accountability across key management functions.

By reviewing relevant academic and practitioner literature, this article demonstrates that relationships between CMOs and other executive functions play a central role in determining whether marketing remains a support function or becomes a strategic partner. Organizations that achieve deeper cross-functional integration are better positioned to translate customer insights into growth, manage complexity, and sustain long-term competitive advantage. This builds on earlier academic research, including the call to integrate marketing into broader theories of the organization (Parvatiyar & Sheth, 2021) and the service-dominant logic perspective, which emphasizes marketing's role in co-creating value across networks (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). By positioning relationship dynamics at the center, this article contributes to the ongoing debate on marketing's strategic relevance.

From a managerial standpoint, the findings from this article underline the importance of deliberately cultivating executive relationships, shared metrics, and common decision-making mechanisms to strengthen marketing's strategic influence and overall organizational performance. These conclusions also connect with research on executive decision-making biases. Studies show that CEOs and boards often prioritize short-term financial results, which leads to myopic marketing management and underinvestment in brand or innovation (Chung et al., 2023). However, organizations with powerful marketing departments are better able to counter this bias, protecting long-term value creation (Srinivasan & Ramani, 2019). In this sense, integration strengthens not only marketing's role but also the organization's strategic practice.

Future research could examine how digital transformation and artificial intelligence reshape CMO integration patterns, as well as how these dynamics differ across organizational sizes, industries, and national contexts. Further empirical work could explore how emerging markets, such as Romania, navigate the transition from marketing alignment to integration within evolving governance and leadership structures. Recent evidence from Romanian enterprises suggests that while marketing activities are widely adopted, they remain predominantly oriented toward communication and promotion and are often constrained by limited managerial involvement and structural fragmentation, underscoring persistent barriers to deeper strategic integration (Chiorean et al., 2025).

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