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Navigating through turbulence – CMO's role in times of disruption

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Abstract

Purpose – Disruptions triggered by exogenous factors like pandemics and economic/political conflicts are a growing challenge for businesses worldwide. Sudden shifts in the environment, and in consumer behavior, fundamentally threaten the core assumptions that a marketer lives by, and there is a need to rethink the CMO's role in disruptive contexts. This paper aims to provide a framework which can help CMOs navigate disruptions.

Design/methodology/approach – A theories-in-use approach with mixed methods is adopted. Study 1 is based on self-report diaries maintained by CMOs, before and during the disruption period, and Study 2 is based on qualitative interviews with CMOs.

Findings – The authors propose a conceptual framework, to help CMOs steer their organizations through disruptions and build resilience. In addition to outlining the role of the CMO, the authors also bring out the role of the Board/TMT in empowering them. They contribute to DMC literature by identifying "prioritizing" as a fourth DMC dimension and outlining mechanisms to strengthen DMCs.

Research limitations/implications – To enhance generalizability and application of the proposed framework, there is a need to study CMO behavior in multiple disruption contexts and track performance outcomes.

Practical implications – This research outlines the key focus areas, key enablers and mechanisms, which CMOs can leverage to navigate disruptions.

Social implications – Sustained exogenous disruptions impact society as a whole and individuals differ in their ability to deal with uncertainty. The authors shed light on how CMOs can support internal and external stakeholders at such times.

Originality/value – This research fills an important gap in the study of CMO roles and disruption leadership.

Keywords CMO role, Disruption leadership, Dynamic marketing capabilities, Theories-in-use

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

In today's interconnected, dynamic world, disruptions are not a remote possibility but a very real and growing challenge for businesses worldwide. The lens has shifted from debating the possibility of a disruption to looking at the timing, type and level of preparedness (Kash and Darling, 1998). The impact of disruptions can be either exacerbated or mitigated depending on how they are managed. Leaders need to adopt a proactive approach and leverage disruptions as opportunities to achieve organizational goals.

Of special interest to the firm is the impact of crises on the firm's customer value proposition and brand strategy. This is where the role of the Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) becomes critical. The speed and extent of shifts in consumer behavior and the environment are exacerbated in times of disruption. As CMOs learn new skills and ways of working to manage this change, it is time to "rethink the strategic and tactical roles" of CMOs, especially in times of disruption (Heyden *et al.*, 2020).

Disruptions can result from triggers ranging from exogenous factors like "extreme weather" to endogenous factors like "product contamination" (Sheffi, 2015) and could be of different types: immediate, emerging and sustained (Parsons, 1996). The COVID-19 pandemic exemplifies an exogenous disruption which is both immediate (little or no warning before the crisis) and sustained (lasting for a long time) (Parsons, 1996). Therefore, it provides a strong context for studying the role of the CMO in times when external forces can accelerate behavioral change in consumers and marketing organizations (Oluwasanmi, 2022) and render strategic plans redundant in a very short span of time (Jeong *et al.*, 2023). Of marketers, 62.3% reported increased importance of the marketing function during the pandemic (CMO survey, 2020). Radical and transformative shifts, like those seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, also occur in other sustained exogenous disruptions which could be man-made (economic meltdowns and war/conflicts) or natural (tsunamis and earthquakes) (Jeong *et al.*, 2023). Such disruptions can render people homeless and/or cause extensive damage to infrastructure, leading to significant shifts in consumer behavior and blocked access to markets and supply chains for extended periods of time. An example of "severe and long-lasting impact on firms and industries" without a "predictable return to normal" is the political and economic fallout of the 2025 US tariff policy changes (Roche, 2025). Other examples include the Tohoku tsunami in 2011, which severely impacted the global auto industry (Jeong *et al.*, 2023, p.938), the current conflict in Ukraine and harmonized cyber-attacks on public utilities likely in the future.

Recent studies point to the research gap on crisis management and "crisis-handlers" (James *et al.*, 2011; Bundy *et al.*, 2017) and recommend exploring multiple approaches including the phenomenological approach to understanding attitudes and opinions of managers to develop conceptual frameworks related to crisis management (Ritchie, 2004). Sudden shifts in environment and in consumer behavior in a disruptive context fundamentally threaten the core assumptions that a marketer lives by and there is a need to rethink marketing models (Boudet *et al.*, 2020) and study how the role of the CMO needs to evolve in such a context.

Our unique research encompassing two studies is a mix of diary-based recording of CMO activities and in-depth interviews, offering a CMO's perspective on their role in times of unexpected and sustained crises. We use a theories-in-use framework to explore CMO's responses to exogenous disruptions. Study 1 is an exploratory study, on the time analysis of CMOs work-related activities in the immediate aftermath of a disruption, involving initial exploratory conversations followed by a systematic diary-based record of CMO activities. In keeping with the TIU approach, we draw on literature pertaining to disruption leadership and CMO roles and the findings from our initial study to identify broad premises around CMO response to exogenous disruptions. Based on these premises, we develop a discussion guide for in-depth interviews of CMOs in Study 2. Deep exploration through in-depth interviews helps in eliciting theoretical propositions based on CMOs experience and behavior, given their proximity to the problem (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2020). Study 2 offers insights into the challenges faced by CMOs, and the key focus areas, skills and enablers, they think are critical to manage in times of disruptions. These insights are based on the CMOs' learnings from the pandemic as well as their future outlook on managing in times of disruption.

Extant literature on disruption leadership does not provide systematic and structured guidance on the role of the CMO in the face of sustained disruption. Our research attempts to fill this gap. We believe that our study is unique in that –we are able to get directional insights on CMOs priorities both before and during a sustained disruption, we propose a conceptual framework by integrating insights from literature and CMOs' perspectives on the way ahead, to enable CMOs steer their organizations through disruptions and build resilience for the future and we map each element in the framework to the underlying dimensions of dynamic marketing capabilities (DMCs) and outline the path toward strengthening these.

In the next section, we proceed to survey the literature on the role of the CMO, focusing specifically on the context of disruption and marketing leadership, highlighting the gaps and research questions we propose to address. We then describe our methodology and findings and highlight key contributions.

Literature review: the CMO lens on managing disruptions

There have been a number of studies on the nature of work of CEOs and middle-level managers, but these studies are largely focused on the role of the general manager. When it comes to marketing, there is a need for specific studies because of the unique "customer facing" focus of the marketer. Boyd *et al.* (2010) described CMO roles as informational, decisional and relational and demonstrated that the CMO's experiences impact firm performance. Research has outlined the factors impacting CMO presence in the Top Management Teams (TMTs) and impact of CMO presence on firm performance (Nath and Mahajan, 2008; Frank Germann *et al.*, 2015). Industry instability, firm innovation (Sharma *et al.*, 2022) and alignment with CEO's marketing knowledge positively affect CMO power (Key and Keel, 2020). Studies also highlight the CMO's role in driving growth (Atefi *et al.*, 2025) and internationalization (Kumar *et al.*, 2021), CMO–CXO interfaces (Nath and Bharadwaj, 2020) and the enhanced CMO–CIO (Chief Information Officer) relationship (Deans and Tretola, 2016).

Research calls have focused on enhanced role of the CMO (Browne *et al.*, 2014), CMO's role in preventing myopic management (Srinivasan and Ramani, 2019) and managing external threats (Moorman and Day, 2016). Internal and external contingencies can enhance CMO power in the TMT (Nath and Mahajan, 2011), and marketing responses can help contain intra-industry spillover effects of a crisis (Kashmiri *et al.*, 2017). With the CMO as the voice of the customer to the board (Kumar and Shah, 2009), the firm is less likely to encounter a product harm crisis (Kashmiri and Brower, 2016) and is likely to better manage product recalls during such crises (Liu *et al.*, 2024). The CMO has to be continually in touch with the changing needs of customers. This becomes particularly difficult in crises, with rapid and unpredictable shifts in behavior. During disruptions, there is a need to "keep an overview," "analyse quickly" (Pedersen *et al.*, 2020) and estimate the impact (Ritter and Pedersen, 2020). Disruption creates an opportunity and need for innovation (Faulkner, 2001; Naidoo, 2010) which helps in renewal and growth (James *et al.*, 2011).

Pauchant and Mitroff (1992, p.15) define a crisis as a "disruption that physically affects a system as a whole and threatens its basic assumptions, its subjective sense of self, its existential core.” Faulkner (2001, p.136) distinguishes crises caused because of internal factors, from disasters that occur because of “sudden unpredictable catastrophic changes” over which the organization has little control. This includes environmental disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic, other natural disasters such as tsunamis or man-made conflicts. There is also the threat of exogenous disruptions through significant shifts in government policy of global powers.

Crises have been classified on the basis of multiple factors such as duration of the crisis, time pressures, response options, threat perceptions and degree of control (Parsons, 1996; Burnett, 1998; Ritchie, 2004). While an immediate crisis does not allow for preparation, emerging crises allow time for preventive action, and sustained crises continue for a long time with lasting impact (Parsons, 1996). Disruptions which are outside organizational control, high on threat level and time pressure, with limited response options involve the highest level of difficulty in managing (Burnett, 1998).

Managing disruptions involve high uncertainty, low control (Burnett, 1998) and “ripple effect” beyond the immediate context (Heath, 1998). Leaders need to be open-minded and flexible to focus on opportunities presented by the crisis (James *et al.*, 2011). DMCs help organizations be quicker and more effective in reconfiguring resources and operational marketing capabilities, based on market knowledge (Barrales-Molina *et al.*, 2014) and organized anticipation of market changes (Mitręga, 2020), leading to enhanced organizational performance (Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000; Kachouie *et al.*, 2018). To sustain value in disruptive times, leaders need to be adept at sensing opportunities by scanning the environment and leveraging new knowledge for strategic decisions (Teece, 2014; Hoekstra and Leeflang, 2023), seizing value by mobilizing resources and managing reconfiguration through continuous renewal (Teece, 2014). DMCs, unlike the original dynamic capabilities view, are more outside-in (vs inside-out) and enable anticipation of (vs only adjustments to) trends (Day, 2011, 2020). Generating DMCs involves absorbing and sharing market knowledge (Barrales-Molina *et al.*, 2014), and it is the responsibility of CMOs to ensure that is done in an efficient and effective manner.

Researchers emphasize the need for marketing agility (Moorman, 2020) as a key priority for CMOs (Kalaignanam *et al.*, 2021). Defined as “the extent to which an entity rapidly iterates between making sense of the market and executing marketing decisions to adapt to the market,” marketing agility centers around sensemaking, iteration, speed and marketing decisions (Kalaignanam *et al.*, 2021, p.36), which has significant overlaps with the underlying dimensions of DMCs. Mitręga (2020) also established that DMCs are positively linked to company innovativeness and agility of marketing operations.

As major disruptions challenge assumptions and trigger new ways of working, it is important to study their impact both during and after the crisis. COVID-19 provides such a context, as its impact was severe during the immediate crisis period, and it also has a significant longer lasting impact in terms of managing a “new normal” (Pedersen *et al.*, 2020). The post-crisis phase helps in preparing for future crises and identifying new opportunities (Bundy *et al.*, 2017).

Leaders can help shape an adaptive and responsive organization (Bundy *et al.*, 2017; Ritchie, 2004), but literature on crisis response strategies has not sufficiently examined the role of key stakeholders in shaping response choices (Bundy *et al.*, 2017). There is a need for a qualitative in-depth approach to exploring focal capabilities, understanding attitudes and opinions of managers and developing descriptive models on crisis management (Pfajfar *et al.*, 2024; Pedersen *et al.*, 2020; Ritchie, 2004).

Ruiz-Alba *et al.* (2023) have called for additional research on the role of marketing in turbulent times. The role of the CMO in developing organizational responses and DMCs is critical (Protogerou *et al.*, 2012), as the CMO is the custodian of customer relationships and market knowledge, which are key levers in the organizational adaptation processes (Barrales-Molina *et al.*, 2014). Challenges experienced by CMOs in specific contexts have been highlighted as a research gap (Sharma *et al.*, 2022). Other questions on the CMO's role in fostering agility in disruptive times revolve around the kind of power needed by the CMO and the challenges of co-ordination both within and outside the organization (Kalaignanam *et al.*, 2021).

Based on the gaps highlighted above, we formulated the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the key challenges faced by CMOs during times of sustained disruptions?

RQ2. Which priority areas and skill sets should CMOs focus on in a dynamic environment prone to disruptions?

Methodology

We adopted the theory-in-use (TIU) methodology to theory building, executed through a mixed methods approach with literature review, self-report diaries and successive stages of qualitative depth interviews, to understand CMO concerns, priorities and mental models guiding their behavior/"theory-in-use" (Argyris and Schon, 1974).

TIU is suitable for marketing contexts when we want to construct organic theories around emerging phenomena, address uncertainties in current understanding by extending theories and provide direction for future empirical efforts (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2020).

The behavior of CMOs in the face of disruptive exogenous shocks is an appropriate context for the use of the TIU approach. Sustained exogenous disruptions present unique challenges for the CMO. Drawing out critical aspects from CMOs' lived experiences, and understanding the inter-linkages, helps in development of theories in use (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2020), based on CMO behavior and joint reflection ("co-creation").

We use extant literature from the fields of disruption leadership and CMO roles, exploratory interviews and a diary-based recording of actual CMO behavior, to develop initial premises related to our research questions. Given that exogenous crises have the ability to fundamentally disrupt business models and established ways of working, there is a need to begin our exploration with what CMOs actually do (Study 1). This is an important first step in the TIU approach.

Study 1: The diary study was done in two phases providing a comparative analysis of how CMOs spent their time before and during the pandemic. First phase of study 1 (pre-pandemic) was conducted in December 2019, where ten CMOs kept track of their work-related activities for two weeks and the second phase (pandemic) was conducted in the December 2020–January 2021 period, where 23 CMOs kept a record of their activities for two weeks. Inputs from the exploratory interviews with three CMOs and previous research on managerial work were used to design the self-report diary for the main study.

The self-report diary covered work-related activities on weekdays and weekends, from 8:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m., with additional facility to record activities beyond these hours. The diary had provision to record CMO activities in terms of how time is used (meetings, handling mail, reviewing market performance, etc.) and the classification by purpose (customer or trade, advertising promotion, insight, strategy, team management, etc.). The CMOs were briefed on how the activities and their classification were to be recorded. After the initial two days of record-keeping, the CMOs were debriefed and clarifications were provided. Across the two stages of diary reporting, the CMOs shared the data of more than 3,100 work-related hours.

We used our understanding of the relevant literature and insights from actual CMO behavior recorded in Study 1, to design a set of initial premises for further probing in Study 2.

Study 2: Study 2 comprised 18 in-depth interviews with CMOs. In the first phase, 13 interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic (June to August 2020 and May 2021: the first and second waves of the pandemic), covering organizations across manufacturing and services sectors. A discussion guide (Appendix 1) was designed to understand the challenges and focus areas of CMOs during the disruption period and their expert views of desired future behavior. Findings from Study 1 and 2 were presented to a panel of 11 CMOs (mix of study participants and non-participants) to validate the findings.

In the second phase, propositions identifying the key focus areas and key enablers for CMOs were developed (based on findings from in-depth interviews). These were integrated into a conceptual framework, which CMOs can use to navigate successfully in times of disruptions. Reflecting on these propositions and drawing from DMC and related literature, we further suggest propositions linking each element in the framework to the underlying DMC dimensions. In-depth interviews, with five additional CMOs (beyond existing study participants), were conducted (Appendix 2), to elicit their views on the framework, helping fine tune and validate accurate representation of theories-in-use.

All interviews were conducted in an online mode with a duration of 45–90 min. The qualitative interviews were digitally recorded with prior consent, transcribed and thematic analysis carried out.

Thematic analysis is appropriate for this study as the objective was to discover common themes across CMOs and obtain constructed meaning from participants' opinions (Hatch, 2023; Creswell, 2003). The analysis followed the procedure laid out by Spiggle (1994). Transcripts were read multiple times to gain familiarity, then segments related to broad categories were extracted and freely coded to help identify major themes (Corbin and Strauss, 2014; Guest *et al.*, 2012). This was shared and discussed with all researchers in the team. Subsequently, a coding scheme was developed and transcripts were analyzed on NVivo (qualitative analysis software).

The broad themes initially identified were – priorities, impact on processes, TMT engagement, technology, innovation, cross-functional engagement, external engagement, team engagement, CMO role changes and skills. Within each of these, further patterns were identified. The themes and sub-themes identification followed an iterative process as data was progressively coded and collapsed into higher-order concepts by one of the researchers before being independently assessed by another researcher from the team (Gioia *et al.*, 2013; Campbell *et al.*, 2013). Three broad categorizations emerged – challenges, key focus areas and key enablers. Modifications were made after discussion to arrive at the final themes and sub-themes presented here.

Validation: Conduct of interviews and data coding was done by two of the researchers, which helped to minimize bias (Quinn *et al.*, 2016). Researchers' convergence on the same theory enhanced dependability, which is analogous to reliability (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2020). As a wide cross-section of industry sectors was covered and participants had high level of expertise, it added to the credibility of the findings and the face validity of the data (Quinn *et al.*, 2016; Miles *et al.*, 2014). Validity can be ascertained by the degree to which views and experiences of study participants were captured and research questions addressed (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2012). The findings of Studies 1 and 2 were validated through a preliminary presentation of findings and a discussion with a group of 11 CMOs (mix of study participants and non-participants). The final propositions developed were discussed in detail with five additional CMOs, who confirmed agreement with the propositions, reflecting credibility which is analogous to internal validity (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2020).

Selection of study participants: Across all stages of the research project, a total of 36 CMOs from a spectrum of industries participated in this study. Taking into account the time and level of involvement required of CMO participants, a convenience sampling approach was adopted, ensuring coverage of diverse industry sectors, large, mid- and small-sized firms, as well as legacy and new-age companies. New-age companies were defined as those which use technology and the internet to run their business, while legacy companies do not rely on the internet extensively to run their business and are typically asset-heavy – automotive and steel, for example. Identification of CMOs was done on the basis of their work profile in terms of heading the marketing function and designations included CMO, Head of Marketing, VP Sales and Marketing and Director Marketing Strategy. The profile of survey participants is provided in Table 1. Participants were informed before this study that the information obtained would be anonymized. No compensation was offered for this study.

Research findings: Study 1

The self-report diary served as an exploratory study to identify shifts in the CMO's ways of working during a sustained disruption like the COVID-19 pandemic. Summary of findings from Study 1 is given in Tables 2–4.

Communication was a key priority of the CMO with considerable time spent on interpersonal communication in meetings and through email. During the pandemic (vs pre-pandemic), there was a significant increase in the time CMOs spent on meetings with peers, as a proportion of total meeting time. However, there was a decrease in the proportion of time spent with external stakeholders. Of the total time spent on meetings, the proportion of time spent by CMOs with partners, associates and the trade saw a sharp drop as the pandemic appears to have disrupted traditional methods of insight generation and relationship management.

CMOs reported a decline in terms of the proportion of time spent in independently reviewing market performance and data analytics. This could be because of more group reviews or focus on short-term continuity. Of the time spent with the top management team (TMT), there was an increase in the proportion of unscheduled meetings. CMOs did not increase time spent on innovation and new product/service creation during the pandemic (vs pre- pandemic) which seems counter intuitive but aligns to the CMO survey report (2020) finding that the pandemic saw increased focus on innovation but decrease in experimentation. The report also confirmed our findings that marketing focus on communication increased and marketers relied more on internal (vs external) sources to guide strategy during the COVID-19 disruption.

Based on our study of literature and the findings from Study 1, we developed six initial premises.

During disruptions, business models are threatened, and there is a lot of anxiety within the organization. This anxiety is larger in employees in market-facing roles, as they see the direct impact of the disruption. The first premise is that in crises, CMOs need to have more frequent communication within the organization. Tasked, with providing a coordinated market response, the CMO will have to reassure internal teams as well as regularly get information from people down the line to identify shifts in the environment.

Second, in the absence of regular mechanisms for customer connect, the CMO will rely more on digital platforms and tracking data for deeper insights. This is crucial for the CMO to keep up with the evolved context of the customer.

Table 1. Profile of CMOs: study 1

CMO Id	Revenue from Operations, US$M, March 2021	Size of company (based on revenue)	Manufacturing vs services	Legacy vs new age	Gender
Profile of CMOs and Companies, participating in Study 1-Wave 1, Dec 2019					
CMO 1	Above US$1,800m	Large	Manufacturing	Legacy	M
CMO 2	Above US$1,800m	Large	Services	New age	F
CMO 3	US$500m–US$1,800m	Mid	Manufacturing	New age	M
CMO 4	US$500m–US$1,800m	Mid	Manufacturing	Legacy	M
CMO 5	US$500m–US$1,800m	Mid	Services	New age	F
CMO 6	US$500m–US$1,800m	Mid	Services	New age	M
CMO 7	US$500m–US$1,800m	Mid	Services	New age	F
CMO 8	Below US$500m	Small	Services	Legacy	M
CMO 9	Below US$500m	Small	Services	New age	M
CMO 10	Below US$500m	Small	Services	New age	M
		Large = 2	Mfg = 3	Legacy = 3	F = 3
		Mid = 5	Services = 7	New Age = 7	M = 7
		Small = 3			
Profile of CMOs and Companies, participating in Study 1-Wave 2, Dec 2020–Jan 2021					
CMO1	Above US$1,800m	Large	Mfg	Legacy	M
CMO2	Above US$1,800m	Large	Services	New age	F
CMO4	US$500m–US$1,800m	Mid	Mfg	Legacy	M
CMO 6	US$500m–US$1,800m	Mid	Services	New age	M
CMO7	US$500m–US$1,800m	Mid	Services	New age	F
CMO11	Above US$1,800m	Large	Mfg	Legacy	M
CMO12	Above US$1,800m	Large	Mfg	Legacy	F
CMO13	Above US$1,800m	Large	Mfg	Legacy	M
CMO14	Above US$1,800m	Large	Services	Legacy	M
CMO15	Above US$1,800m	Large	Services	Legacy	F
CMO16	Above US$1,800m	Large	Services	New age	M
CMO17	US$500m–US$1,800m	Mid	Mfg	Legacy	M
CMO18	US$500m–US$1,800m	Mid	Mfg	Legacy	F
CMO19	US$500m–US$1,800m	Mid	Mfg	Legacy	M

(*continued*)

Table 1. Continued

CMO Id	Revenue from Operations, US$M, March 2021	Size of company (based on revenue)	Manufacturing vs services	Legacy vs new age	Gender
CMO20	US$500m–US$1,800m	Mid	Services	New age	M
CMO21	US$500m–US$1,800m	Mid	Services	New age	M
CMO22	Below US$ 500	Small	Mfg	Legacy	M
CMO23	Below US$ 500	Small	Services	New age	M
CMO24	Below US$ 500	Small	Services	Legacy	F
CMO25	Below US$ 500	Small	Mfg	New age	M
CMO26	Below US$ 500	Small	Services	New age	F
CMO27	Below US$ 500	Small	Services	New age	M
CMO28	Below US$ 500	Small	Mfg	Legacy	M
		Large = 8	Mfg = 11	Legacy = 10	F = 7
		Mid = 8	Services = 12	New Age = 13	M = 16
		Small = 7			
Profile of CMOs and Companies, participating in Study 2, June–Aug, 2020, May 2021, October 2025					
CMO1	Above US$1,800m	Large	Mfg	Legacy	M
CMO2	Above US$1,800m	Large	Services	New age	F
CMO4	US$500m–US$1,800m	Mid	Mfg	Legacy	M
CMO11	Above US$1,800m	Large	Mfg	Legacy	M
CMO12	Above US$1,800m	Large	Mfg	Legacy	F
CMO16	Above US$1,800m	Large	Services	New age	M
CMO18	US$500m–US$1,800m	Mid	Mfg	Legacy	F
CMO22	Below US$500	Small	Mfg	Legacy	M
CMO27	Below US$500	Small	Services	New age	M
CMO19	US$500m–US$1,800m	Mid	Mfg	Legacy	M
CMO 29	US$500m–US$1,800m**	Mid	Services	New age	M

(*continued*)

Table 1. Continued

CMO Id	Revenue from Operations, US$M, March 2021	Size of company (based on revenue)	Manufacturing vs services	Legacy vs new age	Gender
CMO 30	Below US$500*	Small	Mfg	Legacy	M
CMO 31	Above US$1,800m*	Large	Mfg	Legacy	M
CMO 32	Below US$500***	Small	Services	New age	M
CMO 33	Below US$500***	Small	Mfg	Legacy	M
CMO 34	US$500m–US$1,800m***	Mid	Mfg	Legacy	M
CMO 35	Below US$500***	Small	Mfg	Legacy	M
CMO 36	Below US$500***	Small	services	New age	M
		Large = 6 Mid = 5 Small = 7	Mfg = 12 Services = 6	Legacy = 12 New Age = 6	F = 3 M = 15

Note(s): Industry classification – Authors **Tracxn, https://tracxn.com/ *Company reports www.assets.signify.com/is/content/Signify/Assets/signify/india/20210906-signify-innovations-india-annual-report-fy-2020-21-6th-agm.pdf, www.nestle.in/sites/g/files/pydnoa451/files/2022-03/Nestle-India-Annual-Report-2021.pdf, Conversion rate – Rs 72.29 to a $as on March 17, 2021 ***Company Revenue FY 2024–2025: www.capitalline.com; Conversion rate -– Rs 88.8 to a $as on October 5, 2025
Source(s): Company Revenue – www.capitalline.com FY, 2020–2021; Industry classification – Authors

Table 2. Time spent by CMOs on communication

Time spent as percent of work day, how time is used	Dec 2019 before pandemic (%)	Dec 2020-Jan 2021 During pandemic (%)
All communication	79.0	89.1
Meetings	67.5	71.5
Handling mail	11.5	17.6

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 3. Time spent by CMOs in meetings with internal/external stakeholders

Time spent as percent of time spent in meetings, by stakeholder	Dec 2019 Before pandemic (%)	Dec 2020–Jan 2021 During pandemic (%)
Internal stakeholders	53.6	77.3
Immediate boss	8.3	8.8
Peers (from own/other depts.)	19.5	36.6***
Subordinates	25.8	29.5
Board of directors	2.4	2.4
External stakeholders	31.0	17.3
Suppliers	2.7	0.5
Partners and associates	14.9	4.4***
Other external parties	13.4	12.4
Market	13.1	5.4
Consumers	3.6	3.3
Dealers/Trade	9.5	2.1*

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 4. Time spent by CMOs on independent reviews and innovation

Time spent as percent of work day, by purpose	Dec 2019 Before pandemic (%)	Dec 2020–Jan 2021 During pandemic (%)
Independently reviewing market performance and data analytics	7.3	3.0**
Monitoring social media, as percent of work day	2.3	0.9
Innovation, new product/ service/ content creation	12.1	9.0

Note(s): Independent samples, two-tailed *t*-test; ***significant at 1 level; **significant at 5 level; *significant at 10 level
Source(s): Authors' own work

Third, given the constraints and importance of agility, technology will be a key lever for the CMO, which will necessitate close collaboration with the CIO.

Fourth, faced with uncertainties and need for quick pivots, the CMO will spend more time with peers, as they strive to build an organizational coalition to drive appropriate and quick market responses.

Fifth, the CMOs will have more interactions with the TMT to share the customer's voice and seek support to achieve desired outcomes.

Sixth, given the disruptions in normal working processes, there will be a greater focus on internal adaptation, with enhanced technology use and greater reliance on internal sources of information, at least in the early phases of a crisis.

Study 2 was designed to probe these initial premises and build on them further. The aim was to check if above premises were reflective of the way CMOs actually see their priorities in times of disruption, identify other focus areas and understand the enablers and skill sets which can help CMOs navigate disruptions successfully.

Research findings: Study 2

While the immediate discussion context was the COVID-19 pandemic, we also elicited CMOs' expert views on what aspects would be important for them going forward, in a dynamic and hyper-disrupted business environment. Based on thematic analysis of the transcripts and categorization of the emergent themes, we develop a conceptual framework outlining the CMO Charter in Times of Disruption (Figure 1). This framework highlights the following:

- key focus areas for CMOs in times of disruption;
- key enablers that can facilitate CMOs' role in times of disruption;
- underlying dimensions of DMCs which CMOs need to strengthen; and
- steps to strengthen DMCs.

We first describe the key challenges outlined by the CMOs and then delve into each of the above.

Key challenges

The key challenges identified by CMOs to manage strategy in disruptive times, include identifying environmental changes and trends, managing shifts in consumer behavior and maintaining trade and consumer engagement.

CMOs highlighted the enhanced criticality and challenges of identifying industry trends, category drivers, technology disruptions and customer behavior changes in a disruptive environment. Moving beyond the pandemic, they gave examples of how disruptions like the Ukraine war, sudden change in tariffs and acute, sustained water shortages posed challenges. CMOs believe that it is important to identify changes in behavior and business practices which will endure beyond the disruption. The challenge is greater given that the speed and scope of shifts in consumer behavior has increased significantly. Maintaining engagement with customers and trade during disruptions is another challenge and many CMOs admitted that such interactions had decreased during the pandemic. This was also highlighted in Study 1.

Understanding the impact of disruption on employees and the challenges in managing anxiety in the workplace is the third area of concern. Other challenges emerging from this study include grappling with uncertainty, managing the speed of disruption in existing processes and sorting production-related and resource commitment issues.

Literature highlights issues such as interruptions in operations/work flows, redesigning processes (Srivastava *et al.*, 1999), constrained resources (Kang *et al.*, 2021) and adverse impact on employee experience and performance because of abnormal working conditions, uncertainty and isolation, as major challenges (Hansen *et al.*, 2009).

Key focus areas

P1. Key focus areas which are critical for CMOs to navigate disruptions and build resilience are 1) Organizational agility, 2) Enhanced technology leverage, 3) Business continuity planning (BCP), 4) Strengthening customer connect, 5) Managing TMT expectations and 6) Reassurance and motivation.

Organizational agility. Organizational agility is critical during disruptions, and requires CMOs to focus on the following – driving change, resource adaptation, tapping new opportunities, fostering innovation and working structure and process adaptation.

Driving change. Disruptive changes in the environment and customer behavior can be leveraged as opportunities to make radical changes and rethink assumptions on role responsibilities (Heyden *et al.*, 2020). Marketing leaders need to continuously engage in "situation modification" (Gross and John, 2003) and reinvent marketing strategies (Kotler and Caslione, 2009).

Findings: The CMOs in our study highlight the necessity to shake the status quo during disruptions. CMOs are in the best position to initiate change because of their proximity to and deeper understanding of the customer. Having belief in their ability to bring about change is important. Equally important is conveying this belief to others and facilitating change management across stakeholders. This includes facilitating changes in mindset as well as processes.

> A lot of what we are trying to do as marketing leaders today is trying to change the way business was fundamentally running. And that requires lot of change. First in the mindset and then of course in the processes […]. Initial momentum is very critical to change the orbit. (CMO 12).

> Today we are required to shake the boat and the CEOs are […] using CMO's role to shake (it), because we know the customers better. The competencies (needed) are changing because of the customers, (because) of the business model, (because) of the technology and that's putting up a real churn in the organization, […] it is rocking the marketing organization. You have to think that it rocks in the right way. (CMO 22).

Resource adaptation. When there are constraints on availability and use of organizational resources (Marcus and Nichols, 1999), leaders play a key role in mobilizing resources for new projects, process and product changes (Baden-Fuller and Teece, 2020).

Findings: CMOs believe that mobilizing and adapting resources to achieve business objectives becomes more critical during disruptions. Resource allocation needs to prioritize new growth opportunities and ensure implementation of strategies in the altered environment. Cost optimization is important, while parallelly exploring new ways to expand earnings. CMOs caution that pulling the plug on key marketing investments during disruptions may be counterproductive. Leveraging alternate resources and diverting spends to align with changed context can be beneficial.

CMO of an IT products and services company adapted their communication strategy by shifting resources from other channels to online educational events for customers. A textile company diverted resources to new products, like masks, for which there was sudden demand. They leveraged collaborations with delivery partners and shifted resources from trade shows to strengthen e-commerce and WhatsApp channels.

> Be a chief growth driver for the organization […] so that all the organization resources are delivering to those growth opportunities and prioritizing […] Actually, the most critical gate is post commercialization- to ensure there are adequate resources. […]. The biggest thing that you could do is plug-in some of the resources […] (given) the phase of the crisis we are facing right now. (CMO 18).

> There is lot of focus on cost efficiencies, and ROI. So, (we are) looking at marketing investments not just to build the brand (long term), but investments that can give benefit today. Very significant change if you see, in the way we are planning our marketing spends. (CMO 12).

> There is a need to continuously monitor, recalibrate and repurpose. (CMO 36).

Tapping new opportunities. Disruptions can create opportunities if exploited wisely (Bernstein, 1996; Jeong *et al.*, 2023; James *et al.*, 2011). Sensing new opportunities by adapting to consumer changes is critical (Hunt and Madhavaram, 2020).

Findings: Identification of new opportunities is a key focus area for CMOs. These include expansion/modification of existing offerings and redesigning the customer journey. CMOs highlight the need to reconfigure existing resources, processes, competencies and offerings to be able to tap into multiple and sometimes conflicting growth opportunities.

CMO of a packaged food company cited an adjustment in their product mix to cater to modified meal patterns because of work from home. A garment company expanded their portfolio beyond formal wear as its relevance declined in some segments because of evolving work practices. CMO of an IT company catered to new customer requirements, by designing digital on-boarding solutions for insurance companies which witnessed an unanticipated surge in demand from younger consumers during the pandemic.

> We had the road map and there (were) engagements which were based on certain set of assumptions. How have these assumptions changed? […]. Looking at the solutions, we have proposed. Are the solutions relevant? What are the main things that they would like to change in the new reality? (CMO 29).

> Disruptions allow CMOs to look at opportunities which were traditionally not looked at. Relaxation of certain norms allows looking at segments which were previously not attractive. (CMO 32).

Fostering innovation. A disruptive environment necessitates innovation in business models (Doz and Kosonen, 2010), processes and products (Hunt and Madhavaram, 2020), but organizational dynamics could be an impediment for disruptive innovation (Markides, 2006).

Findings: CMOs see themselves as key players in shaping the organization's innovation journey. They need to encourage new ideas, facilitate the innovation process, mobilize resources, review and nurture the innovation to ensure success. They also need to build capabilities and enable cross-functional interaction. CMOs highlight the role of technology as a key enabler for innovations. During disruption, speed of innovation is critical and structures and processes need to be put in place to make that happen. While incremental innovations help cope with disruption, new-to-market innovations can protect the organizations from future disruptions.

A lighting company's CMO spoke about repurposing existing technology to cater to emerging opportunities in the health space. They used UVC light to create disinfecting solutions. A luxury hospitality brand exploited opportunities in at-home hospitality and launched an app for food delivery. A textile company launched new functional finishes (anti-viral and anti-bacterial).

The nature of the innovations (incremental vs fundamental), the emphasis on speed, combined with greater collaboration and flexibility during the disruption period, appear to be the reasons why in spite of greater focus on innovation, time spent on it by CMOs did not increase during the disruption period, as reported in Study 1. Another reason was the increased time spent on managing operational continuity.

The second is innovation and the speed of innovation. Earlier we used to do one innovation a year, but right now, the way business is moving, […] we will have to look at a completely different business model and look at products also that may be very, very different. (CMO 12).

I think focus is (on) how do you create an environment of innovation and out-of-the-box thinking. How do you keep tinkering with the steady boat to say that there are better ways to do it. Even at a cost of some immediate destruction in the business. […] How do you engage the senior management and also how do you engage your colleagues in day-to-day management to think beyond the box and bring in improvements. (CMO 1).

Working structure and process adaptation. In times of major environmental disruption, flexibility of processes, culture and structures is a key factor for success, during and after disruption (John and Thakur, 2021; Ritchie, 2004; Bundy *et al.*, 2017).

Findings: CMOs consider it a strategic imperative, to minimize impact of disruptions by adapting work processes and structures. One key area is to facilitate better working conditions, allow for more informal/unscheduled conversations and find new ways of sharing information. Another key area is better alignment within and across teams, including dismantling rigid structures and equipping team members to perform within constraints. Process adaptation is also essential to reduce delays as response times become critical. Some CMOs set up special cross-functional teams and processes for idea sharing. CMO of a packaged food company improved the team's digital skills and adapted the process for consumer insights with online customer immersions.

Getting in (the) right capability that's the separate team that we built now called a value creation engine team […]. that team requires both very strong understanding of the consumers and being able to take that back to the production team and link with the two. And be able to do it without delays. (CMO 12).

The informal network had gone. Now you had to interact with cross-functional people to get the job done. […] Cross fertilization helped, because everybody has similar problems. (CMO 31).

Enhanced technology leverage. Managing technology is a key aspect of managing disruptions (Bundy *et al.*, 2017) and technology investments help CMOs "spot opportunities and trends, experiment, and respond to or drive changes in the market" (Hughes and Chandy, 2021). As an outcome of COVID-19, 75% firms accelerated the adoption of AI to aid customer acquisition and cost optimization (Bain and Company, 2020).

Findings: CMOs view technology as a prime driver and enabler for new ways of working in a disruptive environment. Two key reasons for the technology focus are customer adoption of technology and the shift toward a predominantly digital ecosystem. Using technology to respond to the new environment, connect better with customers and gain deeper customer insights was identified as top priority. Other priorities for leveraging technology include product design and delivery, communication, back-end/front-end processes, customer experience transformation, better tracking of customer data and use of dashboards to understand variances or to test ideas.

CMOs gave examples of using the digital/online mediums for internal communication, collaboration as well for customer immersions. The CMO of an insurance company highlighted how the pandemic led to the transition from only digital prospecting to putting in place the entire digital fulfilment channel. Others spoke about digital integration of multiple processes in the customer journey.

The first (priority) is being digital across all aspects of business which is very critical because the way we have seen the overall eco-system changing. […] We are talking about integration of our own assets with the CRM. We are talking about e-commerce […] We are also talking about digitizing the after-sales service team (processes) with the marketing team so that we can work together. So, there are lot of things happening on the digital front where we are talking about transformation. (CMO 4).

Business continuity planning. Impact of disruptions on the existing business model (Ritter and Pedersen, 2020) needs to be analyzed and corrective responses planned to increase resilience (Sheffi, 2015). Business leaders need to use reflection and feedback mechanisms (Ritchie, 2004) to learn and iterate future strategies.

Findings: CMOs highlight an increased focus on BCP because of heightened uncertainty and lack of information. Granularity of everyday planning is important, as is preparing for future resilience. Given the criticality of securing the business and predicting P&L impact, CMOs used scenario planning for estimating short term and long-term outcomes. Performance analysis was done more during meetings with subordinates or with the CEO, which would account for lesser time spent on independent analysis by the CMO as reported in Study 1.

I think CMO plays (a) very critical role in the tactical alignment in what needs to be done vs strategic alignment in what should be done in the coming future. So, the role is an amalgamation of running the business, (and) securing, or sustaining the business for the future. (CMO 1).

In the first couple of phases, the tactical part was less. . We did spend a lot of time on the strategic ones. […] We created some scenarios – pessimistic, realistic and optimistic. We tried to learn from other organizations in the same area or with similar experience […]. We then created a different P&L for these different scenarios. As a CMO, I am responsible for both the revenue and the profitability of the organization. (CMO 30).

Strengthening customer connect. While product and channel innovations and adaptations have been discussed at some length in crisis literature, there is less discussion on strengthening customer connect during and after disruption. There is need for a collaborative approach to estimate potential changes in consumption (Kohl *et al.*, 2022) which can only be brought about with strong customer connect. Research indicates that customer-driven service adaptations are most likely to continue post disruption (John and Thakur, 2021).

Findings: CMOs realize the importance of gaining insights and not losing customer connect in turbulent times. They highlight the importance of building customer-centricity and understanding the changed context for the customers. A priority for CMOs is leveraging technology and digital media and developing innovative ways to engage with customers. For example, one of the CMOs involved multiple teams in making calls to dealers, franchisees and end consumers. Another highlighted use of videos and social media for consumer insights, while a third set up customer advisory panels for different aspects of the business. A CMO from the packaged food industry identified three impact areas on consumer lives because of the pandemic – health-related (fear of sickness and mortality), restricted living (to not be able to freely move around) and economic (income uncertainties and price increases). Restricted living reduced out-of-home consumption but led to increase in at-home snacking.

Ensure that the organization doesn't lose the sight of the consumer in these volatile times […] ensure right capability, both in the marketing team as well as the capability in terms of consumer centricity, agility in the larger organization […] ensure that we are innovating to meet consumer needs. Also, innovation in terms of engagement with the consumers. Ability to get into the shoes of the consumer and to figure out the day in the journey and the life of consumers to say which are the various touch points (of) the consumers, the ability to decode consumers' needs and to convert (these) into product, pack, engagement solutions, (and) experience solutions. (CMO 18).

> CMO has to continue (to) bring back to the organization the changing trends in the market place. So CMOs have to continue (to) anticipate the trends anticipate the future; keep himself/herself and the team on the ground much more, you know, informed with customer interaction. (CMO 11).

Managing TMT expectations. Literature on CMO roles highlights that corporate expectations are frequently unrealistic (Kerin, 2005), and this holds true even more during disruptions.

Findings: CMOs point out that delivering topline, market shares and profitability numbers is a key part of their discussion with the Board and the CEO. Managing expectations becomes more difficult in times of resource constraints. In addition to regular KPIs, innovation projects are also tracked by the Board in some cases. Understanding and managing expectations of the TMT is critical. One CMO highlighted that as vertical growth was no longer possible in the altered landscape, they managed expectations by suggesting an alternate strategy of growing horizontally across a different category. Another CMO spoke about having more frequent discussions with the CEO on the implications of the evolving situation.

> We have to achieve what we have set ourselves for in terms of the business. Now that is something which we, as a senior management team, need to work on because expectations have not changed. They remained the same but we as a team need to convince them (TMT) that there are certain challenges which we have in the overall ecosystem in which we are operating today. And even though there are challenges, we have to deliver. So, be open to our feedback and optimize expectations as much possible. (CMO 4).

Reassurance and motivation. Understanding uncertainty resulting from disruptions and adopting higher communication frequency in a crisis is a key requirement for leaders to build resilience (Hansen *et al.*, 2022; Tuan, 2022).

Findings: CMOs believe that a higher communication frequency is necessary during high uncertainty. They feel that focus should be on motivating the team and conducting one-on-one conversations beyond business issues. Frequent reviews with the team help in getting better alignment and faster resolution. For external stakeholders as well, reassurance is critical, and support during a crisis can go a long way in strengthening bonds. Showing empathy, communicating regularly, addressing concerns and offering support are important. During disruptions, flexibility in customer contracts and terms of trade can be considered.

Some CMOs spoke about having daily morning huddles with their teams, while others highlighted creating recognition opportunities and celebrating small wins to keep up the morale.

> We used a lot of these forums to share with people (within our teams) about who is doing what; we got people motivated and we tried to learn from each other. As a leader, to call out and say that it is okay to not feel comfortable, to feel stress and anxiety and lose sleep […] During uncertain times […] there was a need to communicate more. […] The partners are an important part of the ecosystem. If I look at the channel, they are also under stress. How do we manage that relationship in this scenario? (CMO 30).

> It has taken daily calls by field staff to the channel […] to say that we're with you. Being an advisor to our channel partners at all levels. Of course, there was communication (about) what they can do better, but we were also able to help them out in very small things. For example, SOPs as you open up, or giving them simple guidance around how they can sell digitally. (CMO 12).

Key enablers

P2. The key enablers which can help CMOs navigate disruptions and build resilience are – 1) Support from the Board, 2) Clarity on strategic prioritization,

3) Cross-functional collaboration, 4) External stakeholder inputs and 5) Key skills.

Support from the board and increased share of voice. Inputs from the Board can strengthen crisis management efforts (Withers *et al.*, 2012), and CMO presence in the Board helps improve organizational performance (Germann *et al.*, 2015; Kerin, 2005).

Findings: Most CMOs agree that there is an increase in marketing's share of voice (SOV) in the Board in recent years, and this is especially true during times of disruption. Because CMOs represent the voice of the customer, their views are especially critical during periods of uncertainty. CMOs help give the Board a sense of what is happening, share market trends and provide inputs for cross-functional business decisions. The CMOs' presence on the Board, in turn equips them with a better understanding of the Board's perspective and having a say in strategic decisions brings about better alignment.

Kerin (2005) identified CMOs' lack of credibility with top leaders in the organization as a key issue. Our findings also align with this. The CMOs seek backing from the CEO to gain credibility and empowerment. They seek support from the Board in terms of getting time to demonstrate outcomes from new initiatives. Other support sought by CMOs is in terms of business updates and guidance on what could be done better. CMOs opine that while growth is important, top management should be supportive of risk where required. Diverse voices on the Board can provide critical inputs to the CMO on transformation projects and inspiration for new directions during times of disruption.

> I think the voice of the consumer and (the) portfolio needs to be reviewed by the Board. Whether the CMO does it, or CEO does it and, you know, the CMO provides the inputs. I think the second thing […] is (a) little elbow room to experiment and fail sometimes. Sometimes you are so driven by the growth and you become very risk averse.[…] So I think allowing experimentation, trend spotting, […] fast failures […] (is how) the board could help us […] The Board should provide outside perspectives. (CMO 18).

> Support is required in terms of having that patience, that whatever you are investing today will give you results […] supporting with the time which is required for initiatives which you are taking in marketing. […] It took me quite some time to convince the management to get the technology in place. (CMO 2).

Clarity on strategic prioritization. During periods of disruption and subsequently as well, it is critical for organizations to be agile. Reinventing marketing strategies to adapt quickly to marketplace evolution is required (Kotler and Caslione, 2009), and CMOs highlight increased focus on new priorities (CMO survey, 2020).

Findings: CMOs believe that to adapt strategies, an understanding of strategic priorities and clarity on enterprise goals is crucial for them. This is particularly so at a time when the CMOs are exploring new directions. They value the Board's inputs on finalizing portfolio choices and feel the need to have a more structured approach on innovation projects, with clarity on how funds are committed and what the CMO needs to prioritize when trying to optimize spends on such projects.

> The role that I think the Board or/and the CEO brings […] the biggest input is prioritization. Being very clear on what the enterprise goals are, helps provide strategic prioritization in terms of the portfolio choices. (CMO 18).

> Things change. […] Something I would not have prioritized in this year, became so relevant that (it) become (the) need of the hour; and agility is the new word which one has to be very sensitive about. (CMO 11).

Cross-functional collaboration and coordination. The importance of collaboration between the CMO and the Chief Information Officer (CIO) has increased (Deans and Tretola, 2016). Our research finds evidence of this collaboration and highlights that CMOs level of interaction with other CXOs is also high during disruptions.

Findings: CMOs say that they spend a significant amount of time with cross-functional teams and this is especially relevant during disruption. This supports Study 1 findings. CMOs can drive and manage change more effectively, if key internal stakeholders are aligned to and appreciate the criticality of the proposed initiatives. Cross-functional coordination helps in getting projects off the ground faster and also enables quicker, smoother implementation. Quicker decision-making and implementation can explain why time spent by CMOs on innovation did not increase as per Study 1, in spite of increased innovation focus. As technology becomes the key enabler for change during disruptions, interaction of CMOs with the technology/digital teams and the CIO becomes quite extensive. CMOs involvement in initiatives led by other teams also provides useful inputs to them and ensures better alignment. One CMO gives an example of how they worked closely with the services and the IT teams for digitizing customer touch points.

> Every project that we do, we kind of do IT and Operations at the beginning. So that they are very clear what the end results (are) going to be, and they can put their points on the table and we can find solutions quickly. My third big thing is warming up to the financial director, because once he knows what I am thinking, what I am doing, the support is there, and it's very easy to get off the ground. (CMO 27).

> Cross-working with my business heads has gone up. Normally, I would not need to know so much about what's happening (in their verticals), but now I'm very well updated on a very frequent basis on their plans; they are updated on mine, that's gone up. […] What has significantly increased, is the interaction with the factory, the technical head. […] Supply chain head (interaction) has gone up. (CMO 31).

External stakeholder inputs. In an increasingly interconnected ecosystem, managing relationships with external stakeholders is a key part of coping with disruptions (Ritchie, 2004) ensuring better alignment on value creation and delivery.

Findings: CMOs share that they work closely with multiple stakeholders, including trade partners, consultants, regulatory bodies and communication agencies to get a better understanding of the customer's pulse as well to spot changes in the environment. These stakeholders can also be a good source for competitor information and sharing of best practices. Getting relevant inputs at the right time can help the CMOs prepare better for any future disruptions and reduce reaction time. CMOs highlight the role of social media and the necessity of networking and collaboration for value creation.

> CMOs should have a way to connect with the outside world, which for example in our case, are the regulatory body or market research agencies, who are giving you actually what is happening and what is the behaviour of the consumers. So, that outside connect of a larger macro environment which will impact our customers, our distributions, our working, our products, to my mind has to be there. (CMO 2).

> It is becoming an ecosystem-driven business rather than […] a single capability business. […] So, stakeholder management, both in terms of business, and in terms of communicating your business, becomes important and it is largely (the) CMO's role. (CMO 1).

Key skills

CMOs need to have strong cross-functional understanding, good analytical skills, deep understanding of the customer and should be able to leverage technology (Kerin, 2005). To lead, inspire and manage change in a constantly evolving disruptive environment, CMOs need to be forever learning and honing their skills. Our research highlights key skills which can enable and empower the CMO to lead in times of disruptions.

Change management. Pressures regarding business survival because of disruptions necessitate new ways of thinking by marketers, accelerating change readiness (Lim, 2023). CMOs should be able to bring in the right kind of change and know how to align organizational resources to implement the change.

Findings: CMOs say the ability to bring the top management, peers, as well as subordinates on board in a collaborative manner is critical. To do this, CMOs have to believe in the change and be willing to shoulder the risk. The skill lies in getting people out of their comfort zone, while staying aligned to the organization structure and culture.

> How do you move the comfort zone of people and yet get it done without destroying […] First and foremost for me is the ability to accept change, believe in change and take the risk that is incumbent in bringing change in an organization. Largely, the purpose of the business that we handle now, is to bring change from best of experiences, from outside. (CMO 1).

Adaptability and learnability. The ability to detect and respond to disruptions quickly is critical in mitigating impact and enhancing resilience (Sheffi, 2015).

Findings: CMOs believe that agility should be their *mantra*, and they should be able to transform themselves to perform in a new world. Learning and unlearning need to be a constant endeavor and this needs to be combined with the ability to analyze multiple aspects of a problem. CMOs need to have an experimental mindset, continuously thinking of new ways and alternate means to achieve the desired objectives in times of disruption.

> Three skills that the marketers, we felt, needed at this point of time. One was the ability to, from a distance be like anthropologists because you can't meet consumers. So how can you observe behaviour and make conclusions? […] The second skill functionally, was digital marketing […] that is something which has to be mastered very quickly to make the best use of the opportunity. And the third skill they had to learn, was really about the basic drivers of the category-which (ones) are relevant or irrelevant in these times. (CMO 31).

> Multitude of experiences has become more important now than the granularity of (a) single experience in a more detailed way. (CMO 1).

Understanding of technology. Technology aids CMOs in enhancing marketing agility. Understanding technology can equip CMOs to quickly identify insights across heterogenous data sets (Kalaignanam *et al.*, 2021). Technology is also a key enabler for preserving relationships during crises (Alalwan *et al.*, 2021).

Findings: CMOs highlight that among the most critical skills required is developing an understanding of how new technology works and how they can leverage it. Strong techno-commercial skills and deep understanding of digital as a media and as a tool are imperative today:

> I think, one (skill), is certainly, the digital know-how. Staying updated with the latest technology. What is coming in? Today it is digital, tomorrow it will be much more than that. […]Second is, certainly, you have to be technically competent because […] in area like ours techno commercial is very critical because people are looking (at) CMOs as somebody (who) would be offering solutions. CMO (11).

> I think CMOs need to understand technology also now. Ability to understand customers, brings the insights and (you) use technology to deliver whatever you have to. So, there is a very strong need and I think there is (a) lot of effort which CMOs have to make themselves. […] Organization should be supporting them in terms of acquiring these new skills. (CMO 2).

Data analysis. Marketing organizations need to invest in big data and analytics (Lim, 2023), as a marketer's role is centered around providing data-driven insights about customers (Sharma *et al.*, 2020). Value creation capability driven by customer analytics has been identified as an antecedent of sustained competitive advantage (Hossain *et al.*, 2021).

Findings: CMOs believe that comfort with data analytics and the ability to read data is a critical skill, as it provides them with critical insights, helps identify patterns and predict potential changes. This becomes even more important in times of reduced external interfaces.

> Marketing actually has evolved into a highly data-intensive domain, understanding data, comfort with numbers is extremely important. (CMO 16).

> The whole data-driven operating model we have been using for almost two years very effectively that has kept us in (control). Because everything is data driven and everything is based on a system. (CMO 29).

Empowering the team and getting the right mix of skills. CMOs need to inspire and empower their team to be able to take decisions in the face of time pressure and other constraints. Heyden *et al.* (2020) advocate that CMOs should adopt the role of facilitators and advisors, while empowering middle managers to be initiators of change.

Findings: CMOs highlight that team selection is critical to ensure the right mix of skill sets. Skills in the area of data analytics, innovation mind-set, design engineering and digital capability are very important today, but new skills may become essential in the future. Learnability, passion and comfort with ambiguity are assets to succeed in a disruptive environment. CMOs highlighted that while they may need to induct "new blood," they also need to train and empower the "old blood" to ensure that they adapt fast and enhance productivity.

> I mean to empower my team to be able to do their day jobs well so that at least (I get) my time for creating things. […] How do we get the right tools and enablers and skill sets in the team to be ready with this new world marketing where technology is going to take a great place […] So the biggest focus has been and will continue to be get the right technology in place, get the right skill sets in the team. It may be hiring new or it may be re-skilling people. (CMO 2).

The way forward: Developing desired DMCs

Developing DMCs in the organization will help CMOs reconfigure resources sooner, more knowledgably and in a more unexpected manner (Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000; Kachouie *et al.*, 2018), helping them compete better in times of disruptions (Pfajfar *et al.*, 2024). Building superior DMCs can help organizations reconfigure operational marketing capabilities more effectively and efficiently, leading to enhanced agility and speed of innovations (Mitręga, 2020) with better organizational outcomes (Kachouie *et al.*, 2018).

DMC Dimensions: Identification

The underlying dimensions for dynamic capabilities have been identified as sensing, seizing and reconfiguration (Teece, 2014). First, to sustain value in a disruptive scenario, CMOs need to be adept at identifying changes in the context, customers and market dynamics and iteratively making sense of the resultant opportunities and challenges (sensing). Second, they need to have the processes and skills to be able create or seize value by mobilizing resources to address modified needs and behaviors (seizing). And third, they need to be adept at reconfiguring and transforming processes and capabilities (reconfiguration) (Baden-Fuller and Teece, 2020; Teece, 2014). Given the time and resource constraints, there is also a need to revisit business plans and prioritize business objectives, resources, tasks and innovation projects as highlighted by the CMOs. Thus, we identify a fourth dimension of DMC which we term as "prioritizing." This leads us to our next proposition:

P3. "Prioritizing" is the fourth dimension of dynamic marketing capabilities that CMOs need to strengthen to navigate disruptions, in addition to the existing dimensions of sensing, seizing and reconfiguration.

DMC dimensions: Strengthening

We build further on our propositions, by proposing the underlying DMC dimensions which need to be strengthened for each element in the framework. Steps followed are detailed below.

First, drawing from an understanding of extant literature and reflections from Studies 1 and 2, two of the researchers identified and mapped the DMC dimensions to each element of key enablers and key focus areas. Differences in the researchers' views were discussed and convergence achieved. Second, five CMOs who reviewed the propositions on key focus areas and enablers were also asked to independently map these to the DMC dimensions. Third, based on the combined inputs received, the DMC dimensions most aligned to each element were identified (Figure 1).

For many of the key focus areas, strengthening of the reconfiguring dimension is critical, while some of these also require strengthening one or more of the other dimensions. In terms of the key enablers for CMOs, seizing and prioritizing dimensions are the most critical. Figure 1 presents the proposed mapping of DMC dimensions; however, this will need to be tested and validated further.

DMCs are thought to be more outside-in (vs inside-out) and enable anticipation of (vs only adjustments to) trends (Day, 2020; Ali *et al.*, 2024). These are, therefore, aligned to the adaptive marketing capabilities defined by Day (2011). DMCs' focus on speed of innovation is also aligned to the concept of agility (Mitręga, 2020). Drawing from literature on DMCs, adaptive marketing capabilities and marketing agility, we elaborate the mechanisms for strengthening the four underlying dimensions of DMC (Figure 2).

We divide the mechanisms into two broad categories:

(1) mechanisms for strengthening the sensing and prioritizing dimensions; and

(2) mechanisms for strengthening the seizing and reconfiguring dimensions.

Mechanisms for strengthening the sensing and prioritizing dimensions. Knowledge gathering processes: Well-defined processes and practices for knowledge gathering, articulation and codification are important (Zollo and Winter, 2002). Vigilant market learning involves sensing and seizing weak market signals before they fully emerge (Hunt and Madhavaram, 2020). To do this, CMOs need to put in place early warning systems to capture changing customer needs (Hoekstra and Leeflang, 2023).

Cultivating new perspectives: Knowledge once received needs to be analyzed, coded, shared and absorbed to generate new perspectives and facilitate continuous capability development (Hoekstra and Leeflang, 2023). For this, investment in technology (Kalaignanam *et al.*, 2021) and acquisition of the necessary skills is important. Training programs, internal communication platforms (Hoekstra and Leeflang, 2023) and regular exchange of ideas can help enhance the absorptive capacity of the organization.

Knowledge-sharing mechanisms: CMOs need to push for more flexible organizational structures (Deshpande, 1982), which can enable better "cross functional collaboration and

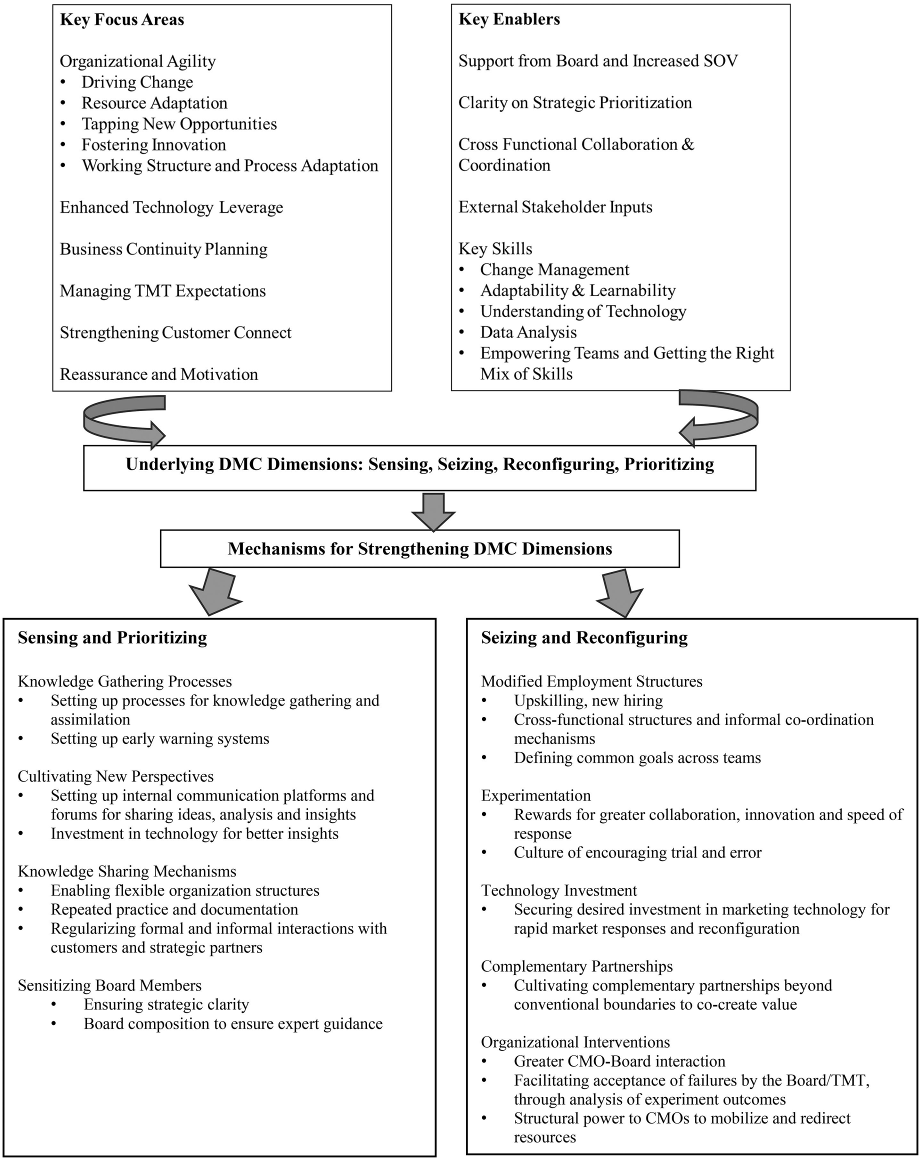

Figure 1. CMO charter in times of disruption: focal DMC dimensions
Source: Authors' own work

cross-pollination of knowledge" (Kalaignanam *et al.*, 2021, p.46). Repeated practice, documentation and learning from past mistakes are additional learning mechanisms through which CMOs can aid generation of DMCs (Barrales-Molina *et al.*, 2014; Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000). CMOs need to develop and strengthen networks of strategic partnerships,

Key Focus Areas	**Sensing**	**Prioritizing**	**Seizing**	**Reconfiguring**
1. Organizational Agility				
1.1 Driving Change				xx
1.2 Resource adaptation		x	xx	x
1.3 Tapping New Opportunities	xx	x		x
1.4 Fostering Innovation	xx			xx
1.5 Working Structure & Process Adaptation		xx		xx
2. Enhanced Technology Leverage	xx		xx	xx
3. Business Continuity Planning		xx		xx
4. Managing TMT Expectations		xx	xx	xx
5. Strengthening Customer Connect	xx			x
6. Reassurance and Motivation			x	xx

Key Enablers	**Sensing**	**Prioritizing**	**Seizing**	**Reconfiguring**
1. Support from Board and Increased SOV	x	x	xx	
2. Clarity on Strategic Prioritization		xx	x	
3. Cross Functional Collaboration & Coordination			xx	xx
4. External Stakeholder Inputs	xx			
5. Key Skills				
5.1 Change Management		xx	x	xx
5.2 Adaptability & Learnability	xx	x	xx	xx
5.3Understanding Technology	xx		x	x
5.4 Analyzing Data	xx	x	x	
5.5 Empowering teams and getting the right mix of skills		x	xx	xx

xx- Strongly aligned
x- Moderately aligned

Figure 2. Focal DMC dimensions for CMOs in times of disruption
Source: Authors' own work

which can provide additional knowledge and desired expertise, for competing in a disruptive environment (Day, 2011). For this, time needs to be set aside for regular, formal and informal interactions with customers and strategic partners.

Sensitizing Board members: Board members need to be sensitized to provide strategic clarity to help CMOs make the best use of insights and respond to anticipated market changes. Organizations need to take a closer look at the composition of the Board to ensure there are experts who can provide guidance in emerging areas.

Mechanisms for strengthening the seizing and reconfiguring dimensions. Modified employment structures: The insights gleaned from market learning and experimentation need quick adoption and action by cross-functional teams. This is facilitated by breaking of silos, setting up of internal platforms to facilitate quick communication, modifying the employment structure and bringing in employees with new skill sets, thereby fostering agile marketing (Hoekstra and Leeflang, 2023; Mitręga, 2020; Kalaignanam *et al.*, 2021). Defining one or two common overarching goals across multiple teams and encouraging informal coordination mechanisms (organic and personal communication) between them aids marketing agility (Kalaignanam *et al.*, 2021). CMOs should also ensure frequent interaction and seamless collaboration with the CIO and other CXOs. Strengthening DMCs requires CMOs to motivate and provide upskilling opportunities to team members through focused training programs (Mitręga, 2020) which ensure their preparedness to act on anticipated changes. CMOs also need to continuously upgrade their own skill sets.

Experimentation: CMOs need to cultivate a mindset of challenging existing cause-and-effect relationships and trying out multiple solutions to market problems (Day, 2014). Such a mindset needs to be cultivated across the entire team, and it can be facilitated by rewards for greater collaboration, innovation and speed of response. Adaptive market experimentation involves learning through multiple trial and error experiments.

Technology investment: CMOs need to be able to secure significant investment in marketing technology to enable rapid responses to changes in the market (Kalaignanam *et al.*, 2021).

Complementary partnerships: Choice of strategic partners is critical, and CMOs need to not only strengthen existing relationships but also look beyond conventional boundaries to cultivate complementary partnerships. Such partnerships can help in co-creation of value, facilitate new forms of market access, enable rapid iteration and provide feedback to new/modified offerings/processes (Hoekstra and Leeflang, 2023).

Organizational interventions: While some of the initiatives to build DMCs are in the direct sphere of influence of the CMO, others need intervention at the organizational level. CMOs need structural power to be able to mobilize and redirect resources (Feng *et al.*, 2015). They need support for investing in experimentation and creating a culture of acceptance of failures (Hoekstra and Leeflang, 2023; Day, 2011). Greater interaction with the Board and analysis of experiment outcomes can aid CMOs in this task.

Tracking outcomes on DMCs. In addition to initiatives to strengthen DMCs, CMOs also need to put in place measures to check desired outcomes. Some critical measures could include:

- number of new insights and trends identified and acted upon;
- response time for modifying value proposition (Boso *et al.*, 2019);
- number of experiments conducted;
- categorizing and tracking innovations in product/service/process across the “revolutionary-inventive- novel,” spectrum (Boso *et al.*, 2019);
- extent and timing of replacement of old competitive advantages (Mitręga, 2020);
- efficiency and speed of responses in terms of customer relationship management, product development management and supply chain integration with suppliers and customers (Fang and Zou, 2009); and
- extent of interaction across teams and number of joint projects.

Discussion, contributions and managerial implications

The proposed framework suggesting a charter for CMOs to navigate in times of disruption is built on propositions co-created with practitioners through the TIU approach. Initial premises drawn from practitioner records were developed, refined and tested through in-depth conversations with practitioners in two stages of depth interviews.

Our research meets the rigor criteria for TIU, specified by Guba (1981), Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Zeithaml (2020): credibility is established as the propositions developed are consistent with the "theory in use" expressed by multiple participants; propositions are transferable and can be extended beyond the study as participant CMOs represented diverse organizations in terms of size and industry type, covering both manufacturing and services sectors; dependability is taken care of, as two researchers independently analyzed the same data and checked for convergence; confirmability is established as the theoretical propositions, which emerged from participant data, were confirmed with two different sets of CMOs; and distinctiveness in terms of theory's propositions being different from existing constructs is also achieved, as ours is one of the first studies to systematically delve into the role of the CMO in the face of an unexpected and sustained crisis using a TIU approach to build theory in an understudied phenomenon. While some of the key focus areas for CMOs may have been identified in other generalized contexts, their criticality and application in the context of managing sustained disruptions has not been discussed in extant literature. Further, key enablers to facilitate the CMO's role during disruptions have not been identified in extant literature.

CMOs seem to be well aware of the key focus areas and required actions to manage in turbulent times, but knowledge may not always translate into desired behavior (the knowing-doing gap). Our study attempts to address this gap by providing CMOs with a systematic framework for managing in times of disruption. "A managers' effectiveness is significantly influenced by their insight into their own work" (Mintzberg, 1975). Using a phenomenological approach to understanding attitudes and expert opinions of CMOs, we develop a conceptual framework which provides managerial guidance to help CMOs build dynamic marketing capabilities and chart a successful path to manage disruptions and build resilience. We propose key areas of focus for the CMO, along with the key enablers which can help them manage disruptions. We bring out five key skills which would be imperative for CMOs and their teams going forward. While role of the CMO is important, we also highlight the role of the Board and TMT in empowering and supporting the CMO at such times.

CMOs need dynamic marketing capabilities to shape marketing strategy based on market knowledge (Barrales-Molina *et al.*, 2014) and organized anticipation of market changes (Mitręga, 2020). This becomes more critical as well as more challenging during disruptions. Our study maps each element in the CMO Charter Framework to the underlying dimensions of DMC which CMOs need to strengthen. We further apply learnings from extant literature, to suggest how CMOs can build and track the desired DMCs.

Our research highlights key managerial implications for CMOs and makes a significant theoretical contribution to literature on CMO roles and disruption leadership. We highlight the key factors which can help CMOs drive change and build resilience, in times of disruption. We also build on the DMC construct, by defining a fourth dimension of "prioritizing," adding to the existing three underlying DMC dimensions of sensing, seizing and reconfiguring defined by Teece (2014).

Unexpected and sustained crises will continue to affect firms in the foreseeable future and can range from wars which affect the supply chain, future pandemics, sudden and dramatic climactic changes and discontinuous technology shifts. By identifying desired CMO behavior in sustained crises and by providing a systematic, DMC-based approach to enable CMOs to achieve desired outcomes, we hope to help the CMO enhance marketing's contribution to the firm.

While we believe that this is a significant step forward, we recognize that our study suffers from several limitations. The propositions in our framework need to further tested in a variety of crisis contexts and geographies. Extending our study to different sustained exogenous crisis contexts, and using experimental approaches to understand more about drivers of CMO behavior are profitable avenues for future research.

Understanding the interaction between CMOs and CEOs and studying the two as a dyad can help us to understand the exact role and influence of the CMO in times of disruption and the role played by the CEO in "signalling" the importance of the CMO to the board. We hope that these will be profitable avenues for future researchers to build on our study.

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Appendix 1. Discussion guide 1

Diagnostic Qualitative Interviews with CMOs Study 2, Phase 1

Part 1 - For CMOs who participated in the Diary Study

Introduction

Thank you for participating in this study to understand how CMOs are managing their roles and priorities in today's world. We had sent you a personalized report giving a comparison of the information that you had provided in the diary, along with the average for all the CMOs who had participated in this study:

Q.1 Did you have a chance to review the report that was provided? (If the CMO has not reviewed the report prior to the meeting, reschedule the meeting)

Q.2 On reviewing your own data, did you feel that the patterns reflected in the report is typical of your workday activities? Were there any surprises? Why do you think this could be so?

Q.3 Looking at the data, do you feel that the COVID-19 disruption has affected how you manage your role?

(Probe for differences and pattern pre-post COVID / with other CMOs and look for explanations) Why is this so? Is there anything that you would like to do differently going forward?)

Part 2 For All CMOs interviewed during the pandemic

Open by setting the context. Explain motivation of study:

Q.1 What would you say are your top 5 priorities as a CMO today? Looking back, compared to 5 years ago, do you feel that the priorities for the CMO in your own organization have changed? Who or what has caused this change?

Q.2 Considering the pandemic experience, what do you think will be the impact on the CMO role or priorities, the work culture and environment in times of disruptions?

Q.3 Looking at your interaction as the CMO, with your peers- other CXOs in your organization, could you comment on the time spent and the working relationships. Is it any different than it was previously, before the pandemic?

Q.4 Looking at the interaction of the CMO with peers and sub-ordinates and external stakeholders, could you comment on the time spent and the working relationships. Is it any different than it was previously, before the pandemic?

(If increased focus on communication is not mentioned by the CMO, ask specifically if communication levels were same or increased during the disruption with internal/external stakeholders. Probe deeper for the reasons.)

Q.5 What is the extent of interaction between the CMO and the TMT/Board of Directors? Has this changed in any way recently? Do you believe that the level of interaction should be less, or more, or is at the right level?

Q.6 What kind of efforts were made with respect to innovations/ technology use related to sales and marketing? Who has been the prime mover? What was the trigger? What was the process? Who else was involved?

Q.7 To monitor consumer and marketplace changes during a disruption in your industry, what do you think should be the sources of information for the CMO?

Q.8 Is there anything that CMOs should be doing differently to manage disruptions? Is there a role that CEO and the Board of Directors should play to help in this process?

Q.9 How well do you think CMOs are equipped to manage the new priorities? What can be done to make CMOs ready for the new environment? What skills would they need to acquire?

Q.10 In terms of hiring for your marketing team, what qualities will you look for today? Has there been any change because of recent disruptions?

Appendix 2. Discussion guide 2

Diagnostic Qualitative Interviews with CMOs Study 2, Phase 2

Introduction

Thank you for sparing time to participate in this study. As I had mentioned the purpose of this study is to understand CMO priorities, the actions they take during disruptions, and how they believe these actions will help manage the disruption better:

(1) What in your view have been some of the recent disruptions impacting business?

(2) Talking about disruptions, these could include like wars, prolonged extreme weather conditions in certain markets, possible harmonized cyber-attacks, sudden and overnight bans and tariff-barriers, etc. What should be the key focus areas for CMOs during disruptions like these?

We had conducted a study during the COVID-19 pandemic in which we asked CMOs what should be their priorities to manage disruptions better. Here, on the screen, are some of the focus areas that emerged through the study –

(Displayed one by one on a progressive PowerPoint slide):

- *Organizational Agility*
  - Driving change in the organization: facilitating changes in mindsets as well as processes
  - Resource adaptation: adapting and mobilizing resources to overcome constraints imposed by the disruption and take advantage of new opportunities
  - Tapping new opportunities: actively identifying and exploiting new opportunities for growth
  - Fostering innovation: being open to new ideas, facilitating and nurturing innovation, ensuring speed and collaboration

  - Work structure and process adaptation: to minimize impact of disruptions and reduce delays
- *Leveraging technology to spot trends, enhance process efficiencies, add value, communicate better with customers and internal/external stakeholders, etc.*
- *Business Continuity Planning- ensuring tactical and strategic alignment to safeguard and secure the business and predict possible impact of disruptions*
- *Managing Expectations of the top management team and the Board*
- *Strengthening Customer Connect and understanding the changed context for the customers*
- *Providing reassurance and motivation to staff, the trade and other external stakeholders to help them cope with both personal as well as work-related crises and needs.*

3) In your opinion is there a CMO priority which has not been covered and should be included? Looking across these areas, do you feel that there are any areas that are not as important and can be excluded from the list of CMO priorities?
4) Could you cite examples of these points from your own experience?

We are now sharing another slide with you, which highlights certain marketing capability dimensions

(Displayed on a PowerPoint slide)

Research has established that to sustain value in disruptive times, leaders need to be adept at the following competency dimensions (Baden-Fuller and Teece, 2020; Teece, 2014)-

Sensing – Scanning the environment, making sense of opportunities/challenges and leveraging new knowledge for strategic decisions

Seizing – Using/creating processes and skills to mobilize resources to address changed needs and behaviors during the disruption

Reconfiguring – Transforming work processes and capabilities

Prioritizing – Revisiting business plans and prioritizing business objectives, resources, tasks and innovation projects

5) Do these capabilities seem relevant to you in the context of the CMO managing in times of disruption?
6) Which of these marketing capability dimensions do you think would need to be strengthened for each of the key focus areas we have discussed. I am sharing with you a table – could you please indicate the most appropriate mapping in your opinion. If you feel these underlying capabilities are not relevant for any aspect, you can indicate that as well.

In our study, we had also asked CMOs what could help them to manage disruptions better. Here, on the screen, are the key enablers that emerged through the study –

(Displayed one by one on a progressive PowerPoint slide):

- Support from the Board – guidance, updates and willingness to consider CMO inputs
- Clarity from top management on organizational strategy and priorities
- Cross-functional collaboration and co-ordination across departments and functions
- Work with external stakeholders to get inputs on environment trends, customers and competitors
- CMO’s skills and abilities
  - Managing change - getting people out of their comfort zone while staying aligned to the organization structure and culture

- Ability to learn new skills and adapt to cope with new business challenges, and experimenting with new solutions
- Understanding technology, and using this ability to understand customers and deliver their needs better
- Comfort with data analytics and the ability to read data-based insights to identify patterns and predict potential changes
- Empowering teams and getting the right mix of skills

7) Is there anything else that you would like to comment on about the CMOs role in managing disruptions?

8) We will send you our complete framework with Key Focus Areas, Key Enablers discussed here and mechanisms to strengthen the sensing, seizing, reconfiguring and prioritizing dimensions of marketing capabilities? Please do reflect on it and let us know based on your experience, if you agree with the propositions or if there are any points of disagreement?

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