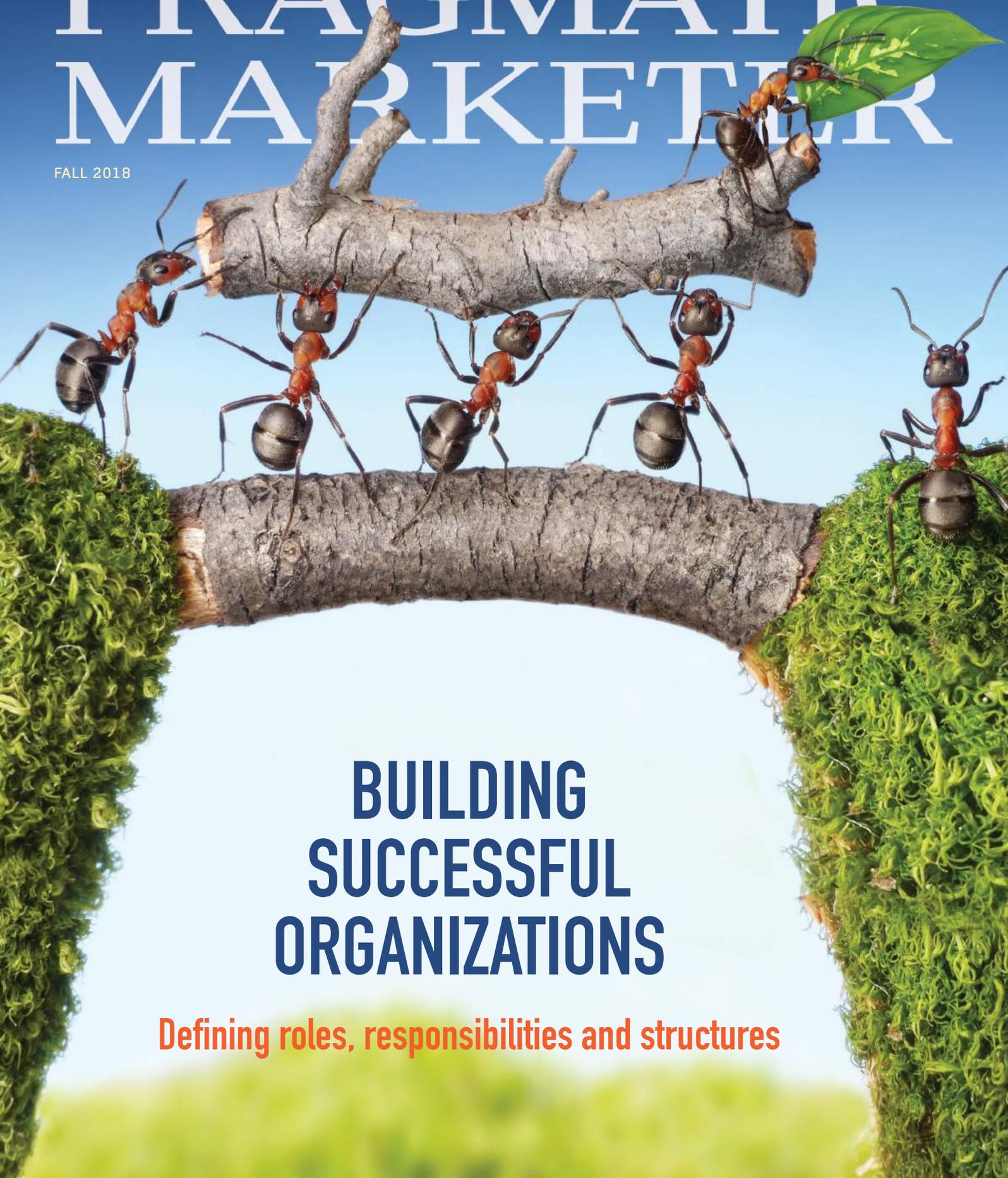


THE PRODUCT MANAGEMENT AND MARKETING AUTHORITY

# PRAGMATIC MARKETER

FALL 2018



## BUILDING SUCCESSFUL ORGANIZATIONS

Defining roles, responsibilities and structures



# DEFINING <sup>THE</sup> ROLE OF PRODUCT MARKETING

BY JUSTIN TOPLIFF

**I F I'VE LEARNED ONE THING AFTER SPENDING** almost a decade in product marketing at more than a handful of companies, it's that it looks a little different everywhere you go. I have been a strategic leader and a revenue owner and also, a collateral factory for sales. To paraphrase the Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, the only thing that's constant in product marketing is change itself.

## PRODUCT MARKETING HAS EVOLVED

The role of product marketing has expanded exponentially. You're not just working on product pitches and discussing product value and positioning. You set strategy, oversee revenue drivers and, above all, are masters and evangelists of your market and the customers you serve. In partnership with product management you inform what products to build, and whom to build them for, based on time spent in-market and with customer-facing teams. You also determine how to price those products in partnership with finance and leadership. Finally, you work with sales and marketing to determine how to sell them.

Modern product marketing has become hyper cross-functional. Roles can become blurred and a lot of time is spent building consensus. Yet there's a fine line between building

consensus and falling into what I like to call a tragedy of commons. With so many partnerships, companies are often confused about when, and how, to start their product marketing functions.

## WHEN TO HIRE A PRODUCT MARKETER

The first thing to ask yourself: How big is my company and how complex is the product portfolio? Your assessment will dictate whether you need product marketing in concept (perhaps co-owned by one or several people), an individual product marketer to handle the growing responsibility and tasks, or product marketing as its own function with an entire team attached to it.

To help reinforce whether it's time to incorporate product marketing into your company, look for any of the following red flags: a flopped product launch, broken communication between departments or trouble making decisions across functions. These challenges indicate that your company has scaled to the point where teams have the luxury and ability to focus on their own areas of expertise, rather than wearing multiple hats. The good news is that—sitting at the intersection of the organizational Venn diagram—product marketing can bring everyone back together.

## DEFINE THE ROLE AND ROLL IT OUT

There are three key pillars of product marketing. The first is research: industry research, competitor research, customer research, market landscape, win/loss, etc. Research helps you understand the market in which you operate, as well as the customers you serve and their needs, and it also informs long-term strategy. The second pillar focuses on messaging, positioning and pricing. Once you know what to build—and it's actually built—it's your job to decide how to talk about it, articulate the value to buyers and price it. Finally, the third pillar focuses on product launches and product lifecycle management. It is all about architecting go-to-market strategies, making a splash with the perfect product launch, and optimizing the performance, consumption and profitability of the product over time.

The reaction to these three pillars is often, "Wow, that's a lot!" Yes, yes it is. And that's the double-edged sword. Remember when I said product marketing looks a little different everywhere you go? The global nature of the role, varying growth trajectories of companies, and even culture and internal politics will dictate what the role looks like and which pillars are the focus.

That's why it's important, as you define the product marketing function for your company's current stage of growth, that you create a responsibility matrix to define roles. Who will be responsible for what? Introducing a product marketing function may feel like you're doing what you've always done, but the difference is that you can function at a new depth of expertise and process.

A major mistake that occurs here is a failure to ensure that product and marketing have a shared definition of product marketing. Much of what will fall into product marketing's domain is sand from someone else's sandbox. And if they've used the sand to build (what they think is) a beautiful sandcastle over the years, it's often hard for them to let go. They may dig moats instead.

Another thing to do ahead of time is to create a product roadmap or line of sight into what you're building next; otherwise, your new product marketer will have little to hang on to. You also should have a good understanding of your company's goals over the next few years so that a product marketing roadmap can be developed.

For instance, when I started product marketing from scratch at VTS, I made sure my roadmap aligned with timely company objectives. My first quarter centered around building departmental partnerships and laying operational framework (intranet, product release/launch protocols, etc.). My second quarter focused on messaging, positioning and a pricing audit of our entire product portfolio. My third quarter focused on a packaging and pricing overhaul to improve product sales and profitability. And during my fourth quarter, I merged our product portfolio with that of a company we acquired, helping customers through that transition and repositioning the product platform alongside a corporate rebrand. If you can equip your new hire with both company and product roadmaps, you will provide them with the necessary tools to plan out the product marketing roadmap that supports both.

The following tips will help as you establish the new



product marketing function, and support the success of the person in that role.

## SET UP PRODUCT MARKETING FOR SUCCESS

Product marketing must be given the tools, authority and altitude to succeed. I often see misalignment between what is expected of product marketing and what product marketing is given to work with. I have also lived this nightmare, and know it is an area where executives and hiring managers make critical mistakes. If there is a gap, something needs to change.

Many product marketers, myself included, assume—after reviewing the job description and speaking with recruiters, the CEO and departmental leaders with whom they intend to partner—that they will receive a warm welcome as they establish and champion the product marketing function. They think they will have the authority to create strategies that drive revenue and make decisions on things that fall into product marketing's ownership. They assume that, as promised, they will be able to do their jobs and build out a product marketing team.

However, they soon discover that their role and authority are limited to collateral creation or project management. They have no ownership for, and limited influence over, key product marketing-owned items like product launches, pricing, messaging and positioning, and all the other pieces that come together to form the modern product marketing function.

And yet, despite executing their newfound responsibilities to the best of their ability, others in the organization become upset because deliverables and impact don't meet expectations.



Much of what will fall into product marketing's domain is sand from someone else's sandbox. And if they've used the sand to build (what they think is) a beautiful sandcastle over the years, it's often hard for them to let go. They may dig moats instead.

The problem isn't that their skills prevent them from helping the company reach its strategic or revenue goals; it's that there is a mismatch between expectations and the authority they are given. At the root of the problem: Executives aren't aligned on why product marketing is there, key stakeholders aren't briefed before the role is implemented, and the job is so poorly designed that it is difficult for anyone to succeed.

This situation will be frustrating for everyone, but it's especially disappointing, and ultimately infuriating, for your product marketer. When this situation unfolds, and a product marketer loses confidence, they usually leave the company within a year. Not only will your company lose money on the hire, it will slip back into the swamp of chaos and misalignment you were trying to escape. The good news is that you can prevent this by providing adequate training (certifications like Pragmatic Marketing) for green product marketers, working alongside them, setting an attainable plan and celebrating early wins.

When I consult with companies that experience rough starts or high turnover in product marketing, they often get defensive and blame the new hire. I hear, "It wasn't the right fit" 80 percent of the time. And, they're wrong 80 percent of the time. If you think it's the person without assessing the impact gap—the expectations you've set for them compared with what you've given them and how you've supported them—you're probably wrong. And your next product marketer will either fail or get frustrated and leave, too.

Many companies and executives don't know what a great product marketer looks like. That's okay. Reach out to your

network and talk with companies that have great product marketing departments. Be self-aware, inquisitive and humble. But above all, think hard about what you expect from product marketing and what you're willing to give them.

#### "ROLE" WITH THE PUNCHES

Much of product marketing is ambiguous; great product marketers navigate and thrive on it. Companies that build successful product marketing teams acknowledge this ambiguity even before they create the function or make their first hire. While you may not fully understand what product marketing is, I encourage you to explore and invest sooner than you think is necessary. Make the jump thoughtfully—outline the role, get key stakeholders onboard, and give your hire the tools and authority they need to meet or exceed your expectations. [PM](#)



#### About the Author

Justin Topliff is director of product marketing at CampusLogic and the founder of ProductMarketingSummit.com. He specializes in starting and/or scaling the product marketing function at expansion- and growth-stage companies, alongside VC funding. He previously worked at VTS, Infusionsoft and Tallwave. Contact Justin at [justin.topliff@gmail.com](mailto:justin.topliff@gmail.com).