



Customer Strategist

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In our increasingly connected ecosystem, marketing and technology matters often overlap. There is even a popular name to describe it—MarTech. Yet the single biggest challenge facing the MarTech space is the conflict between the "Mars" and the "Techs," says Joseph Kurian, head of marketing technology and innovation at health insurance giant Aetna.

Experts who can navigate both worlds are highly sought after. In an effort to strengthen relationships and create seamless workflows between departments, brands have begun to embrace the role of chief marketing technologist (CMT) or chief marketing technology officer (CMTO). An executive with experience on both sides can identify shared goals across the business spectrum to grow the symbiotic partnership necessary for enterprisewide success.

Kurian, otherwise known as Aetna's CMT, sat down with us to discuss the responsibilities that define the position, how it impacts overall brand strategy, and what it means for the future of business.



Customer Strategist: *What are your primary responsibilities, both day-to-day and overall?*

Joseph Kurian: My main function is to serve as a leader in the marketing organization and to help marketing and other lines of business understand the MarTech space and how it can help solve business problems. We serve as hybrid technologists who understand multiple perspectives and can speak the languages of business and tech fluently. Primary responsibilities revolve around making sure the four areas I am responsible for are delivering value for our customers and our business partners. We have Marketing Technology Innovation, Marketing Technology Platforms, Wearables and Health Innovation, and Organic and Site Search. Each of those areas has different goals, but the bottom line is the work they do needs to bring value in our customers' engagement with Aetna, as well as serve the business goals of our business partners across the company.

CS: *What part of your job are you most excited about?*

JK: There is no question that the ability to create enterprise MarTech solutions that impact large swaths of the digital footprint of the organization is something I am very proud of. Some of this work was already started at Aetna, to be fair, but to put strategic thinking around it and, most importantly, how it all starts to tie in together so we start to understand the digital customer journey, is very exciting.

The work we are doing in the wearables space and health innovation with internal teams and third-party partners, and the possibilities that they have for improving and helping our customers live healthier lives, is very important, as well. We are constantly looking to understand how our customers engage with us and how we can leverage technology in the future to create better experiences for them with us, many of which we want to be personalized and contextually relevant. It is an important part of what we do when we look at forward-facing technologies.

CS: *As chief marketing technologists become more common, what defines the role?*

JK: The role, to me, is the same regardless of the vertical. We sit in the middle area between the two long-established practices of technology and marketing. As they start to blend together, you find large dependencies on technology in marketing. To deal with this, you need leaders to help push companies forward in understanding the vendors who are available, the capabilities that they bring to the table, and how you can leverage them to drive business goals. In some cases, these leaders will also have marketing operations teams and handle the actual execution of the digital marketing work that needs to happen. A CMT needs to be strategic in their planning process and understand the broader view of what needs to be done in the company. At the same time, strategy is not enough. This role still has a great deal to prove to the rest of the organization. Execution and delivering tangible business goal results is crucial to the success of the role.

CS: *What skills and competencies do you bring to the position? What abilities must every chief marketing technologist bring to the table?*

JK: I started my career at a call center in banking. Understanding the perspective of customers and their needs early on was important in developing the ability to see the 'other side.' For me, it also crystallized the idea of customer centricity in everything we do, long before it became the mantra you hear everywhere now. I have been fortunate to have worked with very smart people and on many 'doing this for the first time' projects throughout my journey. While I have a strong technical background [he's been a developer, tech support, and

network administrator], I have worked on the non-technical side for most of my career. This balance has been key in my success so far.

Some of the key competencies that my role needs are:

- Solid communication skills
- Strong leadership to go down the road less traveled
- A resilient ability to sell ideas that haven't taken off in the past
- Patience to deal with false starts and disappointments
- The ability to handle the politics that always come with the role

On the technical side, it's necessary for this role to have experience with marketing technology at an operations or support level to understand how things work, how the pieces fit together, and how your teams need to work with other parts of the organization to create overall business success. It has always been my position that, at the leadership level these roles are not 'learning on the job' positions. You have to have done MarTech work before at some level before you can lead it.

CS: *Why is it important for companies to employ leaders who can juggle both marketing and technology matters?*

JK: The cry of 'all marketing is digital' has been one that reverberates in the halls of digital marketing corridors. Many offline campaigns have digital touchpoints for customer engagement, varying from text campaigns to QR codes to personalized URLs. As we observe how companies engage with their customers and how they create conversations and awareness about their products and services, there can be no denying the massive impact of technology in these efforts. To manage this and guide a company through these waters requires the role of a marketing technology officer, as the traditional avenues of marketing and technology alone are ill-suited to lead this journey alone.

CS: *How can companies realign their priorities and roles to reflect digital evolution?*

JK: Common priorities, to me, should be around a coherent MarTech strategy that is tied to the business goals of the organization. MarTech does not live in a space by itself. It is a function that is best represented when it drives business goals forward for a company, serving as a partner in success rather than the story itself. There's nothing better for a funding request or headcount addition than a business partner coming to your leadership and saying, "They have done a brilliant job for our business and we need them to continue to do more for us."

CS: *How is digital evolving at Aetna and in health insurance overall?*

JK: In health insurance, the movement from B2B to B2C that causes us now to pay attention to the digital customer experience and how we can get people to engage with us in a positive way is a brand new phenomenon. Methods of digital communication and engagement that other verticals take for granted in 2015 are still very much in their infancy in much of healthcare. There are exceptions to this, but there is a great deal of opportunity in this space.

CS: *What role will hybrid marketing and technology executives play in the future? How will the role of chief marketing technologist grow in the coming years?*

6): It is my view that the role will continue to get elevated as they continue to prove financial value in an

organization. There is debate about whether or not the Chief Marketing Technology Officer role will get to the level of the C-suite. That will require an acknowledgment at the highest levels of leadership that there is a role for a CMTO, CMO and CTO. This sort of visionary leadership will be what propels the role to the C-suite. I believe that there will be a need to put overall strategic control of this space around the CMTO even if they don't own direct operational control of all teams. Strong ties to the business organization and their goals will be key in ensuring support for the role and what it can do across the enterprise. Keep in mind that the number of leaders who exist in Fortune 500 companies that perform this role, while growing, is still very small. This is a unique set of people. Leveraging them in the right ways will be a combined effort of what they can do, as well as how executive leadership sees their value.