Dedicated Group at Aetna Helps Evaluate, Deploy, Manage Marketing Technology

AN INTERVIEW WITH:

Joseph Kurian
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As marketing and technology continue to converge, many enterprises are creating dedicated roles and groups to better manage the deployment and utilization of these tools. Joseph Kurian, head of marketing technology and innovation at Aetna, spoke with eMarketer's Bryan Yeager about his company's approach and considerations that need to be made specific to the healthcare sector.

eMarketer: How has the role of marketing technology evolved at Aetna over the past few years?

Joseph Kurian: I've been involved with marketing technology for probably eight or nine years in different companies. At Aetna, the way that it was [originally] rolled out was large pieces of the stack sat within the IT organization. The other pieces were actually owned by agency partners—vendors and so on.

We made the case to own marketing technology from the business side because we have a point of view and a perspective that's about much more than just technology. Since we are inside the company, we understand how these products and systems integrate with our back office better than any outside agency or vendor would.

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These technologies are all involved in marketing and have been for years now, and so we made the case for centralizing some of the work around that.

eMarketer: As a marketing technologist, where do you and your group sit within Aetna's organizational structure?

Kurian: I sit inside enterprise marketing, which is essentially corporate marketing. "CMO" in healthcare actually stands for chief medical officer, so a chief marketing officer isn't really something that's widely acknowledged in the industry. I report to the head of enterprise marketing of the organization.

It's fair to say that I have and, by necessity, need to have a good relationship with my IT partners, with all the agencies that we work with and certainly all the vendor platforms that we work with.

My team's biggest constituents are the marketing organization inside enterprise marketing and the various lines of business, but also nonmarketing partners that want to sort of do customer outreach and customer engagement programs using our technology stack. So we are pretty widely connected into the product organization, and I think that's the only way that a group like mine can be successful.

eMarketer: How does your group keep up with the fast pace of change in marketing technology and make the right investment decisions?

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Kurian: One of the roles on my team is called "marketing technology innovation." That person's full-time job is really to evaluate what's out there and whether there is anything interesting [for our company]. In the context of healthcare, they need to understand whether there is tech that can be relevant to us making a better customer experience.

Their goal is to evaluate, thinking about a 12-month period. If Aetna wants to do something in 12 months, what do we need to do from a skill set, budget and technology-platform perspective to actually prepare us to do it? We are really future-thinking.

eMarketer: How do you factor privacy and security into your mar-tech decisions, especially with all the cloud-based software available today?

Kurian: It boils down to a couple of things. First, it's about the security of your cloud. If you want us to store our data in your cloud, your cloud needs to be as secure as our infrastructure is for our internal stuff. If you can't guarantee that, if you can't show us that you, in fact, can pass the security audit within your external cloud, then that's probably going to be a challenge for us.

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Many times it comes down to what sort of information you store in the cloud. In the healthcare space, if it's things like PII [personally identifiable data], then that is a very complex issue for us. If it's general things like anonymized data about web visits, I think that's something that security and privacy are a lot more open to. But when you start talking about people's health information and specific data at the personal level, it becomes a lot more complicated.

We know that there is a time and a place to use [a cloud]. Many large companies are building internal clouds. Within the infrastructure of the large corporation, they are also building internal clouds with a bunch of these same vendors so that they can get the efficiencies and other benefits of the cloud technology without having to necessarily deal with the security issues of having to go outside.

eMarketer: Any perspectives to share on the concept of the marketing cloud?

Kurian: Everyone is always talking about the marketing cloud. And after a point, you stop hearing it—you become numb to it. Everyone says that they have it, everyone says that they do it, everyone says that it's secure. There is no differentiation at this point for me with someone who comes into our office and says, "We have a marketing cloud." Congratulations. Right? Nobody cares. Everyone has got one of these now.

What you need to tell me is about the wiring around it, what that box looks like, what's the security around it, and how easily can I talk to it from my back office system and how secure is that connectivity and communication?

Interview conducted by Bryan Yeager on February 4, 2015.