

Six Sigma and Marketing: Mind the Gap

Imagine a pharmacy where 999 out of 1,000 prescriptions are filled correctly.

Would you shop there?

Would you buy a car whose brakes are guaranteed to work 999,999 times out of a million?

These are two examples that illustrate how reducing defects through process improvement is not just critical to customer satisfaction but critical to business continuity. No pharmacy could survive making one mistake in 1,000. No car company could either, even with only one faulty brake system per million. In both cases, the defect rates must be driven down to their "practical zero" points as failures have catastrophic implications for the consumer, the company, the employees, and shareholders.

These are the sort of manufacturing and engineering challenges to which Six Sigma can be readily applied to help define, measure, analyze, improve, and control the underlying business processes. But does the same level of precision need to be built into the pharmacy's marketing process? Is it realistic to expect that the auto manufacturer could even measure its marketing efforts to know 99.9997% effectiveness when it saw it?

Having so definitively rooted itself into the mindset and culture of the company in most other departments, there appear to be significant gaps between Six Sigma and marketing. Interviews with Black Belts (the most experienced Six Sigma project leaders in a company) and senior marketers in dozens of Six Sigma companies suggest that despite some major progress in the sales organization, efforts to import the discipline into marketing have been characterized by relatively minor project success accompanied by some resentment, foot-dragging, and passive-aggressive behaviors.

Yet Six Sigma and marketing share a key principle — hearing and understanding the voice of the customer. So why hasn't Six Sigma penetrated further into marketing? Here are a few key issues to consider.

Mars and Venus

It may sound like a cornball analogy, but within the organization, engineering, manufacturing, finance, and even IT tend to be from Mars (quite apropos in an era where these very sorts of skills are landing rovers on Mars). They are largely populated with people who favor analytical, methodical, and fact-based decision processes with rigorous measurement systems.

Marketing, on the other hand, is historically the land where great instincts are legendary, opinions abound, and persuasion wins. As a group, marketers tend to be amongst the most outgoing, articulate, and convincing folks in the company. Their connection to the customer and the sales force gives them exposure to the market and a perspective frequently confused (by themselves and others) with true insight — a subtlety made more challenging by their outward self confidence and enthusiasm.

These Venusian characteristics, at their best, provide sparks of creative genius and seemingly boundless advocacy for the company, its brands, and customers. They fuel efforts to find and attract new customers and new markets in ambiguous worlds where the rules are constantly changing and entropy is a fact of life. However, as nearly all marketers will attest, these same traits lead to long, rambling, argumentative meetings that sow the seeds of conflict as personal opinions are substituted for hard facts and evidence. More often than not, these opinion-based positions cloud factual evidence and work to subdue the true genetic creativity upon which the company depends.



Reconciling these interplanetary differences is crucial to any effort at integrating Six Sigma into marketing. At LSI Logic, the disk-drive and data storage software company, the Six Sigma team anticipated enough initial resistance from marketing that it decided to measure the nature and magnitude of the resistance before developing a plan to overcome it. The team conducted a classic Myers-Briggs personality-typing test amongst populations of associates from manufacturing, engineering, finance, IT, and marketing. Not surprisingly, team members found significant differences in the profile of the marketing staff vs. the other vocations. Armed with that insight, team members modified their expectations and approach to appeal more to the marketers, and created a win/win for all involved. (See sidebar [Six Sigma meets Myers-Briggs](#).)

Data Availability

Another key challenge for Six Sigma in marketing is data accessibility. Large numbers of observations for any particular variable are often not available to study, making it difficult to apply many of the classic Six Sigma tools.

One can argue whether it's cause or effect, but marketers are used to making decisions with little statistically significant data at hand. They have adapted to become comfortable with the risks of charging forward on the basis of only directional data (which perhaps explains the higher turnover rate most companies see in marketing).

Consequently, they historically do not invest much time or energy in collecting data on a subprocess level because it's all they can do with available resources to collect meaningful data on an overall effectiveness basis.

Many Six Sigma projects launched in marketing die for lack of available data. The ones that succeed often are characterized by careful definition of the problem built around a creative strategy for available and acceptable proxy data where concrete statistics are elusive.

Unfunded Mandates

Many marketing execs in Six Sigma companies report having been set-upon by swarms of Six Sigma locusts once the company started running out of meaty projects in other areas. This problem seems particularly acute where companies invested heavily to adopt Six Sigma and continue to establish annual (if not quarterly) financial goals for minimal returns from it in a manner that sets each Black Belt up as a de facto profit center. In many instances, the metrics used by the company to measure Six Sigma effectiveness have been perverted, albeit altruistically, to emphasize things like the number of Green and Black Belts trained, the number of projects undertaken, and the annual financial return from each Six Sigma project.

Those are exactly the kind of metrics likely to disenfranchise the marketing staff right from the start.

When the company's Six Sigma leaders show up on marketing's doorstep with all the best of intentions but little knowledge or understanding of the nuances of how marketing works, sparks fly. There is suspicion that Six Sigma is really all about preservation of Six Sigma jobs, and there is inherent potential for conflicting agendas. Mandatory training and project team participation are seen as additions to the normal workload and resented as such, particularly when the training isn't specifically attuned to marketing challenges. Projects often are defined so broadly as to be black holes or so narrowly that they are perceived to be missing the "bigger picture."

In short, Six Sigma often comes in a package that marketers see as having little to do with improving marketing and much more akin to additional burden in achieving their objectives with, in all likelihood, less money than they had the year before. This is especially noticeable when participation requirements are stated in fractional man-years (i.e. "we need a director-level person for 30% of his or her time over the next five months") as they often are in IT or engineering.

So how can you bridge the gaps and get big benefits (financial and otherwise) from using Six Sigma within marketing? Here are a few recommendations for Six Sigma leaders and marketers alike.



[Overview of Six Sigma](#)

[Making Six Sigma Work IN Marketing](#): 7 Things the Black Belt Can Do

[Making Six Sigma Work FOR Marketing](#): 2 Good Places to Start

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