

When do startups need a T-shaped marketer?

Over the last couple of years, more and more digital marketers believe they must become T-shaped if they want to remain at the top of their game in the years to come. At the same time, more and more companies are looking to hire such talent. In this article, we'll be debating the T-shaped marketer concept and when startups should, in fact, hire such talent.

T-shaped marketers can pull together a marketing strategy because they have a solid base of knowledge across major disciplines (think data, product, branding, psychology). They also have an extensive set of skills together with at least one or two channel-specific expertise.

Sounds like a dream, right? Who wouldn't want to work with someone who's basically good at everything and can deliver operationally?

Buffer visually explained the concept.

The concept of a T-shaped person comes from the world of hiring, and it describes the capacities that someone brings to a job — their depth and breadth of ability. The vertical, up-and-down stem of the "T" represents one's depth in one or more areas, and the horizontal, side-to-side stem of the "T" describes one's breadth.

When I look at this diagram and the base knowledge required, the marketing foundation that these talents would possess together with their channel expertise, it sounds like they should actually run the business.

Who can be a T-shaped marketer?

It takes years, if not at least a solid decade of marketing work in senior roles, for someone to be able to claim they are T-shaped.

The beauty of such a talent is that they can create or improve a strategy while executing their ideas thanks to their high level of experience.

But if we want to be objective, how many people have the necessary background to meet such qualification criteria? I personally don't think that there are more than 5000 people worldwide who have both the experience and the knowledge needed to genuinely be T-shaped.

A T-shaped marketer's ideal background is probably a mix of agency experience and a senior role in a hyper-growth environment.

Suppose someone wants to become T-shaped in the future. In that case, I reckon the best path is to join a startup at a seed-stage. The objective should be to lead them all the way from 0 to as many millions as possible in revenues. This is obviously not an easy task and pursuing this challenge comes with no guarantee of success.

When should startups hire a T-shaped marketer?

I see many early-stage companies looking to hire a T-shaped marketer early on in their journey. The underlying reasoning behind it must be that having such a talent in your team early on will help you get faster and better traction.

However, I see a couple of problems with this strategy.

The first one is, even if you have one of the world's best marketers in your team, there's only 24h in a day. To show their strength, they have to be surrounded by a team of people who can help them in the execution.

At the same time, if you consider the average salary for a VP of Marketing/Growth as outlined by a [*research from MarketingWeek in 2019*](#) you're looking at £94,000 per annum on average. You must be pretty convinced you will grow very fast to hire such a talent with your pre-seed or seed funding.

So when should you hire a T-shaped marketer? When we see bigger and bigger seed rounds, does that justify hiring senior talent early on?

Let's consider the example of Weezy, *who raised \$1.3M in pre-seed*. They are a D2C business that provides grocery delivery in under 15 min. To gain traction, their main objective was to grow their base of active mobile app users.

In that sense, did they need a T-shaped marketer to kickstart their growth? Absolutely not. They required a marketing specialist that knew how to grow a mobile product through ASO and Ads for acquisition while having a system to activate and retain these users.

It is not a surprise to see that they recruited their VP of Growth in January 2021, the month in which they announced a \$20M Series A funding.

We can expect their new VP of Growth to start building a team of specialists to better deploy his business strategy.

This example is far from being random. As an early-stage business, your growth comes from a couple of channels at most. That's how some of the most successful tech companies have grown. By focusing on a couple of channels, you can systemise a growth model. It is both more forecastable, controllable and more attractive to investors.

Conclusion

For startups there are two main paths to bring a T-shaped marketer into your team. The first one will be to hire an eager-to-learn and proactive marketing manager early on and invest on their growth so that in time they can own more and more parts of the business's growth.

The second option lies in external recruitment. In that sense, the best timing to hire a VP of Growth (which is usually the job title you'll give to your T-shaped marketer) comes right after your Series A, just like your VP of Sales. Ereveva, an executive search firm, wrote *a great article on the matter*.

Coming back to our diagram, you should focus on understanding the growth model to help you reach \$1M in ARR or achieve the milestones needed to raise a Series A. From then, you hire the right T-shaped marketer that has the base knowledge, the marketing foundations and the in-depth channel expertise you need.

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