

**Matthew:** Hello and welcome to Marketing Smarts, a podcast brought to you by MarketingProfs. I'm your host Matthew Grant, Managing Editor here at MarketingProfs, and I thank you for listening.

Is there any corporate function that has been more transformed by technological innovation than marketing? Probably not. Ever since the rise of email on the web marketing has seen nothing but constant change from the way it develops and sells products to the way it communicates with customers and vice versa, and even in the tools it uses to get work done behind the scenes. Marketing has become a highly technologized discipline.

Our guest today has spent a lot of time thinking about these changes and even more time devising ways for marketers and marketing organizations to deal with them. His name is Scott Brinker, President and CTO of Ion Interactive, a firm that provides software and services for landing page optimization and management.

Scott writes about the intersection of marketing technology on his blog [Chief Marketing Technologist](#) and we're going to be talking with him about why marketers need to be fluent in the use of technology, how software has become the primary interface between marketers and their customers and what it means to have the brains of a software developer and, relatively speaking, the cajones of a hacker.

Scott, welcome to Marketing Smarts.

**Scott:** Thank you, Matthew. Good to be here.

**Matthew:** I was wondering if we could just jump right in here. I highly encourage people to check out your blog, there's a lot of very thoughtful and interesting stuff there. But, I was wondering if we could start out by talking about this notion that software has become the primary interface between marketers and their customers. What do you mean by that?

**Scott:** It's interesting, there's actually an analogy to this. A guy by the name of Jim Grey, a computer scientist a few years back, had actually done a study on the change of science. That once upon a time science worked because you would have scientists who actually looked at things, they'd look through telescopes or they would look through microscopes, observe things then make conclusions from those direct observations.

But, now if you go into pretty much any modern scientific lab what's happening here is this incredibly complex instrumentation is doing all this automatic surveying of data, collecting just terabytes of it into systems and now scientists are using software tools to try and analyze that data to see what's actually happening there.

It's sort of a wild transformation that as a scientist you're not really directly looking through the microscope anymore, you're working with a computer. To me that's very analogous to what's going on in marketing now.

So much of the information that marketers have about who their audience is and what that audience is reacting to is seen through the filter of software. For instance, analytics. Everyone, whether it's Google Analytics or Omniture, you look at your analytics of what are people doing on my website. Well, you're not really observing those customers directly.

Depending on how your software is configured, what sort of features it has, the sorts of default reports it tends to show things for you, this is actually becoming your eyes and ears to what your audience is doing.

**Matthew:** It seems that that would actually allow us to capture data we couldn't capture before, especially when I think about ecommerce where you can actually watch the entire buying process happening, in some cases in real time. I remember being on a flight once and talking to a guy who worked in now defunct Circuit City's IT department and he was talking about how many days worth of user sessions they were just hanging onto there. I was thinking about that, just that level of insight, but also this daunting mound of information to actually sift through that it represented.

But, I'm wondering if you think that by going this indirect route that we're actually losing something. I think we gain certainly this data and some amount of insight, but do you think marketers are losing something in the process?

**Scott:** Well, yes and no. I like the way you talked about it. In some ways it should just be an augmentation of all this additional information that we never had the visibility of before. I think there is the case that in some marketing departments the amount of data driven work and technology driven work we're doing we tend to get so caught up in that that in some cases we're deprioritizing.

My friend **Gord Hochchaes** puts it this way, sort of the difference between quantitative versus qualitative marketing. He had this great analogy about when you're driving along you can be looking at the dashboard or you can be looking out the window to see where you're headed. They're both important, so if you get too caught up in just looking at the dashboard at some point it becomes worthwhile to say, "Let me get up from the computer, let me actually get on the phone with real customers, let me go and visit real customers." There's something qualitative there that we don't want to lose.

**Matthew:** Right. I was thinking about that actually. In one of your recent presentations on your blog you had talked about sort of analytics, automation, optimization, listening, targeting,

CRM, as all areas where technology had really taken over. Not in a bad way necessarily, just that people were relying more and more on technological solutions to take care of all these different marketing functions. It made me sort of wonder what is left in marketing that still is certainly not untouched, since I don't think there's anything in marketing that's untouched by technology, but where it's sort of this qualitative human mind still needs to be doing something.

I was thinking specifically of things like product development, literally developing a new product. Of course the product development is going to be driven by all of this data you've gathers technologically. Then also, I guess in a communications standpoint, this creative side, packaging and advertising and all this other stuff. But, does this rise of the technological enablement or the tools that allow you to do all the other stuff, does it tend to undermine the value of these more qualitative marketing functions?

**Scott:** I think you're onto a really important point there, which is sometimes there is confusion about what the technology does and doesn't do.

Just take optimization. The ability to have optimization software that makes it very easy for us to run an A/B test of two different landing pages or get into more sophisticated multivariate testing of all these different elements on the pages. That's terrific, but there's nothing about that software that's actually going to generate for you meaningful tests.

It's still up to the marketer to think about, "What's my hypothesis here? What's the thing that I believe will reach through the screen and actually have an impact on a visitor. Here's theory A and here's theory B, now let me go ahead and test it."

I think to the degree that people rely too much on software to somehow as a black box generate those creative solutions for them, it's just combinatorially not possible, there's just too many possibilities out there and most of the combinations are not good.

**Matthew:** That's interesting, because we had a fellow on the show a couple weeks ago named Aaron Weber and he works for a company called Spiral16 that does web monitoring of different sorts, and he was talking about the need for human brain in that process. You can use the technology to gather as much data as you want, in fact more data than you can probably comb through in a lifetime, but that you still needed a human brain to at least perfect the algorithm that was picking through the data because humans are still good or better than machines to a certain degree at pattern recognition and actually understanding what's meaningful in the data. Does that resonate with you at all?

**Scott:** Very much so. People have used the phrase "marketing automation" a lot and I think it's a bit of an unfortunate term. I almost feel like it's an oxymoron. I think there's

tremendous opportunity for what I would call semi-automation of marketing. Which is to say there are certain tasks we are doing that are repetitive or there are certain pattern detection approaches that it would be better to have the software look for this, great let's set it loose.

But, to still have that human brain guiding the creative, guiding the meta process of what's happening and exactly as the other guest had mentioned there, in particular having that human brain pay attention to the feedback loop on the other direction. "What are these reactions, how are people behaving, what are they seeing, what does my instinct tell me is going on here?" Very important.

**Matthew:** Right. It also seems in terms of when they talk about automation or even automating or dynamic content creation or trying to get specific types of content out to specific segments at the right time, that there is a need for this, in fact a necessity for human intervention.

You had written recently a apropos of marketing automation that there's a huge opportunity for agencies in this era of marketing automation, because "there's often a dirth of compelling segment specific content. If agencies could extend their vision and domain beyond the realm of awareness and early funnel interest generation into deeper engagement in the nurturing stages of the buying cycle they could inject much needed creativity into the middle of the funnel."

I think you wrote that over a year ago probably. Do you see that that's happening, that there's an injection of this much needed creativity into the middle of the funnel or are we still waiting for that?

**Scott:** Well, you guys probably have a pretty good view of that too, on this whole explosion of content marketing. I think basically everyone agrees with the principle of content marketing at this point, that if we can create really useful, compelling, entertaining, whatever it is, something that has meaning to visitors, respondents or prospects, as targeted to their particular circumstances and interests as possible, great. That is a brilliant way to start to build that relationship and build your brand with them.

So everyone agrees with that in theory. The challenge is actually executing that content is hard work. It's something that technology can certainly help with the production process, the technology can help with the analysis of what's working and what isn't working, it can help with the testing and all this sort of stuff that it's really great to have those capabilities, but the technology can't generate the meaningful content for us.

So I still believe, I mean I don't know of a single company at this point that wouldn't benefit from having some sort of source they could go to that would help create more exciting creative meaningful content for them, it's just hard to even find good sources for that.

**Matthew:** I think that the kind of upside of, especially like we were talking just before the show how I'm able to do this as a one man band, creating this podcast, editing the podcast, distributing, I can do it all myself so there are a lot of tools that actually allow you to create a lot of interesting content. You can make animated short films just through a SAS delivered animation tool on the web and things like that. But, yes, you still need creative people to come up with the ideas or figure out what exactly it is you want to do with those tools.

I was actually curious about how you're approaching this at Ion Interactive itself and what role content plays in your marketing efforts and how you try to maintain a stream of meaningful content across the whole buying process.

**Scott:** My number one strategy has been to give up that dirty habit called sleep. A nasty habit I picked up in the east. We're constantly writing, we're constantly preparing presentations. I think actually – yes, a little plug here – I'm doing a webinar with MarketingProfs next week on landing pages, sort of the latest and greatest trends we've seen in that space. My business partner **Anna Talerico**, she blogs almost every day on this. We're constantly reaching out to customers, to people throughout our organization to pool tips, tricks, experiences.

It's amazing, if you actually work at it there is tremendous content out there to be harvested, but it doesn't just automatically come into being. Harvest is a very active verb in that process.

**Matthew:** It reminds us too just what hard work, like being a farmer, was. Most of us have moved beyond it, we leave the farming and that kind of hard work to everyone else.

I'm wondering then too, coming back to this total technologization of marketing is well under way, so I was curious to discuss with you this concept that every modern marketer needs to be fluent in using technology. Specifically this word fluent. What embodies or how could you illustrate this concept of technological fluency?

**Scott:** So that may have been a slightly aspirational comment. I think, again, the reality is that at this point so much of marketing is either digital or even marketing that isn't digital very quickly the feedback loops and the echoes of it end up being digital, that if you aren't comfortable being at a computer using web based tools, obviously being comfortable with things like Excel and Google Analytics then you're at a real disadvantage because so much of the data and so much of information for your job is now coming through these tools.

That being said, I do distinguish a difference between fluency and feeling comfortable using a tool versus sort of the next level up of actually being able to configure or program or alter or build your own tools. That really starts to go into the territory of what I call a marketing technologist, someone who is more of an actual true technologist who just happens to be applying those skills in the marketing world.

**Matthew:** So it seems like what you're really talking about is the modern marketer needs to actually at least fluently understand the potential of what certain technologies could do or how certain technologies could actually help them achieve their marketing goals.

For example, they might be able to see how developing some kind of app may be a way of creating more brand awareness or providing a useful tool to customers or something like that. You just need to know that that's possible, you don't need to know how to actually program or build something like that yourself.

I guess what I'm thinking about you from what I know of your background, you actually come from this software development world and as I understand were kind of there at the inception of one of the very earliest, in my thinking, social media, which was this bulletin board software. I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about your origins in the BBS world and kind of what you learned there and if you see some of the same lessons applying today with this now totally ascendant social media.

**Scott:** Yes. I'm definitely dating myself on this. So when I was a very young kid in the mid-80s before the web had exploded there was this rise of dial-up bulletin board systems. They were sort of the precursor also of services like America Online.

So people would use their modems to dial into a local computer system where they could then exchange messages, have chats, play games, do these things with other people in their area. It was a very early predecessor to a lot of the exciting that are on the web.

I think when the web first exploded the web actually sort of went in a different direction of being much more a publishing platform, whereas bulletin board systems at sort their peak right before they vanished were a much more social interactive platform. People were using them to chat with each other, play multiplayer games.

So I think when the web exploded and was such a publishing platform we went through a little bit of a period where we sort of lost touch with that online social capability. The explosion, I mean Facebook more than anything, but even systems like Twitter. The technology of Twitter is incredibly simple, but it such a powerful and embraced platform. At the end of the day the platform sort of gets out of the way and it just makes it pretty darn easy for people to connect with each other and chat and share.

I think basically the killer app, it seems, in all of these technologies, now through several cycles, is human connectivity.

**Matthew:** I know. It's funny because Ann Handley and I are doing a presentation tomorrow and we were thinking about this concept of content is king, so actually went online to figure out

where does that come from. It's something I've heard a million times. I don't know if he came up with it, but Bill Gates wrote an article called Content is King back in 1996, which I guess it is maybe one of the first really public uses of that expression.

The funny thing there is that he was really focusing on that the web is a publishing platform. He was saying the web is going to become a marketplace for content and that's why content is king, because that's where you're really going to make all the money is on content.

I was thinking through this idea, I was actually moving more towards what you're talking about. Like it almost seems when we see, especially the prominence now of something like Twitter and Facebook, that community is really king. And the kind of killer apps in the end aren't a specific movie or maybe some games or something like that, but it's really this platform.

If you're able to create a platform across which people connect then you've done something really amazing. It seems like the kind of BBS world was really the beginning of that.

**Scott:** Yes, definitely. I don't know if it has to be one or the other. I think part of why the web is just such a magical place is it's a little bit of both, content is king and community is king. The intersection of those two is just really fascinating.

I think at the end of the day those two things are both very different than what marketing was about 20 years ago. But, now community and content is where marketing is almost entirely at. When you realize just how big of a transformation that was and the objective of marketing and the sort of vehicle by which marketing connects with its audience you can appreciate why we're all so busy figuring out how do we keep re-operationalizing our marketing departments to make this all happen.

**Matthew:** And on that front, I'm wondering if you are seeing more movement in the sense of marketing and IT getting closer together. It's interesting, I've certainly been in marketing departments over the last few years where I saw this technological change and have an eloquent implementation, starting to use Basecamp or other tools for the project management side of things, you have CMSs you're actually publishing, blog publishing platforms and things like that.

There was a definitely a way that that was happening. In the olden days I would have to go to the IT department to figure this out or they'd have to help me pick something out or something like that, but it definitely seems to have moved or has been moving for awhile now in the direction of "I can just sign up for this stuff without IT." Like I can get a Basecamp account and just start using Basecamp and I don't have to talk to IT about it.

And the flipside, I know from the IT standpoint that kinds of freaks people out on that side. I was hosting a podcast on cloud computing for awhile and they were talking about one of the big challenges that IT departments were having was that cloud based services were entering the enterprise really without them knowing about it. Anyone can set up an instance, they can even set up an instance on Amazon without talking to IT at all. All you need is a credit card and it's kind of pay-to-play and you just go.

So that was what I was seeing over the last two years or so. Do you see IT departments and marketing departments working more closely together or is there still a tension there and does IT still see marketing as rogue and marketing still see IT as the department of no?

**Scott:** It's a huge question and I don't think there's a standard answer yet. Depending on the company you're at the relationship between IT and marketing may be better or worse.

I think if we sort of get a little bit beyond the tremendous variants out there in the market today and we say, "Where should this end up?" I think there are sort of two truths that we have to embrace.

One, and this is from the IT perspective, I think IT needs to move further out of the business of managing and implementing all of the technology in the organization, just because technology is becoming so ubiquitous. Certainly in marketing they talk a lot about the consumerization of IT with everyone in the company bringing their iPhones, their iPads. IT just cannot manage and implement and operate all of that.

However, I do think they have a really important role there to play and it's one I would call of governance. We have a rich legacy in corporate structures of the difference between someone who handles day to day operations in management and then some other group above that that provides a certain governance, a certain checks and balances, a certain rules of the road. I think there's a tremendous opportunity for IT to provide that leadership while starting to provide a more distributed policy to technology management in other departments.

That's the second part of this, which is marketing. I just firmly believe at this point marketing needs to lead its own technology. A part of the marketing department needs to be people who are technologists who are fluent at selecting and implementing and customizing and extending this incredibly rich ecosystem of marketing tools.

One of the ways I describe this to people is the old tale of King Solomon and the two women, "It's my baby." "No, it's my baby." King Solomon is like, "Okay, we'll just split the baby down the middle." When it has come to marketing technology that's sort of how people have treated it for awhile where they say, "Oh, marketing technology. This group over here will do the marketing and this other group over here will do the technology."

I think the flaw in that is marketing technology is not something that can be split that way. It is sort of an entity unto itself. I would argue marketing technology isn't so much a new kind of technology as much as it is a new kind of marketing. We started discussing this is our interface by which marketing is seeing and touching the world around it.

**Matthew:** When you say it's not an entity that can be split in half, so is the solution there that – or is this really why you're saying that marketing needs to own its own technology and that's why you need to have, as you've sketched out elsewhere, a role of Chief Marketing Technologist who is supporting the Chief Marketing Officer by being the person who really understands the capabilities of technology but also has the wherewithal to actually own its implementation and its use within the department?

**Scott:** Exactly. This is definitely not a shadow-IT. Actually, Forrester just released a report endorsing this exact same approach of creating a marketing technology office, as they call it in marketing, that reports first and foremost to the CMO and up through the marketing organization, but also has a direct dotted line responsibility to the CIO.

Again, very much looking to IT for its governance leadership and making sure that in the day to day work that marketing is doing with technology it's not putting the company more broadly at risk or that it's fully able to leverage any sort of other shared info structure that other departments might want to use.

But, in the case where marketing says, "Hey, we don't want that other shared info structure, there's a very specific application we want to use here. The reason we want to use it isn't because we just want to be special about our technology versus some other platform, it's because we're in the business of creating customer experiences in this digital environment. For us, the subtlety of how different tools allow us to create entirely different experiences for customers is something that we as the marketing department ultimately need to take the responsibility for."

**Matthew:** First of all, I really like that idea of clarifying the role of IT within the organization as a governance role more than as the gateway through which technology enters the organization, because those days are gone at this point.

I also really appreciated the point you just made about marketing needs to understand what technology can do because technology is increasingly influencing and in some cases becoming the way that consumers or potential customers interact with the brand, so that can't be a decision that's left to IT. It's something that really marketing needs to own. That makes perfect sense to me.

So we're kind of getting to the end of our time here, but there was one final thing I wanted to ask you about social media. I was digging back through the archives on your blog and you were sort of criticizing a little bit or just raising some questions about the sort of boosterism that we saw in social media marketing a few years ago, in fact to the point where some people were like, "Why do you need a website?"

In fact, there was an ad agency here in town that basically made their website their LinkedIn page plus their Facebook page plus their Twitter page. They were trying to basically spread their website over all these different social media platforms. I will note that that agency has since gone out of business.

But, you did say, and this was back in 2009, social media marketing is not the destructor of the other marketing. And yet in one of your more recent appearances when you said you had spoken with Seth Godin, Seth Godin seemed to be saying, "Well, it is destroying it." In fact, old marketing anyway, advertising and that kind of frequency, reach, broadcast, advertising.

So I'm just wondering do you still stick with this social media is not the destructor of the other marketing or has the worm turned in a sense and you can see how social media and its ascendance is maybe destroying big chunks of the other marketing.

**Scott:** Great question. So the stuff is constantly changing, so whatever we agree today, six months from now we might have a different view.

I think if there's one thing I would say that's really the heart of marketing at this point it's the customer experience. It used to be that marketing just had relatively little control over the customer experience.

You had basically two levels you pulled. Marketing would do its market research and play an important role in product development, but the way that was done in the days before the web was often very isolated from real customers. The joys of market research.

And then there was what the advertising agency would do, which the way Seth Godin characterized it in his presentation I saw was, frankly, you could make really cheap ads and you could buy them on really cheap media, and because there were basically three channels of TV you could just basically assault consumers over the head with repetition and that would be sufficient to get your message out there.

I think that's what he was talking about, that age is gone. I think what we're seeing rise in the middle of that is even more of this reemphasis on customer experience as the touch point by which marketing is really able to make a difference.

That customer experience is interwoven with social media in the sense that it becomes a feedback mechanism to a certain extent. If we're doing a really good job, it becomes a word of mouth platform for the people we give great experiences to evangelize on our behalf.

So I think it's incredibly important, but at the end of the day that example you gave with the advertising agency that said, "We'll just push ourselves out to social media and there's no reason for anything else," and they're not here anymore.

I don't think social media is a customer experience unto itself, it's sort of a layer on top of what is the core product / service experience you're delivering people, whether it's through your website, through various online services and properties, whether it's also through your call center, your store. Wherever people are touching you they're expectations are rising.

If you really do a good job with that customer experience, social media can be a just great booster for that, it can be a great feedback mechanism for that, but without the core customer experience I don't know that there is anything to say on social media.

**Matthew:** Right. I think too, as we've kind of have been saying throughout, that technology ultimately these are tools and you still need that brand idea, you still need someone who is designing this customer experience and sort of vetting it and making sure that it aligns with what the company is trying to accomplish.

You still need these deciders and human minds that are figuring out how best to use the technology, which is why it's becoming even more critical that marketing departments actually are hiring and using people who have this deep understanding of technology and its power and how they could be applying it to achieve their marketing ends.

Scott, that's all the time we have today. Thank you very much for joining us on Marketing Smarts.

**Scott:** Great. Thank you, Matthew.

**Matthew:** And thank you, listener, for listening here to the end. This has been Marketing Smarts podcast brought to you by MarketingProfs and I'm your host Matthew Grant, signing off.