

SCOTT BRINKER

# HACKING MARKETING

**AGILE PRACTICES TO  
MAKE MARKETING  
SMARTER, FASTER,  
AND MORE INNOVATIVE**

WILEY

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*For Jordan:  
Let your imagination always lift you beyond the limits of labels.*

*And for my parents,  
who ran a Mad Men-era marketing agency and encouraged me  
to study computer science.*

# Introduction

It's a fascinating time to work in marketing.

It's also a somewhat dizzying time, with so much change happening around us.

The world is becoming more digital every day, steadily reshaping relationships between customers and businesses in the process. Buyers have more information, more options, and more leverage in when, where, and how they engage with sellers. And their expectations are rising, as state-of-the-art, digitally native companies—from Amazon.com to Uber—push the limits of what is possible into what is desired and then demanded.

For some businesses, that may still seem like a far-off, foreign realm. Not many of us aim to compete with those digital wunderkinder. Yet every day, we see more signs of digital dynamics infiltrating the space between us and our customers, disrupting sales and marketing in a thousand small ways—and not-so-small ways. We feel the tremors of our competitive landscape shifting.

On closer inspection, that realm is not so far-off after all.

The fact is that in a digital world, inherently, *we are all entangled in digital dynamics.*

“How did my business go digital?” With apologies to Ernest Hemingway, “Two ways. Gradually, then suddenly.” Regardless of size, geography, or industry, the digital age is upon us.

The accelerating tempo and growing complexity that this brings—especially to marketing—is both exhilarating and exasperating. It is a whirlwind of obstacles and opportunities.

## Marketing Management for a Digital World

My goal is to help you harness that digital whirlwind.

Many wonderful books have been published about the many new strategies and tactics of digital marketing—inbound marketing, content marketing, social media marketing, and so on.

But there's a common thread connecting all of them that has received far less attention, yet is crucial to their success: How should *marketing management* evolve to best leverage these modern marketing methods?

Management is the orchestration of *all* those different strategies and tactics. It's how we weave them together into a cohesive organization with a mission and the methods to achieve it.

The trouble is that traditional approaches to marketing management—classic marketing plans, designed and enforced in a siloed, top-down structure—are buckling under the pressures of the digital world. There are too many moving parts, spinning too quickly. Strange interaction effects abound. It can feel like you're driving at high speed with a broken steering wheel and failed brakes. At night. With no headlights.

But there is a bright, shining way forward.

Marketing is not the first profession to struggle with digital dynamics. Before any other discipline found itself roiled by digital turbulence, software development teams ran into many of these issues first. Continuously changing requirements. Rapidly evolving technology. Mounting complexity. And demanding stakeholders who had little appreciation for those difficulties.

Software developers have been the canaries in this coal mine. Through trial and error in millions of software projects, successes and failures, they have discerned some of the underlying patterns of what works and what doesn't—and why—when wrangling the digital dragon. As a result, the art and science of managing software has matured tremendously.

So what does this have to do with marketing?

More than you might think.

The challenges of creating great software and the challenges of creating great marketing share increasing similarities in a digital world. They're both juggling an explosion of digitally powered interactions in a tornado of constant change and innovation. They're both creative and intellectual disciplines that rely on human insight and inspiration, and a new kind of teamwork, to produce remarkable experiences in highly competitive environments. And as the world has grown more digital, the scale and scope of their responsibilities and influence have grown too—but at the cost of mushrooming complexity.

Given those parallels—and the head start that software leaders have had wrestling with these challenges—are there successful, digitally native management concepts from the software community that modern marketers could borrow and adapt to conquer their own digital dragons?

I believe the answer is yes.

## Hacking Marketing

This is not a technical book. It assumes no knowledge, or even interest, in software development. All it requires is an open mind to look at marketing management from a different perspective.

Don't be alarmed by the title, *Hacking Marketing*.

As we'll discuss in the first chapter, hacking has a very different meaning in the software community than it does in the media. It's not about *breaking*. It's about *making*.

The bad kind of hacking breaks into systems.

The good kind makes new inventions—in fast, fluid, and fun ways. It imagines what's possible, figures out clever ways to realize those ideas within the tangle of real-world constraints, and above all, celebrates the courage to try, tinker, and learn.

Cross-pollinating management concepts between the realms of software and marketing is that good kind of hacking

but on an organizational level. And in championing that, we'll strive to bring a touch of kinetic hacker spirit to everything marketing does.

This book is organized into five parts:

- I. An orientation on digital dynamics and the parallels between marketing and software
- II. An in-depth examination of agile and lean management methods applied to marketing
- III. An exploration of opportunities and techniques for innovation in modern marketing
- IV. A collection of ideas to tame digital complexity and achieve new kinds of scalability in marketing
- V. A closing chapter on managing marketing talent in this digital environment

Part II on agile marketing is the most comprehensive, because that is the foundation on which digitally savvy marketing management must be built. We'll thoroughly cover the rationale and key practices of agile management, specifically in the context of marketing.

Parts III, IV, and V cast a wider net, providing a helicopter tour of a variety of other concepts and frameworks from the field of software management that have become surprisingly relevant to the challenges of modern marketing. We'll approach each of them in a pragmatic and nontechnical way through the lens of how they directly benefit marketing today.

*Hacking Marketing* aims to expand your mental models as a marketer and a manager for leading marketing in a digital world where everything—especially marketing—now flows with the speed and adaptability of software.

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Marketing  $\approx$  Digital  $\approx$  Software



# 1

## Hacking Is a Good Thing

When most people hear the word *hacking*, they think of something bad.

They picture cybercriminals who break into computer systems to steal credit cards or deface people's websites. They recall sensational news stories, such as the hacking of Sony Pictures Entertainment in 2014, which resulted in the studio's private, internal e-mails being published all over the Internet—to the horrified embarrassment of many Hollywood elites. Or even more serious hacking of government systems by foreign spies.

Hackers, the perpetrators of such digital mischief and mayhem, have frequently been the villains in movies themselves. In *Live Free or Die Hard*—the fourth movie in that storied Bruce Willis franchise—hero cop John McClane battles a hacker bent on bringing the United States to financial ruin by wreaking havoc on the stock market, the power grid, the transportation grid, and other key, computer-controlled components of the nation's infrastructure.

At this point, you may be wondering whether you've mistakenly purchased a book that intends to teach you how to electronically steal your competitors' marketing plans or knock out their marketing systems. Is that what is meant by "hacking marketing"?

Rest assured, no.

There's actually another much more positive meaning of the word *hacking*.

In software development circles, hacking is the art of invention. When a programmer creates a particularly cool piece of software, especially in an inspired burst of coding, that is hacking. When an engineer devises a novel solution to a supposedly intractable problem, that is hacking. When a maker—someone who builds do-it-yourself robots, electronics, and other cool gadgets—fabricates a new homemade design, improvised from ordinary components into a functional work of art, that is hacking.

Picture Mark Zuckerberg, up late at night in his Harvard University dorm room, madly cranking away on building the first version of Facebook. He imagined new ways for people to connect with each other through a website, unconstrained by prior conventions—and launched the golden age of social media.

That is hacking.

In fact, Facebook would take hacking to a whole new level in business management.

## Facebook and the Hacker Way

Facebook was founded on the principles of hacking—the good kind of hacking. And that approach to getting things done helped propel it into a \$200 billion company.

Indeed, when Facebook filed for its initial public offering in 2012, Zuckerberg wrote an open letter to prospective shareholders, in the S-1 registration statement that the company filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission, describing his vision for the firm.<sup>1</sup> It famously included a section, on pages 69–70, under the heading “The Hacker Way” that explained the company’s unique culture—and why it was such a powerful source of competitive advantage.

Zuckerberg countered the negative connotations of hacking as typically portrayed in the media. “Hacking just means building something quickly or testing the boundaries of what can be done.” In a little more than 800 words, Zuckerberg described the essence of hacking as a creative force and how it was embedded into the culture and management principles of his company.

“The Hacker Way is an approach to building that involves continuous improvement and iteration. Hackers believe that something can always be better, and that nothing is ever complete. They just have to go fix it—often in the face of people who say it’s impossible or are content with the status quo.”

He repeatedly emphasized the importance of rapid iterations. “Hackers try to build the best services over the long term by quickly releasing and learning from smaller iterations rather than trying to get everything right all at once.”

He championed a software-empowered bias for action. “Instead of debating for days whether a new idea is possible or what the best way to build something is, hackers would rather just prototype something and see what works.”

He defined the company’s hacker-inspired values around being fast, bold, and open.

For Zuckerberg, being open meant instilling a high level of transparency in the way the company was managed internally, stating a firm belief that the more information people have, the better decisions they can make—and the greater impact they can have. “We work hard to make sure everyone at Facebook has access to as much information as possible about every part of the company so they can make the best decisions and have the greatest impact.”

Although Zuckerberg wasn’t the first person to champion the hacker ethos—hacking emerged at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the 1960s, 20 years before he was born<sup>2</sup>—this letter to investors, traditionally conservative Wall Street types, was remarkable in presenting it as a mainstream business philosophy. It was a brilliant piece of marketing, positioning the

company as an exciting innovator in the digital world. But it was also a management manifesto, declaring that Facebook intended to run its whole business—not just product development—with a hacker mentality.

Idealistic? Perhaps.

But you have to acknowledge Facebook's incredible success. It created a new kind of company, a social media juggernaut, that has had far-reaching, global impact. It sprang from a college sophomore's side project into one of the highest-valued public companies in the world, all in less than a decade. Along the way, it fended off intense competition—in a market that disruptive innovation continually roils—from dozens of aggressive start-ups and even the world's other largest Internet company, Google.

## Why This Matters to You

However, odds are your business is not a social media platform like Facebook. Hacking probably sounds like something that's meant for companies with tinkering engineers and Silicon Valley code jockeys. How is it relevant to regular businesses? And what does it have to do with marketing?

Those questions inspired this book.

First, Facebook demonstrated that the spirit of hacking could be adapted and applied to general business management, not just technical innovation. It's not just for techies.

Second, Facebook proved that such a management philosophy was scalable, even for a public company with thousands of employees worldwide. It's not just for start-ups.

And third, even if your company isn't a purely digital business like Facebook, you are now operating in a digital world. Marketing, in particular, has become heavily dependent on digital channels and touchpoints to reach and engage customers—in both consumer and business-to-business markets. As a result, you are affected by digital dynamics, regardless of your industry,



size, or location. You have more in common with Facebook than you might think. That might seem like a scary thought at first. But it's really an opportunity.

Digital environments enable far greater agility, innovation, and scalability than were ever possible in just the physical world. But harnessing that potential requires different approaches to management—approaches that leverage digital dynamics instead of fighting them. Luckily, we don't have to figure this out from scratch. We can draw upon more than two decades of management practices that have proved successful in purely digital businesses and professions—particularly in software development—and adapt them for modern marketing management. Modern marketing actually has more similarities with software development management than you might imagine.

This book will show you how to tap those parallels to your advantage.

Hacking marketing is about bringing a little bit of that inventive hacker spirit to the management and practice of marketing. In a digital world, that proves to be a very good thing.