

Annual Marketing Planning is Not Dead

Proceeding with marketing planning
in an increasingly agile world

Each year marketing organizations set out to chart their course for the year. It's an exciting time, where anything is possible, no goal is impossible, and they are ready to overcome any challenge.

Or not.

In reality marketing planning at enterprise organizations is rarely straightforward. Planning is long (it can run 6–9 months) there are many moving parts and people involved, and just when the plan is set someone changes strategy, adds in new dependencies, or just doesn't buy in.

After the plan is launched and execution actually starts, organizations must replan, readjust, and change their plan. Quickly we find that planning is, quite literally, constant.

If your annual planning is this frustrating and exhausting, you're not alone.

Many of Allocadia's customers have inquired about the "right way" to run an annual planning process. With this in mind, we spoke to marketing leaders at several enterprise organizations about how they're doing it successfully.

Before diving into what we found, here is a level set on planning.

1. There is no standard way to run an annual plan. Every organization will have differentiation. But there are similarities and patterns we found – you'll see these in our framework below.

2. There are two types of planning:

The first is annual planning and, despite the rumors, it's not dead. The timeline here is long and can feel arduous. You probably won't be able to shrink the timeline, instead your goal should be to try and shrink the time the marketing org as a whole invests into this process.

The second is continuous planning, this happens every day across your marketing organization. This is where the rise of agile planning is taking hold. There should be acknowledgement in the annual planning process that adjustments will be made throughout the year and marketers must be enabled to do this.

Marketing organizations must separate these two planning motions as it will help you be more efficient in both parts of planning

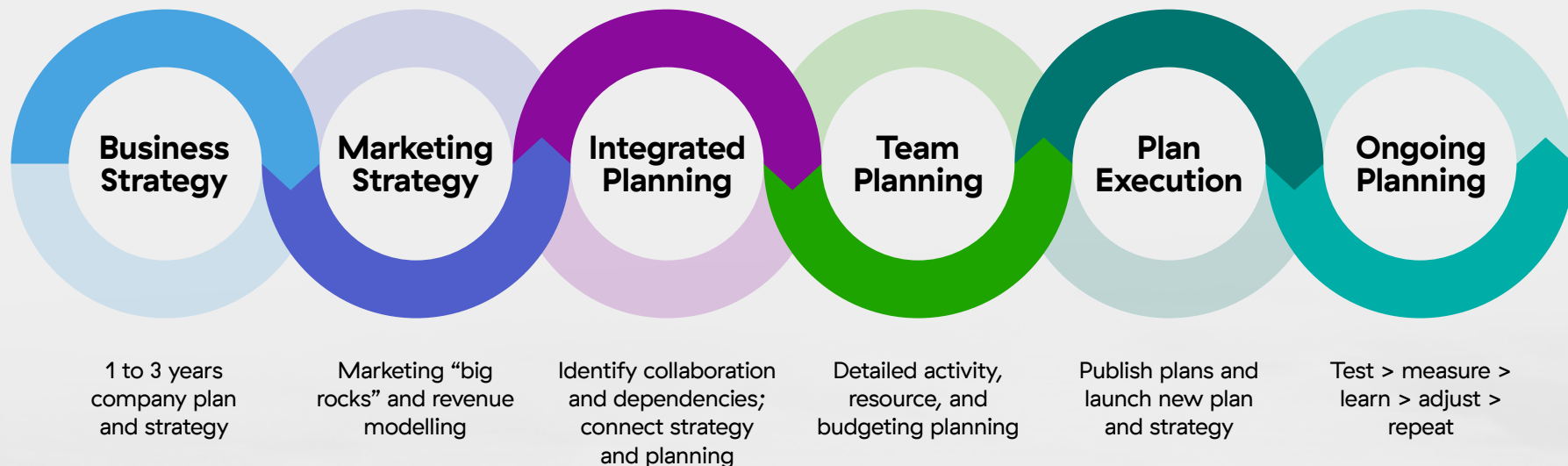
For this paper we will focus on the annual planning. If you're interested in learning more on agile marketing planning read Allocadia's ebook:

[A Guide to the New Era of Agile Marketing Planning](#)

Marketing's Annual Planning Framework

Below is a high level overview of an annual marketing planning process based on our customer interviews. The naming conventions and order might change slightly, but this is the general process at enterprise marketing organizations.

What you'll find in the rest of this paper is an overview of each stage, the timing, who is involved and key mistakes to avoid.





PHASE 1

Business Strategy

Business Strategy is driven from the corporate level. Ideally the CMO is involved and has a voice in the process, but it's very much run at the CEO, board, executive team level. The focus is a multi-year horizon, sometimes as far as 3–5 years, but more typically the next 1–3 years.

The expectation is that top company priorities or “big rocks” will come out of this and allow the departmental leaders to rally around and support their plans and strategy. Some of this process is reaffirming and readjusting the multi-year goals and a reprioritization of what needs to get done in the next fiscal year.



Timing

- For enterprise organizations this begins 6–9 months in advance of the new fiscal year.



Who is involved

- From marketing the CMO is involved.
- This stage is driven by the CEO and their strategy leads.



Mistakes to avoid

- Don't wait for this to be perfect or fully baked if it's encroaching on marketing's timeline. In an ideal world this business or company strategy is crystal clear, but that's not always the case. Marketing still needs to publish it's functional plan.





PHASE 2

Marketing Strategy

Marketing strategy is where the overarching ideation within marketing happens. This represents itself in a few different ways: the top 5 global campaigns or themes, key milestones the organization is working towards, and at product led companies this encapsulates major launches. These should include areas like markets to focus on, industries, or themes and positioning that marketing will lead the charge on.

This is also where revenue targets and projections are created. The focus is commonly on specific markets and what type of revenue is needed for the company to be successful. A large portion of the revenue targets is growth planning of where revenue will come from in the coming fiscal year.

Initial conversations on funding start to happen in this phase. Budgets won't be finalized, but initial buckets of market funds start being mapped and communicated to marketing leaders. Sometimes funding is done through debate, other times it is handled centrally by the CMO and a few core members of their team, but the important point is to set the stage here that plans and budgets are aligned.



Timing

- 4–6 months before the fiscal year starts – this allows for some back and forth as there should be some debate and iterations.



Who is Involved

- The executive marketing leadership team is involved in all aspects of this phase.
- The revenue planning is ideally done by marketing operations in collaboration with sales operations and/or revenue operations.
- Regional/product line/departmental leaders who aren't on marketing leadership should be made aware and brought into the process for input as needed.



Mistakes to Avoid

- Focusing solely on revenue planning. When this happens it limits the scope of what marketing does and downgrades parts of the department that cannot directly attribute their work to revenue.
- Focusing solely on themes and overarching campaigns. Marketing needs to think about strategy in a matrixed way: What big themes and/or campaigns are we investing in? AND what product/regions are going to deliver the growth and revenue we need? One without the other creates a lopsided plan that won't deliver for the company
- Ignoring emerging markets and future growth. While specific regions or products may be more profitable today, marketing (and the company) should be investing in the future as well. Make sure to incorporate conversations about where the company wants to set the stage for the future
- Too many people involved. Marketing strategy is interactive and iterative, but it can also spin into a bit of a never ending process. Have a planning lead who works with marketing leadership to bring in the right people at the right time to truly manage the project.





PHASE 3

Integrated Planning

Integrating planning is the connection between strategy and team planning. The purpose of this phase is to set up the second level of marketing leadership to focus their plans and execution around key goals, help these leaders identify and define what their team's big rocks are, and what results they need to deliver.

When done properly this allows the functional and regional teams to work with their teams to build their plans. It also allows them the space and context to make the case for different sets of resources or different target sets.

The other important action within this section is identifying dependencies and collaboration points across teams. Some of this might be directed by marketing leadership, but often the team leaders will identify where/when this is needed.



Timing

- 3 – 4 months out from the start of the fiscal year.
- This stage is dependent on the marketing strategy and growth targets being set.



Who is Involved

- Marketing leadership
- Marketing departmental leads
- Regional marketing leads
- Product or business line marketing leads



Mistakes to Avoid

- Skipping integrated planning. Planning without collaboration might be faster, but without it the organization will be siloed and will have no shot at supporting each other and the overarching marketing strategy.
- Lacking buy-in from second level marketing leaders. Not everyone will end up happy with resources and targets, but having a forum for feedback and adjustments is imperative to get buy-in. In the end a decision may have already been made, but the forum is important.
- Debating too long. While a forum for feedback is important, this is an interlude between strategic planning and team planning.





PHASE 4

Team Planning

Team planning is where team leads (think regional marketing leaders and those at each country level) take the guidance, growth targets, and resources from the marketing strategy and build out their plan.

These plans will contain team specific goals and metrics, which must align with the broader marketing goals. Similarly, these teams will need to do their own growth or revenue planning that must support the top down company revenue goals.

Much of the negotiation around resources and targets is done in the integrated planning phase, in this phase the team leader works with their direct reports on specific details such as plans, budgets, and timelines – some negotiation at the team level occurs, but the overall resources and strategies have been set.

This is also where the identified areas of collaboration and dependencies come into play. For areas where collaboration is needed and required, this is built into the team's plan. Where there are dependencies that haven't been made, it can be put into a backlog or wish list for the replanning phase.

While this is part of the annual planning process, teams should be incorporating short-term planning and getting ahead of inevitable changes to the plan. They should set the table, so to speak, for the full year and allow for iterations and incorporating different scenarios once execution begins.

The marketing systems set up begins during team planning. Hierarchies, campaign structures, and data flows will not be final, but an initial pass should be complete and marketers should be able to work in the systems.



Timing

- Ideally 80–85% of this plan is completed 6–8 weeks prior to the new fiscal year.



Who is involved

- Marketing departmental leads
- Regional marketing leads
- Product or business line marketing leads
- Team leads across the marketing organizations



Mistakes to avoid

- Don't wait for budgets or targets to be finalized to start planning. Sometimes resources aren't fully confirmed until the fiscal year has started, be comfortable with assumptions. Create scenarios or finalize 85%–90% of the plan. Both of these approaches allow for changes once execution begins and budgets are finalized.
- Don't lock down plans for a full year or even half year. As plans and marketing become more agile (with a small a), marketing team leaders should look to set a baseline that aligns with marketing leadership's strategy and then allow their teams to adjust activities as they need. In short, within the team planning it's imperative to plan for change – don't plan for absolutes. (For more ideas here check out Allocadia's blog post on [how to do scenario planning in 5 minutes](#))





PHASE 5

Plan Execution

Once it's time for execution, the initial plans have been published and timelines and actions are set. In addition, the plans and budgets have been set within marketing's systems – meaning systems are loaded with budgets, plans, and campaigns, and dashboards are built.

It essentially kicks off the iterative process of execute, test, measure, and adjust. Execution in marketing doesn't stop for planning, but once the new plan and strategy is locked in, the execution muscle will shift as needed to the new plan and move into the ongoing (or agile) planning mode with the new KPIs and goals in place.



Timing

- Look to shift to the new plan 2–6 weeks prior to the new fiscal year starting (depending on the activity).
- Some larger programs (global campaigns, large scale events, etc) may have already been in flight months before.



Who is involved

- Team leads across the marketing organizations
- Marketers in the field



Mistakes to avoid

- Avoid decoupling program planning from budgets. If this happened during the planning process, it will be chaos once it's time to go live with the new plan.
- Don't expect there to be a clear break between annual planning and ongoing planning. Marketing planning and execution is a little like a pit stop during a car race, sometimes you're just refilling gas, other times it's gas, new tires, and replacing an engine part. But never forget that the race is still going. Marketers don't stop executing just because a new fiscal year is coming – incorporate that in rolling out the new plan and strategy.





PHASE 6

Ongoing Planning (Agile)

This is the second type of planning referenced at the start of the paper – the agile or continuous planning, that happens 100% of the time. This portion of planning is separate from the annual plan, but as discussed the annual plan must be set up with the understanding and flexibility that shifts will happen.

Allocadia has a separate ebook on this topic, [A Guide to the New Era of Agile Marketing Planning](#). Here's a concept taken from that guide for you to consider:

Have No-regret Moves

A series of investments that will advance your strategic goals in any scenario. We never call anything a “sure bet” but these are as close as you can get.

Test Plausible Options

Investments that have a low up-front cost, but can be scaled up or down at the right time.

The ongoing planning is coupled with execution and is all about test, learn, adjust, test, learn, and adjust. Embrace this as you move out from annual planning and empower your teams to do this!



Timing

- Always on



Who is Involved

- All of marketing:
- CMO and marketing leadership ensure strategy is being executed and continue to communicate goals.
- Business units and geographical leaders create accountability for goals and shifting targets as needed.
- Team leads confirm execution is happening and empower their teams to adjust as needed.
- Marketers across the organization execute and iterate.



Mistakes to Avoid

- Make sure systems are set up to embrace the adhoc/agile approach. Without systems to support the adjustments that are made to the plan throughout the year, marketers will flounder.
- Avoid shifts in major strategy where possible. Ideally shifts aren't happening at the strategic level, but if that happens, create clear communications on the why and how. And expect further adjustments and improvements at the team level.



This should give you a solid foundation on how to think about annual planning. Here are three things to keep in mind as you think about planning:

Budgets

Remember, budgets and dollars spent are the ultimate expression of a marketing strategy, so if the budget doesn't align with a marketing organization's strategy something is amiss. The other point is that the budget is not owned, it's rented from the CFO. That means communicating the why, how, and expected impact of marketing must all be part of marketing planning.

Shortening Annual Planning

Annual planning is 100% necessary. Reducing the length of this process may not be possible, however, we advise marketing leaders find ways to reduce the capacity it takes to put together an annual plan. These means only have necessary people involved in each phase of the planning process, have clear roles and expectations for those involved, and stick to a project schedule. With that in place, everyone else can focus on execution and agile planning throughout the year and not get sucked into the six month annual planning process until they are truly needed.

Make Planning Your Own

Each organization's planning process will be different and there will be different levels of collaboration vs directives given. This framework is a high level approach that we've seen across dozens of enterprise marketing organizations: adapt and adjust it as you see fit.