

# Q&A: John Hancock's CMO on learning from things that don't go according to plan

Article

In the insurance industry, rising customer acquisition costs and increased commoditization are reshaping marketing's success drivers. And rapidly shifting customer behaviors and

expectations are prodding chief marketing officers (CMOs) to double down on embracing digital. **Kate Ardini, CMO at John Hancock**, told us almost all of her company's ad spending is on digital so the firm can "optimize in real time, quickly see what's working and what isn't, and make changes."

We recently spoke with Ardini about why the CMO role has been expanding, how CMOs define their roles and responsibilities, what factors are shaping their roles and strategic priorities, and how they can succeed in a fast-evolving, competitive market.

**Kate Ardini**

**Chief Marketing Officer, John Hancock**



*This Q&A is an excerpt from one of 10 interviews we conducted for our report, “[The Insurance CMO Report 2022: How to Deliver Profitable Growth in a Demanding Market](#).”*

*The following has been edited for brevity and clarity.*

## **Insider Intelligence (II): Can you tell me a little bit about your professional background and your path to becoming a CMO?**

**Kate Ardini (KA):** Before joining John Hancock, I worked in Deloitte’s financial advisory services group. And before that, I spent about three years at a small broker-dealer and financial technology company with a three-person marketing team. I call that my mini-CMO role because I got to do a little bit of everything. My manager said: “Sure, you can rebuild the website. Sure, you can go and figure out PR.” It was a safe place to learn and figure out what I wanted to do.

When I joined John Hancock in 2012, my role focused on brand. A few years ago, that expanded to include sponsorship, and then I built our internal marketing analytics team to demonstrate the value of marketing to the organization. About a year and a half ago, I took on the chief marketing officer role, which in addition to brand, sponsorship, and marketing analytics also encompasses advanced analytics, human-centered design, customer experience, creative, and product marketing.

## **II: What are the top three or five components of your role?**

**KA:** I have three priorities. First and foremost, my job is motivating and engaging my team, helping develop and challenge them, and just being there for them. I have to understand what’s going well, where they need support, where I can lean in—while still empowering them to take ownership and grow in their roles.

I’m sure when you talk to CMOs, everyone says that people are a priority, but I’d say with this “Great Reset” that we’re experiencing, people have become core to our success. If you’re a strong marketer, it’s likely because you have an amazing team, and that happens through leadership.

My role also involved being a chief listening and insights officer—hearing what’s happening within our company, in the industry, and in the world at large. There are lots of disruptors, and they’re changing the industry very quickly. CMOs are responsible for listening and sharing what we’re hearing with colleagues across our organization and making insight-led decisions

The last part is innovation. I am always looking for inspiration within the industry and outside of it to drive the business forward. Where can we become more digital? Where can we improve the buying process? People expect frictionless experiences whether they're buying life insurance or buying clothes online at a department store website. Those are two very different processes, and one's more complicated than the other, but both need to meet customers' expectations about digital delivery.

A CMO can be great at all three of these things, but if you're not delivering growth and value for the organization, you're not doing your job.

In the business, I focus on three pillars daily. Those include growing our US brokerage business, optimizing our in-force business, and growing our international high-net-worth business.

Beyond that, we're focused on being a digital leader that makes our customers' decisions easier and their lives better, so I'm also thinking about our digital offerings, like [John Hancock Vitality](#), which helps differentiate us in the US market. In the past, you'd buy life insurance, pay your premium once a year, and beyond that, you didn't really want to think about it. Vitality offers rewards and up to a 25% discount on a policy if customers show they're prioritizing their health and wellness. That means they're going to the doctor, getting recommended vaccines, eating well, exercising, getting enough sleep. Bringing in partners like Apple, Amazon, and Headspace has changed the game for life insurance. It's made us about *living*—helping our customers live longer, healthier, better lives.

## **II: How do you collaborate with other teams?**

**KA:** One of my tasks is bringing together global marketing priorities and our US business priorities. To succeed, I must have good relationships with our head of strategy and continuous delivery, the leaders of our IT teams, our Ops teams, and our product and distribution teams. And I never want to lose sight of the importance of a strong connection with the CFO—because for every dollar I spend and every minute of someone's time we use, we have to demonstrate the business value.

## **II: Could you describe how you work with producers and how distributed communication works?**

**KA:** We have an internal distribution team, and our marketing, distribution, and product teams collaborate closely. Distribution gets insights from the field and tells us: "Here's what we're

hearing from producers; here's what makes us great; here's where we have an opportunity to do better.”

John Hancock’s insurance products are sold through intermediaries, so we have to find how digital can optimize and improve an experience without losing sight of the role the human relationship plays in selling life insurance. That's part of what we call our Continuous Delivery model, which brings together marketing, product, distribution, technology, and operations to align with our customer journeys across five value streams: engage, offer, buy, enjoy, and promises delivered. We're all working toward common outcomes and key results. That's a new way of working for us. We've been doing it for about a year and a half and have seen great success.

Through our segmentation work done in partnership with distribution, we know that for lots of reasons, certain producers require different types of messages. This year, we’ve focused on getting the right message to the right person at the right time and developing a learning agenda and feedback loop to inform our strategy. That's Marketing 101, yes, but we needed to make it part of our delivery framework, including marketing analytics, distribution, and product. That creates a continuous feedback loop on whether something resonates and works or falls flat.

**II: You've highlighted a few times the importance of gathering feedback from customers and human-centric design. How do you collect that feedback?**

**KA:** We have ongoing net promoter score (NPS) surveys—a more transactional NPS and a longer-term relationship NPS. That gives us verbatims and a score to see what's going well, where the pain points are, and our opportunities to do better.

A team looks at that data every day, but because every company has an NPS system, the question is how we democratize that information and share it across the organization. We recently took our end-to-end customer journey and pulled in those NPS verbatims and shared the common challenges and areas that are going well. Our entire US leadership team was part of that discussion.

We also do quite a bit of customer research. We run focus groups and quantitative analyses to look at our brand health and how we compare with our peers. That’s a regular pulse check on the business, and we always get something new from it to react to or think about. Again, it helps us understand how we fit into a customer’s bigger picture of the world.

Being curious also means reading books and being up to date on news, listening to friends and family, and asking how our company can really deliver on our mission of “decisions made easier, lives made better.” How can we innovate and fit into this world? How can we add value to people’s lives?

## **II: What are the main trends affecting you today?**

**KA:** One trend is the role of modern marketing—it really has changed. It’s not just the top of the funnel. It has a role to play throughout the customer journey and in delivering on those promises. But for marketing to be viewed as a strategic function, it has to demonstrate a return on investment. That can be a hard-dollar investment through a paid campaign or an hour of someone’s time. Your marketing ROI model and your media mix model must show how marketing is contributing to the value and growth of an organization.

## **II: Are you prioritizing specific channels with your campaigns?**

**KA:** Digital is the best way for us to spend our limited media budget, especially when we’re targeting an intermediary audience. It’s been a good challenge for a 160-year-old organization to become a digital, customer-centric leader—it’s accelerated our business, showed us we can react and make changes quickly, and forced us to be better and do better for our customers and for our employees.

There’s a role for broadcast and media like out-of-home, but a mix of primarily digital channels has given us the most impact and value. It lets you optimize in real time. You can very quickly see what’s working and what’s not and make changes. We also know digital is where our audience is spending a lot of their time. But we’ve also seen success from email marketing with LinkedIn and some industry publications. Just because something is the newest, shiniest, coolest thing doesn’t necessarily mean it works for your audience.

## **II: How do you measure the success of your marketing initiatives?**

**KA:** Aside from the bigger picture of quarterly results and our day-to-day campaign measurement, we’ll have a learning agenda upfront before we spend time on anything or put something out into the market. We’ll agree on what success looks like for a campaign and what we’re going to learn along the way.

Then, after campaigns come to life, we’re optimizing them and making decisions about whether to stop, keep going, or pivot. Having a common learning agenda upfront helps the



team understand what success looks like and how you're going to bring your learnings into what you do next.

Every company will say they have a test-and-learn culture, but there's a difference between that and being agile, being clear with everyone on how the learning agenda will influence your future work and being willing to say, "This thing didn't work and we're going to change it." And to have that be okay—you are creating a safe place to learn and try new things. When you get more senior in your role, you become more comfortable with the fact that everything you do is not going to be a success. It's just not. So as leaders, we need to celebrate our many successes and learn from things that did not go according to plan.