



## **AMA Marketing & Technology Interview Series: Lagasse Inc.**

**Editor's note:** This is the first in a series of interviews that will explore the increasing role of technology as a driver of marketing excellence.

Chris Rowe is VP of Marketing for Lagasse Inc., a wholesale distributor of janitorial, food service, paper and safety products. Lagasse offers more than 10,000 foodservice, janitorial, and paper products to other distributors, which in turn serve retailers and other customers. Lagasse stocks items from more than 200 manufacturers and distributes them from more than 30 facilities throughout the US. The company is a subsidiary of wholesale office products distributor United Stationers. Recently, Dan Neff, president of Aquent's IT Solutions Group ([www.aquent-it-solutions.com](http://www.aquent-it-solutions.com)) and marketer Ben Bradley sat down with Chris Rowe to discuss the convergence of marketing and technology.

**AQUENT IT SOLUTIONS:** As background, how is your department structured?

**CHRIS ROWE:** I have a 15-person team divided into four functional groups: catalogs, channels, events and promotions. All four groups are customer facing. We produce a million catalogs per year for our Distributor customers' use in serving their customer markets, and we represent a large number of brand-name products in our catalogs. We deal with logos, photos, colors, product descriptions, etc. in our catalogs and our website. It is our job to faithfully represent our vendors' brands in the way we do business. A rigorous process is used to manage our vendors' brands. We collect a great deal of information to use throughout the execution of our business. Technology enables this process. On the channel marketing side, it is mostly a research and data analytics team that looks at buying behaviors and trends. The event planning team works on trade shows and sales incentive programs and the promotions group drives quarterly and ad hoc sales promotions. Our ERP system and our data warehouse provide large volumes of customer buying history so everyone in the department uses a fact-based, data-driven decision making process to justify spend and deliver direction and input to the sales force.

**AQUENT IT SOLUTIONS:** So let's start with the basics, how do you separate marketing from technology?

**CHRIS ROWE:** You can't. IT is so ingrained in marketing that you cannot do a good job in marketing without it. Technology is absolutely an inseparable part of everything we do. Our website is responsible for a large portion of revenue. Our fleet of trucks is managed by a state-of-the-art satellite tracking system that monitors idle times, plans routes for most efficiency and tracks driver speed and braking practices. Our customers' buying behaviors are recorded and monitored by an advanced data warehousing and query system, enabling precise marketing and merchandising decision making, and we have a network of warehouses linked by a management system that analyzes product movement and inventory flow for best positioning of stock for order preparation and storage efficiency. The essence of marketing is delivering the services that are expected to make the sale occur. Everyone needs to be a marketer. Everyone has to participate in using the information systems properly and effectively to deliver the right customer experience, whether it is about ordering, fulfillment, processing payments, etc. It all impacts how the customers see you, and subsequently, how they view you as a product and service provider.

**AQUENT IT SOLUTIONS:** You sell products that customers can buy anywhere. Are you a product company?

**CHRIS ROWE:** I see Lagasse as a services company. We don't make the products we sell, but rather we are a purveyor of brand name products that our customers know we can get to them more efficiently and more timely than other distribution sources. Our differentiator is our unified, nationwide network of distribution centers, private fleet assets, knowledgeable and responsive sales and customer service teams, and marketing tool set that comes together to form a consistent platform that our customers can depend on to derive growth. The quality of the customer experience is the heart of what we do, and information technology knits it all together.

**AQUENT IT SOLUTIONS:** How does technology impact your brand?

**CHRIS ROWE:** Lagasse is a low-profile brand, focused purely on the Distribution market in our industry space. Because we're a pure wholesaler, we do not want our customers' customers, the product's end-users, to buy from us. You can't get into our website without login credentials. To buy from us, you need to prove that you are a reseller. Our trucks are plain white boxes – we don't put our name on the side of our trucks. But to the thousands of companies that buy from us, the reliability of our technology impacts their perception of our brand. Our website is the vanguard of our brand, and we focus a lot of attention on website reliability and functionality. Our customers could buy these products from someone else. We need to earn their business through excellent service and give them great customer experiences every time. For our active customers, we actively seek to impress our brand value through our performance and dedication to getting better every day. We maintain lots of close relationships throughout the industry and we are known for quick response, customer service and transparency through our website. Our customers can get into our website and access deep information about inventory and availability with confidence that everything is accurate and up to date.

Technology is an important tool that helps you manage proactively. Like anyone, we have bumps and bruises from time to time that hurt perception of our brand, but we always work hard to rapidly correct those situations. For example, a few years ago we rushed a website upgrade. The middleware portion of the site was not up to the transaction volume. We went live too soon and our website was crashing on a regular basis. We were embarrassed in the industry as some customers lost confidence in our ability to deliver. This illustrates how our website is the foundation of our brand - the website is a major customer touch point. How you touch customers with technology has a huge impact on brand perception. We applied a full-court press, spent quite a bit of resources and time on the situation, and got it turned around. It was a valuable, if not always pleasant, learning experience!

**AQUENT IT SOLUTIONS:** Can you talk a little about the marketing department's relationship with IT?

**CHRIS ROWE:** At Lagasse, the interface between marketing and IT is very close. We have to work closely together to refine our requirements and plan how to proceed. Most often a plan is arrived at through a give and take negotiation to arrive at something implementable that will produce the best outcome given the circumstances. This process is always difficult and tedious, and translation errors in the design/negotiation phase cause most of the project issues. I stress to my team the importance of clear definition of what the business need is for the technology solution they are seeking. Don't blame IT for the outcome if you did not give them clear direction up front and throughout the process. Internally, the Director of Information Technology and I work together on a daily basis - constantly interfacing with each other's teams to define needs and solutions. It doesn't work perfectly all the time, but we learn from mistakes and continually get better at it.

**AQUENT IT SOLUTIONS:** What advice do you have for other marketers that are working with technology?

**CHRIS ROWE:** First, for successful projects, strong liaison is needed between marketing and IT. The liaison relationship needs to translate marketing to terms the other party understands. Second, marketing has to interact with IT empathetically knowing that IT has many demands from the rest of the business. If the business leader is unreasonable about functionality/timeline/budget it can cause a breakdown in the relationship between marketing and IT, and if you do not have a healthy relationship, very little gets done. This means you need to be a good “describer” of what is needed. be understanding of the IT perspective, and tease out of the engagement with IT what is needed to get the best outcome for the business.

**AQUENT IT SOLUTIONS:** What are the major marketing trends in your industry? What are the trends that will give you headaches? What are the trends in marketing and IT that will give headaches to a lot of marketers?

There is a lot of momentum in marketing products that feature sustainability attributes, aspects that are less harmful to the environment. An outcropping of this is the use of paper-less communication methods, carbon emission reductions, and other evolving methodologies that are Earth-friendly. Technology enables and accelerates the impact of many efforts in the sustainability realm.

A major marketing challenge is the rapid emergence of alternative channels of supply - how do we compete with non-traditional competitors, as well as how to serve non-traditional customers? Collecting and synthesizing competitive intelligence is difficult enough when you're familiar with the competitor; make it a non-traditional player, and the challenge multiplies. The same can be said for selling.

**AQUENT IT SOLUTIONS:** Where do you see IT and marketing in the next five years?

**CHRIS ROWE:** I think we'll see an acceleration of current trends of information content driving the economy. The need for ever-increasing speed-to-market with product and service information, and the never-ending need to keep your brand foremost in the customer's mind will continue to ratchet up demand on IT's ability to satisfy marketing and merchandising demands. Customers are going to continue to demand instantaneous access to information about products, services and the status of their account. Marketing has to hear and respond to these demands, working with IT to accurately define technology solutions, where appropriate. In turn, IT is left to cost-effectively build the compelling tools that Marketing defines are the needed solution. The good news for the marketer is that working with the IT team to build unique, differentiated solutions that deliver value to customers is one of the most tangible and rewarding experiences the marketing practitioner can have.

### **ABOUT AQUENT'S IT SOLUTIONS GROUP**

As the technology services arm of the world's largest marketing staffing firm, Aquent's IT Solutions Group provides technology project execution, consulting and outsourcing for marketing departments that want to contract out all or part of their web application development (including web 2.0), portals, business intelligence/data warehousing, and marketing productivity projects.

For more information, or to have your company featured in an upcoming interview, contact Ben Bradley ([bbradley@aquent.com](mailto:bbradley@aquent.com)).