

CEOs: Hire the best CMO with this proven interview process

Advice for screening CMO candidates

by Mike Gospe, marketing strategist & Interim CMO

According to Statista in an analysis published on January 18, 2022, the average tenure of Chief Marketing Officers (CMO) in the US is 40 months, the lowest of all C-suite titles. Why is that? The short answer is that not all CMOs are alike, and as your company grows, you are going to need a different skill-set from your head of marketing. The mismatch between CEO expectations and CMO competencies creates heartburn. Since the average CEO is in place for 85 months, chances are you are going to need to replace your CMO at least once.



In addition to facilitating Customer and Partner Advisory Board meetings, I serve as an Interim CMO for companies looking to grow from \$50M ARR to \$100M+ ARR (annual recurring revenue). As a marketing executive veteran, this is my sweet spot. In agile sprint fashion, my duties include building and executing a 90-day plan while coaching the executive team as they hire their next CMO. I do this in partnership with the executive team and their recruiting agency. Here's how.

Where is your pain?

The trick to hiring the “right” CMO is to fully understand what your company needs. What areas need improving, such as:

- Problems with the demand gen pipeline?
- Issues with product launch strategies?
- Inability to build a partner ecosystem?
- Frustration with the management of your brand or company image?
- Lack of business strategy or leadership issues?
- Fighting between sales and marketing leaders and teams?

Mike Gospe is a skilled marketing strategist acting as an Interim CMO helping B2B technology companies grow from \$50M ARR to \$100M ARR. He brings 37 years of marketing expertise and leadership experience across demand gen, product marketing, and brand disciplines. As an Interim CMO, Mike designs and delivers a 90-day plan tailored to address specific marketing needs, cut “[marketing popcorn](#)” (random acts of marketing), and improve efficiencies, all while guiding the executive team to hire the right CMO. Mike is the cofounder of [KickStart Alliance](#), a marketing leadership consulting team. He is also a Customer Advisory Board (CAB) strategist, with more than 20 years of experience and 200+ advisory board meetings under his belt. His [CAB Resource Center](#), a website sharing a variety CAB strategies and best practices, has been viewed more than 46K times since its launch in 2017.

Not all CMOs are alike. There are many types to choose from.

In general, the CMO is responsible for all things marketing: product marketing, demand generation, and brand. Most CMO candidates should be capable of managing these functions. However, this does not mean that the CMO candidate brings deep expertise across the board. Does their sweet spot align with your needs? For example: if you are lucky enough to have an experienced VP of product marketing but you are lacking a savvy demand gen strategist, then you probably don't want to hire a CMO with a deep product marketing expertise and limited demand gen experience. That choice duplicates where you are already strong. Your choice should focus on your most pressing need and your anticipated need in the near future. Aim to complement the existing skillset of your team.

To further complicate the picture, the marketing game changes greatly as a company grows from scrappy startup, to adolescent company adopting disciplined processes to scale, to established Fortune 1000 status. For example: a marketing leader who is confident operating in start-up mode may not be your best CMO choice if you want to scale your company. Start-ups need a nimble marketer focused on executing short-term tactics to help sales win specific deals. Scaling requires *corporate* leadership and applying go-to-market processes found in larger companies. This person must be a strategic thinker who knows how to execute. And, they must know how to build the right team and navigate internal politics. You'll want a CMO who has managed this type of growth before. Thus, your choice of CMO will also depend on your growth stage.

This is why your CMO screening process is so incredibly important.

Strategically interviewing CMO candidates

You and your executive team are busy. And interviewing takes a lot of time. Without a documented interview strategy in place, your team will be left on their own to ask random questions. If you follow this common approach, you are at risk of hiring the wrong CMO!

CMOs are skilled interviewers. They know how to answer questions and position themselves. Therefore, your team must be confident and comfortable in knowing what, specifically, you want in a CMO. And your team must know how to ask the right questions to get to the truth. You need to know how to properly screen the candidate.

For your CMO interview process to be repeatable and consistent, you should document it. This includes writing down your expectations for the role and what questions need to be asked by specific members of your interview team.

There is nothing random about the CMO interviewing process.

Figure 1 on the following page illustrates the interview process I recently designed to help a CEO screen CMO candidates. Depending on your unique needs, your process will have differences.

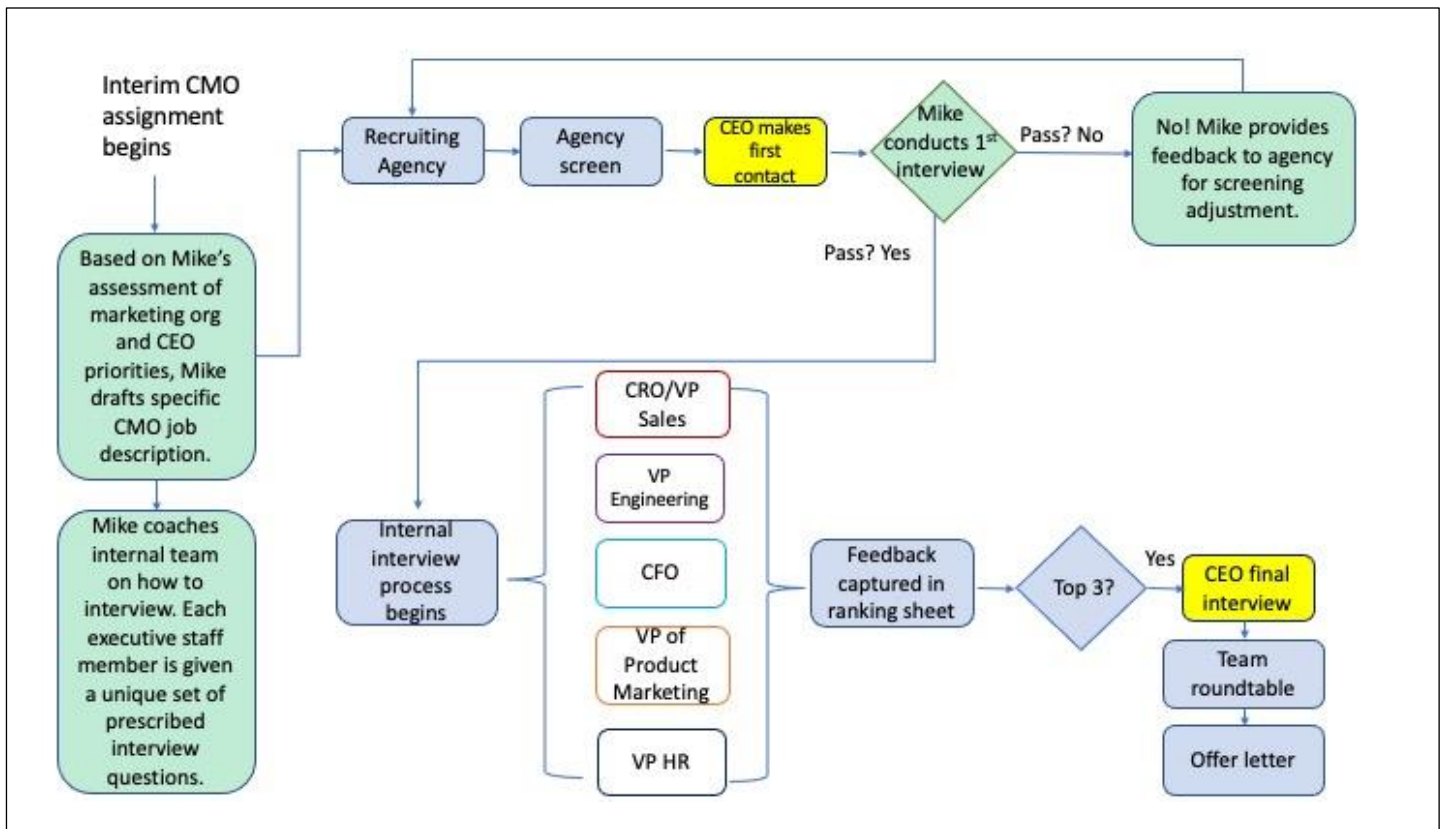


Figure 1: Example of a CMO interview process I use in my role of Interim CMO.

Is the CMO job description correct for your company?

As an Interim CMO, my first duty is to perform an internal assessment. *(I perform this with the team in agile fashion. It takes a couple of days.)* After completing this, I learn a lot about the CEO's relationship with marketing, marketing's relationship with the sales team, and how aware the marketing team is of their own strengths and limitations. This provides me with a very clear picture of the type and caliber of the needed CMO.

I've discovered that most CMO job descriptions do not accurately match what is actually needed. They are too generic.

This helps me define, or revise, the CMO job description. Your CMO job description must not be generic. While your recruiting agency can offer you a job description template, that is not sufficient to map to your needs. You need a tailored, specific job description in order to filter candidates properly.

After confirming (or rewriting) the CMO job description, I draft specific interview questions for each member of the interview team. Everyone on the leadership team has a different relationship with

the CMO. So, the questions they should be exploring must be specific and relevant to their role. Since other members of the leadership team are not marketers, they may not know how to properly judge a person on the strength of their marketing knowledge and expertise. Instead, they should interview on the points of intersection between their own priorities and what they expect the CMO candidate to deliver.

The beauty of this approach is that by the end of the interviews, you will have gained a comprehensive view of the candidate. And you'll be able to more effectively rank candidates.

Case study: A CMO Interview Guide

Here's how I recently coached an executive team in the hiring of their new CMO. Every interviewer was tasked to explore a specific theme with the candidate. *(This is just an example. The questions you will want to ask will likely be different.)*

CEO: Theme: Leadership, Vision & Strategy

The CMO needs to be the executive sponsor of the company's annual vision, strategy, & planning (VSP) process. Can you rely on this person to guide and align the executive team on a common vision? The CMO is your partner in mapping your vision to market expectations, and vice versa. The best CMOs are strategic thinkers who know how to execute. Can the candidate do this? Do you instinctively feel that this candidate would be credible in playing this role with your team?

My prescribed interview questions:

- Specifically, what role did you play in guiding, or participating in, any corporate vision, strategy, planning exercises?
- **Show me** an example.
- Tell me about your experience in communicating the vision/strategy/planning internally? What was easy for you? What were the challenges?
- What was your approach to working with the leadership team on this exercise?
- Tell me about the role you played in growing your company from \$X to \$Y ARR?
- What would your past CEO say about you?

VP of Engineering: Theme: CMO-engineering relationship

The CMO must be able to form strong ties with engineering and across the organization, especially if the product management team reports to the VP of engineering.

My prescribed interview questions:

- What experience do you have in our company's marketplace? (*Lack of experience may not be a deal breaker here; but it would be very nice to have.*)
 - Describe the relationship you've had with engineering (or specifically, product management)?
 - **Show me** how you have integrated and aligned product marketing with product management.
 - What tools and processes have you used to help companies strengthen and nurture the roadmap by incorporating voice-of-the-customer insights and perspective (aka market research)? (*Do they understand MRDs (market requirement documents owned by product marketing) versus PRDs (product requirement documents owned by product management)?*)
 - The relationship between the CMO and engineering is just as important as the relationship between the CMO and sales. Tell me about your leadership style and how you work across departments?
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CFO: Theme: Creativity and Budget management

Is the candidate fiscally responsible? Do they know how to manage a budget effectively?

My prescribed interview questions:

- What size marketing organization have you managed in the past? What was your overall headcount and budget – both headcount dollars and program dollars?
 - What's your approach to financial planning and managing the marketing department budget?
 - How do you prioritize your marketing responsibilities against competing interests (i.e., program dollars spent to achieve short-term sales or market gains, versus investments catered to the future) and with a finite budget?
 - How do you show the ROI of your marketing projects? **Show me** an example.
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CRO: Theme: CMO-sales relationship

Will this candidate be an ally or an obstacle for the sales team?

My prescribed interview questions:

- What's your philosophy for working with sales?
- How do you balance strategic marketing priorities versus the quarterly needs from sales?
- **Show me** how you have defined the lead gen funnel and how you track marketing's contribution to driving sales? **Show me** a picture of your dashboard.
- Tell me about how you and your VP of sales collaborate and work together.

- What role have you played in SKO (sales kickoff)? *(Did they play a role in communicating the corporate strategy and vision and playbooks with passion that inspires the sales team? Or did they sit it out?)*
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VP of HR: Theme: Leadership style, chemistry, values

How well would this candidate fit in at our company?

My prescribed interview questions:

- What's your leadership style?
 - Tell me about the marketing organizations you've managed in the past. Share a success and a learning experience.
 - What are your personal values when it comes to leading a team?
 - **Show me** an example of how you engage and communicate with your direct reports as well as your entire marketing department ("all-hands").
 - If we were to survey your current / most recent marketing team, what would they say are your personal strengths and weaknesses?
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Mike (me as the Interim CMO): Theme: Marketing leadership and functional expertise

We need a CMO who is a strategic thinker who knows how to execute.
(I know when they are bluffing.)

It can be beneficial to have a CMO screen your CMO candidates.

My personal interview questions:

- Tell me about your leadership philosophy as a CMO?
 - **Show me**, as CMO, how you helped take a company from \$X - \$Y ARR?
 - What's your strong suit: product marketing, brand management, or lead gen?
 - Where are you weak? How do you manage this?
 - What would your team say about you?
 - I noticed on your resume that you were CMO at a couple of companies with short tenures. What did you learn from each experience? *(Any stint less than 2 years is a potential yellow flag and should be explored.)*
 - **Show me** your marketing dashboard and tell me how you manage it?
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Final thoughts

1) Show me

You'll notice that in every interview, the candidate is asked to **show** an example of their work. Most candidates will wave their arms and tell you they cannot share details due to the proprietary nature of their role. While being respectful to NDA requirements, there are ways a CMO candidate can show a CEO specific deliverables regarding integrated marketing strategies & plans, dashboards, and approaches to strategic marketing. Any CMO who brings nothing to share is not prepared for your interview. (*You are looking for proof of strategic thinking, not clever copywriting.*)

Case in point: When screening candidates for a company I recently worked with, only two of seven candidates who made it to the final interview round had something to “show”. This was despite the recruiter giving every candidate a heads-up on what questions we'd be asking. Showing me examples over Zoom is simple. I don't need to see a physical copy. I am not going to critique his/her work; I'm looking for how clearly and credibly they can describe what they have done and what results it generated. These two candidates were leaps ahead in credibility because they had something to show.

2) Background checks and the LinkedIn network

While the agency will perform in-depth background checks, I always like to do my own. Usually, that's just a quick perusal on LinkedIn. One of the candidates and I shared some background; I didn't know him directly, but I had worked with his company and was familiar with the organization, their marketing priorities, and who had ownership of specific projects. Had the candidate done some background on me, he would have found we shared this history. I caught him in several “stretched truths.” He was immediately disqualified even though he looked impressive on paper.

Conclusion

Interviewing takes time, but following this approach will speed your process. Because the average CMO tenure fell to 40 months in 2020, the shortest since 2009, according to several recruiting agencies, it's very important to screen candidates using the process I've outlined here to avoid a mis-hire. Understanding CMO archetypes will help CEOs and executive teams find the best, right candidate. It can also be beneficial to have a CMO screen your CMO candidates.

Contact Mike Gospe



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