



MARKETERS SHOULD LEARN TO <CODE>

MEC's digital director MENA, **Simon Sothcott**, explains why **marketers** should up their tech game.



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In 2012, a man from the Netherlands, known as K, posted to Reddit: "My friends call me a scumbag because I automate my work when I was hired to do it manually. Am I?"

His role involved extensive manual data entry – approximately 60 to 100 transactions a day, with a 90 per cent accuracy rate. K was a programmer of code at heart and went on to create a script that automated these tasks.

As a result of this automation, he increased his output to more than 1,000 entries per day, with an accuracy rate of 99.6 per cent. Later,

he revealed that, for the past four years, he had collected 90 per cent of the shared bonus offered by his employer, which equated to roughly \$260,000.

This story indicates that, with a small amount of code, K was able to rapidly improve the speed and accuracy of his job, leading to greater rewards.

As marketing moves toward being a process of software and automation, generating vast amounts of data in real-time, the skills gained through learning how to code can immediately be applied to our industry.

We already know that marketing is evolving at an unprecedented pace and the skills required to keep up with these changes are also advancing.

At the forefront of this change is the proliferation of data and the wealth of available technology to analyse it all. The lexicon we now have is moving more towards being a computer-led science, with logic and rules, than a past art. These tools and data-sets are now so valuable and indispensable for today's marketers that they have become the de-facto currency with which we operate.

To understand and further enhance how we create and manage digital campaigns today, it is important to delve deeper behind the scenes and understand how they are built.

Having a knowledge of coding helps to evaluate and determine the correct scope of work, select the right vendor, identify if they have the required skills to complete the job and whether they are charging the right price for the agreed duration. For example, as we saw with K, could we build a faster and more cost-effective solution ourselves if we had the right resources?

Marketers may partner with more than 30 technology vendors. So, having the skills to properly evaluate and model the data is essential. Code acts as the underlying foundation of our digital marketing infrastructure, helping to deliver some of the best (and worst) campaigns.

Basic introductory courses will cover front-end languages like HTML, the structure and framework of all web pages, along with CSS, which determines the style and design of the page, including colour, font and alignment. A good understanding of HTML can help with the technical side of SEO, to ensure that pages are optimised accordingly.

JavaScript is a more advanced language, driving the interactive page elements like drop-down menus, form validation and content changes on the page, without loading a new page. A good example is the posts on LinkedIn, where you can continuously



scroll down to the next post and the URL will change automatically.

For marketers, nearly all site-tracking tags are built using JavaScript code, allowing for re-targeting, conversion attribution and the use of tools like Google Analytics. Without JavaScript, we could not build a marketing framework for optimisation.

Back-end languages like SQL give access to databases and allow for business logic queries to take place, which is essential to understand what type of content has to be served at the right time.

By manipulating the wide sources of data you have access to, you can begin to ask questions about how much you should spend on each channel, whether this is your target audience, how your message resonated with them and whether there is a correlation between advertising and footfall.

The ability to scale, model and query large database components in milliseconds has

become the differentiator for agencies and technology vendors. Marketing companies now compete on their 'technology stack' capabilities, which have given rise to the Data Management Platform (DMP).

Yet, we often encounter data silos, with information stored in different places. Therefore, the need to stitch these complex data-sets together to achieve data fluidity is paramount. The code to answer this problem is called an API (Application Program Interface), allowing trusted software partners to essentially talk to each other and allow data to flow in a structured manner. Most of the large platforms offer an API – Facebook, Twitter, and Google have nearly 100 APIs, from Gmail to AdWords to YouTube Analytics.

Hence, we have seen some marketers moving away from a mobile-first approach towards an API-first strategy to make content adaptable and future-proof across all platforms. To ensure this, with the increasing



number of consumer-facing access points like wearables and the ever-present Internet of Things, content must be adaptive on-demand.

Companies like Souq.com have opened up a public API, allowing for marketplace content from sellers to be embedded elsewhere, thus driving additional traffic back to the core site. The key benefit comes from the database network effect: the more data sources are connected, the greater is the value to those that use it, thus creating a platform from this so that additional services and dashboards can be built on top.

The increasing reliance on database marketing has led to the use of advanced code languages like Python to store, organise and manipulate all kinds of information or R for data analysis and visualisation, which is used within Facebook Insights and Twitter Analytics.

There are numerous programming languages available to code in. However, here, we have focused on those most applicable to marketers for web and database use. Yet, the majority of code is written in English, thus proving a potential barrier for some.

Accessibility to coding is important for the region. Software engineer Ramsey Nasser built the first Arabic code called قلب (pronounced "alb", meaning "heart") based on Python.

Ultimately, the skills developed from using specific programming languages can be applied to encourage structural thinking, team collaboration, adaptive test-and-learn approaches, creativity, logic and problem-solving, helping to reduce large problems into smaller, more manageable parts.

Collaboration is widespread in the coding community through open-source platforms like Github, a repository for people to share their code and for others to edit, collaborate and ultimately improve upon the original.

Logical thinking is also key. For example, automation tools like Oracle's Eloqua allow marketers to build complex decision trees based on logic and specific outcomes, so personalised marketing communications can be delivered to users at various stages of the customer life-cycle, leading some to scale further and adapt to a predictive-based model. The models are based on coded

programming structures and behave like individual computer programs, where action X delivers Y if a condition is met; if not, it delivers Z. This 'code thinking' is the basis of modern-day marketing.

The expectation is not for marketers to be on par with professional coders or write their own software, but for them to be 'T-shaped', i.e., having a broad knowledge of many things and a deep knowledge of one area, and able to work alongside specialised skill sets.

Some may think this only applies to performance marketers and this may be true. However, brand marketers still need data in order to underline their decision. Knowing the foundations of code will help them apply their thinking more constructively.

The challenge ahead is to bring the non-technical and technical marketing conversations together. It's clear that there are elements of integration required. The aim should be to bring this complementary and in-demand skill set to the wider group of people involved. And learning code will help bridge the gaps we currently face. ■