



# The management of marketing talent

Bernard J. Jaworski<sup>1</sup>

Published online: 3 November 2023  
© The Author(s) 2023

## Abstract

There is very little research on talent management in the marketing discipline. This is despite the significant time and effort that firms allocate to the entire marketing talent pipeline—including recruitment, selection, training, development, rewards, and promotion within the firm. Michael Farrington serves as the senior vice president, people and culture at NuVasive and is responsible for the company’s human resources, talent, and total rewards, as well as the corporate marketing, brand and communication functions. This interview sheds light on the nature of how firms manage the end-to-end talent pipeline in marketing.

**Keywords** Marketing talent · Talent Management in Marketing

## Company overview

NuVasive Inc. is a medical device company that focuses on minimally invasive spine surgery. Patient conditions include degenerative spinal disc, stenosis, early onset of scoliosis, and trauma (e.g., accidents that cause spinal or disc injury). Their core products include the implantable hardware (e.g., disc replacement, plates, and screws), instruments that enable physicians to access spine, and software systems for surgical planning and monitoring during surgery. Their products are marketed directly to spinal surgeons, hospitals, and other health care facilities.

As of December 2022, NuVasive had approximately 3,000 employees and reported revenue of \$1.2B for the year. This was a growth rate of 6% relative to the previous year. Their products are sold in more than 50 countries worldwide. The marketing organization is comprised of approximately 100 professionals—including product marketing, regional marketing and corporate marketing—located in various regions of the world.

On February 8, 2023, NuVasive entered into an agreement and plan of merger with Globus Medical. Globus Medical is a competitor of NuVasive, with a reported sales

of \$958 M for the 2022 year with a growth rate near 7%. The combined company will focus their energies on the \$50 billion musculoskeletal market, which includes spine, orthopedics, enabling technology, power tools, biologics and other offerings. This merger was recently approved.

## Talent development in NuVasive

As stated in their annual FEC filing in December 2022, NuVasive described its talent development strategy as follows: “We believe that success comes from investing in our people and ensuring our work force is aligned with our cultural mindset—*The Cheetah Way*. The Cheetah Way is the foundation of our culture that aligns our beliefs, actions, and how we work to fulfill our commitments. The Cheetah Way is how we deliver on our vision to change a patient’s life every minute. To achieve this goal, we devote time and resources to ensure that throughout our organization, employees are familiar with our business, industry and product offerings. Training is offered to new employees which teaches the anatomy and pathologies of the spine and our surgical procedures, and our sales representatives receive additional comprehensive training on our various product offerings. In addition, a key driver of our future growth is our ability to develop leaders. Employees are encouraged to partner with their manager to create individual plans to guide their development path and to incorporate training offerings and resources to support their growth and drive their continued

✉ Bernard J. Jaworski  
bernie.jaworski@cgu.edu

<sup>1</sup> The Drucker School, Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, CA, USA

success. Additionally, we regularly conduct talent reviews and succession planning to identify and develop our current and future leaders. We are committed to identifying and developing talent to help those employees accelerate their growth and achieve their career goals.”

## Talent development in the marketing area within NuVasive

Several years ago, NuVasive embarked on transformation journey to upgrade marketing within the organization. The team in charge of this effort focused on a range of activities—embedding a new marketing doctrine including marketing principles, a pilot program to test their new marketing planning approach, the development of a comprehensive go-to-market planning approach, roll out of training for all marketing personnel (and related functions), as well as a focus on the entire end-to-end upgrade of marketing talent including talent acquisition, talent development of NuVasive-specific marketing competency framework, revised job descriptions, and annual talent assessments.

### Interviewee: Michael Farrington

Michael Farrington is the Chief People and Culture Officer, and is responsible for the company’s human resources, talent, total rewards, and corporate marketing, brand and communications functions. Since joining NuVasive in 2016, Mr. Farrington has held various leadership roles at NuVasive, and most recently served as senior vice president, corporate marketing, brand and communications. Mr. Farrington has played an integral role in shaping the company’s brand and culture—including architecting The Cheetah Way, serving on company employee resource group (ERG) advisory boards and leading many enterprise-wide cultural projects and initiatives. Before joining NuVasive, he held a variety of corporate, brand and product marketing positions in global medical technology companies including Becton Dickinson, CareFusion and Cardinal Health. Mr. Farrington currently serves on the Board of Governors for Biocom California and holds a bachelor’s degree in business administration from Pepperdine University.

### Questions and structure of the interview

Given the relative absence of literature on the development of marketing talent, the interview focused on a very broad range of topics including: (1) the overall end-to-end process of talent acquisition, development, and promotion, (2) the

development of the NuVasive competency model,(3) career pathways from individual contributors to leaders of others, (4) formal training vs. in-role learning, (5) conducting yearly talent assessments, (6) succession planning, and (7) the value of a standard marketing planning process.

### Interview with Michael Farrington

**Jaworski** When you think about talent development in NuVasive, everything from initial role specifications all the way through to development, hire, search, talent, acquire, inspire, reward, and promotion, does that general talent development model apply in marketing?

**Farrington** The beauty for me coming into a new role—where I’ve been able to combine twenty years of practical marketing experience paired with running our HR and people function—I get to play the “idiot in the room” card. I get to step back and say, from an HR lens, how should we be approaching every function? And not just marketing, which has a special place in my heart. I think your question relates to all functions. Not to call out NuVasive, but most companies have bad historical behaviors where we’ve looked at all people and functions through the same lens. At NuVasive, we have nine competencies for all employees, whether you work in IT, finance, field operations, or commercial. They’re really good competencies, like strategic mindset, adaptability, and leveraging differences. When you peel back those functions, a coder within our IT function in software engineering requires a completely unique subset of skills to be a great coder in software engineering.

It wasn’t until two years ago that we stepped back and said, what are the competencies we want within a marketing function? What makes a great marketer? Not, what should be replaced from our company competencies? Which are, in my view, measurable behaviors that we want for really good people within our culture. Additively, how do we pair the right level of competencies that make great marketers, as well as great employees at NuVasive? Marketing’s been one of the first functions where we’ve said, yes, we believe in strategic mindset. Yes, we believe in adaptability. Yes, we believe in leveraging our differences. And we want people to understand and be confident in how they view and break down markets. That was something we never looked at before. It’s something we never talked about before. I would say we’re still in the early stages of what that looks like. Now where my mind goes is, what does that look like in finance? What does that look like in every single functional discipline—and historically, we’ve looked at them all through the same lens.

**Jaworski** I think that's really interesting. What you're saying is maybe there is a common competency that all employees must possess or achieve?

**Farrington** Maybe 90% of it. Otherwise, we would have really good employees at NuVasive and potentially, really bad marketers.

**Jaworski** How much time is spent figuring out, what are the jobs that we need, and what are the job descriptions that relate to those roles? As the markets evolve, do we have, "here's our common job description for someone who is a product marketer." Here's somebody who's doing market research. Here's a job description. How does that work, and particularly, as markets evolve?

**Farrington** How they've evolved is a result of a failure to stop and pause and say, is this the new world order that we want? A little bit on NuVasive, we were called the "billion-dollar startup." Started twenty years ago. We did \$1.2B this past year. Crazy growth driven by bringing something really novel to market. A marketer's dream where we solved a unique problem in our industry through the deployment of novel and truly differentiated technology. Marketing evolved similarly. It became the catch-all to do everything, so from gathering market requirement to building product, to launching product, to writing a value proposition, to flying to observe a first case with a surgeon, to supporting a trade show, to designing a banner for a society meeting. You step back from those six, seven examples I just gave you—if you can find one person that's great at all that, give them a billion dollars, and don't lose them. Those people don't exist. The company evolved quickly. People had to evolve as well.

Yet what happened is we started getting really good people that were subpar in areas where we needed marketing excellence. You had a really good upstream marketer that was spending half their time doing downstream marketing, and they were not good at these activities. By the way, they didn't like doing it, and so they actually were less engaged in their work. We see a higher attrition rate than probably most companies of our size, especially in marketing. I think there's a reason behind that, which is a challenge for us as we've looked at job descriptions. Either (a) they actually were part of the old philosophy of role definition and wanted to touch everything, but they didn't have the self-awareness to realize that they were average at many of those disciplines, and/or (b) they were being asked to do things that weren't in their wheelhouse that they were either good at, competent, or enjoy doing. They wanted to be more

focused so they could be great at the discipline that they were really good at!

**Jaworski** That's really interesting. Let me shift to a different topic that relates to this role definition topic. Can you share with us how you came up with your competency model for marketing? Did you say, "Here's the industry. Here's our role. Here's what we're going to do"? Did you benchmark others? Did you make it up from scratch? How did you come up with this competency model that represents yours?

**Farrington** Whether it's a marketing competency model or it's a competency model for all employees in all functions, you put any competency on the board, and it's hard to argue with what you should prioritize. Take our nine competencies as a company, you could put fifty things on a white board and say, I want someone that is humble. I want someone that is scrappy. All right, at some point, you've got to whittle it down to get to a place of something that is memorable, concise, impactful, but most importantly—will move the needle. I think the most challenging part is not necessarily building a model. It's selecting the right competencies to then anchor yourself to knowing that you're leaving really good competencies somewhere on the cutting room floor. That's point one.

The second point is, it must be a collaborative process, leveraging domain expertise from an area we don't possess, which is heavy expertise from consulting partners that understand how other companies have approached it. We did it through an integration with third-party marketers, and also HR change management leaders that knew how to build a people-centered view of the measurable behaviors we wanted through the lens of marketing. What I tell marketers is, don't leave your HR partners out of that process because there's a role that they have to play—where they a) translate what you want to accomplish as a measurable behavior on paper for a human brain to understand, and b), for them to understand it and actually have it be something measurable that shows up in behaviors in the workforce. HR has a role in that process.

**Jaworski** Do you do annual reviews each year to figure out, hey, how did you score in these nine competencies? Where do you need development with respect to these nine competencies?

**Farrington** Where a model remains just a model and not something that actually drives change in an organization is in these practical, almost system-and-process-level changes that a company has to embrace and implement. Take something like even promotions. How are we as marketers using

the language of the competency model in even—this is something super tactical—even in the congratulations email that goes out to the rest of the company? “Mary Doe is promoted on Monday to this new role. Her ability to do A, B, C leveraging competency A unlocked the value in the company, and it resulted in Z. Her unique progress in growing her skill set in competency B in partnership with this other organization unlocked this new market opportunity.” Versus a communication that says “Mary was really great. We’re super proud of her. She’s now a vice president of marketing.”

How do we implement and integrate the language not just in the annual review, but in totality so that the rest of the organization gets behind? Not only was I trained on it, not only am I going to be scored against it, and the language that’s used across from January 1 to December 31st is anchored in these competencies that I need to get behind, engrained in, and get my arms around so that I too get a good review, I too get promoted, I too get the result that I want. Then that actually makes the model practical versus just a model.

**Jaworski** That is a very important observation.

**Farrington** There are some companies that do that really well. Take Amazon. They’re not perfect in a lot of things. Every promotion, any promotion that gets through that company, the leader writes a document, literally a research paper, on John Doe and why he should be promoted. The paper then is sent to all the other leaders. Before the promotion takes place, you have to read the document to ensure that the growth and results have taken place. We’re a ways away from that at NuVasive. That model is something that I want to instill here. Again, the measurable behaviors show up in the day-to-day that unlock the next level for a person to then go after.

**Jaworski** That makes perfect sense. I’m now going to talk about promotions in a little bit more detail. One thing I’ve observed in R&D organizations—this is a question for you, is the emergence of the person who likes to work on their own and do certain things but doesn’t like to manage a team. They’re really good in a domain of expertise. They are strong individual contributors. This contrasts with an individual who moves up the organizational hierarchy and manages more and more people. Do we have that in NuVasive or something like that where there’s two different trajectories of people in terms of what they do?

**Farrington** Yeah. We have multiple pathways, whether it’s a people leader or a knowledge expert. I think a lot of companies screw this up. Let’s just start with, Jane who never

wants to lead people. She just wants to write reports and look at data and publish them. Then why would you promote Jane to lead people?! That’s a terrible decision. We do intentionally have different tracks. We have different tracks—not just in R&D. We have it in marketing. We have it across every kind of corporate function here. R&D is a natural one. Someone who has a unique discipline in some software architecture role, they might be an N-of-1. Let them be a knowledge leader and be a pro in place with maybe zero ability to scale but a massive ability to make a huge impact in product development. We should celebrate those roles and celebrate the fact that that person is self-aware knowing that they don’t want to lead people. There are certain people that lead people well that actually are poor knowledge experts, which is kind of funny to think about. You do need certain groups of people that lead others well, but you don’t want them talking about a physical domain because they don’t have any experience in that domain.

**Jaworski** It’s kind of interesting. There’s the GE crossroads model. It relates to the idea that one needs to make “major adjustments” in one’s approach as one moves up the hierarchy. For example, at some point in a career, someone gets promoted into a role where they’re now managing accountants and finance people and R&D folks, and they may know very little about those roles. But they still have to manage those folks who report to them.

**Farrington** Take something in commercial selling. I’ve studied in depth—I was on the advisory committee at a global sales consulting organization for some time. I’ve brought it to multiple organizations and love the research behind “The Challenger Sale.” If you were being intellectually honest, I don’t think a great organization would have just 100% of all commercial profiles be challengers. I think you actually still need, in a high-performing organization, some small percentage of relationship-focused reps and/or even a lone wolf, if you’re familiar with that model. I want a handful of these commercial sellers that are off the beaten path and may even create a little tension in the organization. If 100% of my organization are lone wolves, that’s bad for everyone. If I have 5% of them, that’s probably the right amount of tension, both internally and externally, that I want. I think the challenge is having these black-and-white models where in order for you to be a knowledge leader, you have to be A, B, C, or a people leader, it’s A, B, C. Generally, I want functional experts to be in that knowledge track. Generally, I want people leaders to have certain competencies that lead people. We’re going to live in the gray a little

bit too because I want some normalized, balanced view as well within the organization.

**Jaworski** Metaphorically, could we imagine something like that in marketing where we have the folks where they are going to do things differently or are going to be the lone wolf? Could you imagine, what you just said in relation to the Challenger salesperson ratios actually applies to marketing?

**Farrington** I don't know if you follow Duncan Wardle at all, former Head of Innovation and Creativity at Disney—what a cool role! He talks about just the simple principle of “yes/and” versus “no/but.” I think if we have more black-and-white role definition, which I do advocate for conceptually, we're just going to get a lot of “no/buts.” You need some percentage of people that do flex a bit because they can say, that's super interesting. “Yes/and” I wonder if we approach it this way. You're going to need the no/but to constrain, in a healthy way, some of the thinking. If it's full of no/buts, we will ultimately then have constrained thinking in perpetuity. That's dangerous for an organization.

**Jaworski** Let's talk about talent development in marketing. Stepping back, when we think about talent development in NuVasive, what are the levers you can pull? What's your gut instinct as to which ones are the important ones in terms of developing your marketing talent?

**Farrington** I am a firm believer in “learn by doing.” I think it is nearly impossible to replicate in a classroom, in academia, even in research how someone gets to a certain level of proficiency without doing it. I started my first company at nineteen years old in my college dorm room and learned by doing, pitching brand ideas to people that had money when I had none. I had the chance of spinning-off and launching a four-billion-dollar brand in six months across one hundred countries. Getting that opportunity was a little bit of hard work, a lot of luck, right place, right time. I could've taken a class on that. When given the project within the confines of, at the time, a Fortune 20 company, to spin off a four-billion-dollar brand, there's no learning that can be done other than doing the project yourself. Learn by failing and doing it in the real world.

I tell people all the time, from a talent development perspective, nearly a 100% of the time, I want my people to learn by doing. There's a little bit of “ready, fire, aim” with it too. We can try to architect career trajectories and the competencies someone needs to gain and maybe even the projects we could put them on versus saying, “there's a dumpster fire over here Bernie! I don't know how we're going to solve

it. I think you're the guy for it! Go figure it out.” It is on us to have a good view of our talent. We have regular talent reviews where we're looking at a certain band level, the impact and scalability, the skills and competencies that people have so that we're ready when these opportunities come up. We're not sitting around saying, or Is it Sally? Is it Mike? Is it Bob? We're ready to say, hey, this came up. Sally's the right person for that project. Have we scoped it? No. Do we know the issues? Not entirely. Is it on her career roadmap? It's not at all, but we've identified through talent assessments that she will bring certain skills to the table, and she'll figure it out.

**Jaworski** I have two follow-on questions. You just mentioned talent reviews. Is that part of your process where each year, “here's our marketing talent bench, here's how we score them, and here's the distribution?” Is there something like that that's happening?

**Farrington** Yeah. We do it company-wide quarterly across every function at a certain band level and above. Our greatest job is to make sure we have the right people in the right seats at the right time. The only way we're going to do that is to know what talent we have under the hood and review them regularly. We can't know everyone. For high-impact talent, we are, each quarter, looking at a different lens of that talent so that we're ready. We have the classic 3×3 grid, scored by impact and potential. We're also looking at flight risk as part of that as well to make sure, do we have a good handle on our talent so that we're ready if we need to react quickly. The bottom line is that we need to be ready.

**Jaworski** Do you have any rules of thumb around succession? Let's say we have a VP of marketing role over here. We've got a really good person in that role. Do we want to make sure that we have somebody who's lined up to take that role in the event that person moves on? Is succession planning part of what we do?

**Farrington** Great question. When I took this job in September—one of my ten pillars was succession planning. Most companies do this. We often promote, hire, advance people's careers out of necessity. Bob retires. We're like, we weren't anticipating that. Sally, are you ready? Bob takes a new job at company ABC down the street. The next one up, it has to be Sally because she's number two on the list. In the perfect world—I take a lot of analogies from the sports world. A lot of college programs, even pros—name a coach-in-waiting. You make it very visible. This would be fascinating to pilot. Sally is the VP of marketing right now. Albert, currently the senior director, he has been identified as the VP-in-waiting. We tell people that. When Sally either moves on to take on

a new role within the company or outside, it is super clear. There's no hidden agenda. Albert's the one in place.

Being identified, there's expectations that come with that. It's being prepared. The competencies are being worked through. He is ready to step in that role. There's less fear, doubt, and uncertainty when we make that change of talent. Everyone knows Albert's going to get it when Sally moves on because that's what's been communicated. The challenge is, Sally never moves on, and Albert's sitting there and waiting. What do you do with that? What do you with it when Bob thinks he should be number two? To me, when all cards are on the table, it makes it a lot easier to say, Bob, there's a reason why Albert is the role-in-waiting and you're not, and it's because of these areas you still need to advance into. We haven't formally taken that on. It's a philosophy that we've conceptually talked through. I would say, to my earlier comment, we historically have promoted and advanced people reactively out of necessity versus proactively based on a strategy framework. This role-in-waiting is something I'm giving thought to.

**Jaworski** It's really interesting. There's an interesting issue here around, I'm going to call it standard marketing processes. We're going to have the NuVasive way to do market planning. Here is our ten-step process. There's pros and cons, probably, of doing something like this. You do have a marketing playbook in place at NuVasive. You do have a process in place. Speak to the strengths and weaknesses of doing something like that where you have a standard process tool set for doing something. What's the downside of having something like that? You obviously made a big investment.

**Farrington** I would say the pro is, at a minimum, a common language. We talk, we think, we act through the same shared mindset. When someone is hired in on day one, they are given, essentially, the rules of the road to operate within. They know what's expected of them. They can operate within that framework. They're given tools and trainings to be supported in that role. It brings clarity to an organization, a team, and the individual's day-to-day function. The con is, especially—in reality, we're a small company. Yes, we're a billion-plus dollars. But this is a huge market. There is a challenge of the view of it being bureaucratic. Everything that I'm supposed to do is within tools that you are demanding me to not just use, but to think a certain way, believe certain things, act a certain way. The fifty-three man roster of an NFL football team doesn't have fifty-three playbooks. They've got one. An offensive coordinator has a philosophy that no matter the center, the left guard, the right tackle, the tight end, they all follow the playbook so they get the right outcome independent of the role they play. That, to me, is

still the work we have got to do, and I think most companies have to do. The embracing of a playbook or philosophy yields a better outcome. I don't think that someone would debate that. Yet the tension is, especially in high-tech or fast-paced moving companies, the fear and the receptiveness of the people is greater bureaucracy.

**Jaworski** That makes sense. Also, when does the tool set change too? When do we have to modify it? How do we upgrade? All that stuff. I think this notion of common vocabulary, common thinking, common process, common philosophy—the marketing doctrine kind of thinking of, behind the playbook, here are three or six, seven, or eight principles, those should be, hopefully, core. We're the West Coast offense. We're the wishbone offense. Got that. Then within that, maybe there's some more flexibility as to how we follow a particular play.

## Reflections

The interview covered a wide range of topics and the Malek et al. (2023) commentary that follows provides a comprehensive perspective on the set of issues and challenges. Here I identify three topics that merit closer investigation by researchers in the marketing discipline.

First, is the identification, build out, and implementation of marketing competencies models. These are individual-based models that relate to the scope of the job requirements for all marketers. For example, a firm may have a competency of “market research and intelligence.” This competency would apply to product marketing, marketing communication, and field support roles. However, the specific “depth” of understanding and expertise would be role specific. How does the firm identify the “right” set of 6–8 competencies for marketing in their firm? Who is involved in the process? Does one always identify “behaviorial anchors” for each competency?

Second, there is an interesting issue related to succession planning in marketing. As a general rule, many firms attempt to identify at least two internal candidates who can “step up” and fill a role of an individual who is promoted, transferred, or leaves the firm. How does this process work in marketing? How much is HR involved in this process? What are “best of class” lessons that can be applied across firms?

Third, it is important for the field to obtain a better understanding of how to transform or upgrade marketing within the firm. There are a number of levers that can be used to upgrade—adding quality marketing talent, training and skill upgrading, revision of marketing competencies models,

career path development, and rewards. That said, we do not know all the levers that can be pulled—nor do we know their sequence.

**Funding** Open access funding provided by SCEL, Statewide California Electronic Library Consortium

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors have no conflict of interest to declare that are relevant to this article.

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate

if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## References

Malek, S. L., Kirilova, G., & Sarin, S. (2023). Talent management in marketing: A Framework and Agenda for Future Research. *AMS Review, 14*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13162-023-00264-4>.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.