



**SPECIAL REPORT:** Tactics for Creating A More Agile Digital Tech Buying Strategy

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*How digital media executives can make their technology evaluation and adoption process more effective and efficient, featuring best practices from leading experts.*

BY ROB KEENAN

We all know the old phrase, “time is money.” Well, in the case of today’s digital media executives, time is more than money. It’s a scarce resource executives need in order to innovate and move their technology culture forward. In fact, time - not money - is the number one reason that media executives struggle to implement new technologies in their media organization.

This point is best highlighted by a report produced last year by Publishing Executive. The report, titled “[Special Report on Technology Adoption Strategies in Publishing](#),” surveyed media executives about what their objectives and obstacles are when investing in new technologies. The study showed a “lack of time and resources to evaluate new technologies” - not budget - was the biggest obstacle in their quest to adopt new technology.

Time definitely plays a key role in the implementation of new technologies in a media organization, said Brian Kroski, a media strategist and former Chief Digital Officer of American Media. “Time is a resource issue,” Kroski said. “Everyone in media is chronically understaffed.”

I’ve heard this sentiment over and over from media executives in 2017 and 2018. For example, many companies have told me about the value they see in adding an Alexa-type service or a customer data platform to their tech stack mix. But the next words out of their mouth is that they don’t have the time or people to break away from current projects to look at and run a trial of these solutions.

This is not to discount the significance budget has on limiting tech investments. It was ranked as the number two obstacle in the Publishing Executive report. But your budget for tech investments are likely quite fixed. On the other hand, although your time and resources are relatively fixed, you can effectively free up time and human resources by making your process for evaluating and adopting technology more efficient and effective.

This report will explore the tactics publishers are employing to streamline and optimize their technology evaluation efforts, such as creating a cultural and organizational environment that fosters agile technology experimentation, establishing operational best practices that will expedite tech evaluation and adoption, and creating more fruitful vendor relationships.



## ORGANIZATION & CULTURE: JUMP OFF THE GERBIL WHEEL

All too often, I hear from media executives that they want to try out a new technology, but the need to deliver on existing products often forces them away from implementing and experimenting with new tools. The reality is that digital executives are working so hard to drive current revenue initiatives that it's tough to put the time and energy into evaluating and implementing new technologies that could drive efficiencies, or even better, new revenue for the organization.

Brian Kroski says he has definitely observed this conflict. "There is a lot of stuff flashing at you every day that requires your attention," says Kroski. "That volume can easily consume your days."

Matt Morgan, senior VP of digital and data for Farm Journal agrees. "I wish I had a couple hours a month to talk about new tech," says Morgan. But with all of the other demands on his time, these are the first meetings that get cut from his schedule.

Stated another way, many of today's executives are on a gerbil wheel trying to complete existing projects with the resources they have, meaning they often can't jump off that wheel to implement new technologies.

How do you get off the gerbil wheel? Here's some techniques that will help.

### Say "No" & Kill Time-Wasting Projects

After years of launching new products, most publishers have diverse product portfolios. What they also have on their hands is a litany of products in various stages of health when it comes to profitability. "Sometimes you just have to cut programs that aren't working," says Kroski.

However, cutting under-performing products is easier said than done because the willingness to do so often involves cultural and organizational factors. Many publishers are tepid about cutting loose legacy products due to the allocated impact and cost implications that such a move may have on the organization.

To be a company that adopts new technology at a quicker pace, you have to be willing, as Kroski says, to let programs go and to figure out the allocated cost implications. As a business manager once said to me, you have to work hard to understand the revenue (and/or profitability) that can be gained by giving up a product.

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*-- Brian Kroski, media strategist and former CDO of American Media*

Making these tough calls often depends on whether such decisions are empowered. A company's culture will have a big impact on how it looks at flailing products and how "precious" they are despite the numbers.

Senior management also needs to foster a culture where dissent and questioning are encouraged. A lot of "good ideas" from people at the top of the chain of command get added to the workload without proper vetting. On the other hand, culture that fosters dissent and questioning is healthy, and one where larks and pet projects are less likely to gain traction and soak up time. Bottom-up innovation, a hallmark of nimble, tech-savvy startups, means the same rigorous evaluation is applied to ideas from the top and from the bottom. It's a widely touted and rarely practiced approach.

Are you empowered to say no to bad ideas? Are your reports?

### **Encourage an Agile Mindset: Test and Fail Quick**

Today's media companies need to be more agile with their products and the technology used to power them. We can no longer afford to just work linearly, completing the path of a project without looking at anything else or monitoring KPIs. An agile development process that enables us to test and fail quick is imperative.

"You have to embrace an agile approach," says Aneel Tejwaney, CTO of Haymarket Media US. "You have to keep your resource investment small and you need to fail quick. But if the new technology hits, it can be a big success."

Tejwaney says that media can take advantage of new tech by making very minimal investments when trying out a new tool or technology. "Define the MVP (minimal viable product), create a test and start showing sales folks and key advertisers. Let it gain interest organically."

Tejwaney thinks a lot of media companies haven't yet adopted this more nimble approach. "Most executives are still leaning towards the traditional approach: Create a 3-year strategic plan for an idea, do thorough market analysis, define detail requirements etc. It's uncomfortable for most to think you've defined an MVP, have a relatively cheap way to get there and let the product evolve and take shape as per the market demands."

### **Tether New Tech to Current Revenue-Generating Projects to Reduce Risk**

All companies have an aversion to risk, dependent on a number of cultural and organizational factors. It then becomes incumbent upon execs leading digital technology strategy to minimize the real or perceived risk of new tech investments.

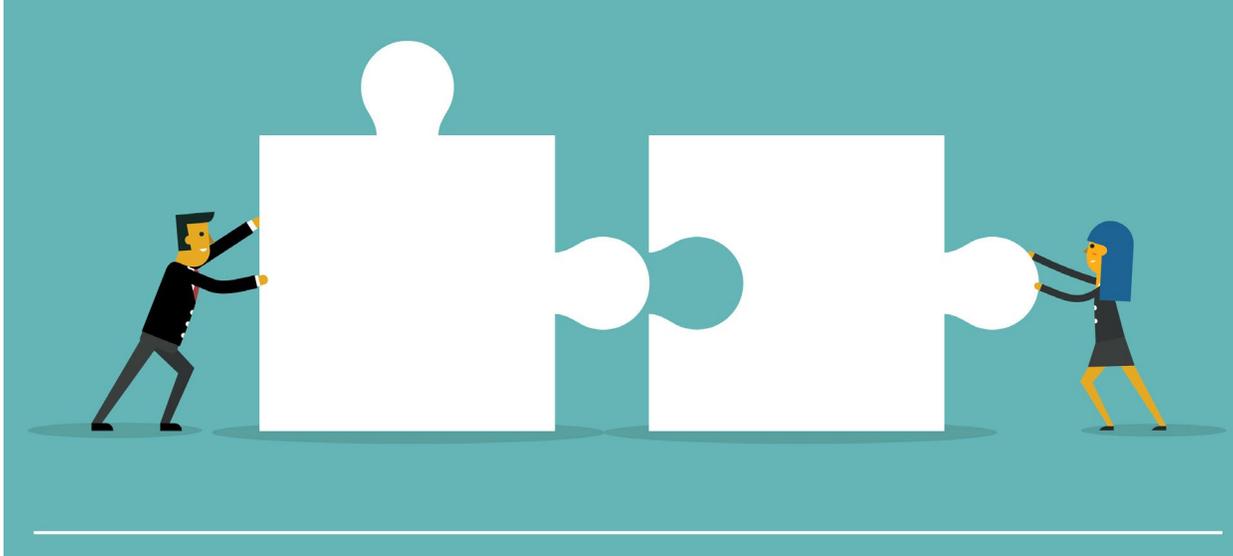
A little revenue solves a lot of problems. In a time-crunch situation, digital executives should be looking for solutions that have a quick impact on the top or bottom line of their organization. Tom Cintorino, CEO of The Next Chapter Consulting and former EVP of digital at Northstar Travel Media, suggests that when assessing new technologies, look for things that are "going to make money."

Not all new technology purchases have to drive new products or services into an organization. According to the executives interviewed for this report, a good option is to pick a current revenue-generating project and to add on a new technology that can increase the revenue for that project. If the test works, you can show an immediate ROI for the new technology you're investing in.

"In many cases media brands are well served by connecting starter initiatives with current revenue drivers," says Kroski. "If by increasing revenue in an existing business you can break even, and launch a new product, that's a big success."

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## INTERNAL OPERATIONS AND PROCESSES

*One of the principal areas where publishers can make technology adoption more efficient is with putting clear processes in place and improving communication around technology needs.*

### **Build a Bridge Between Tech & Other Departments to Better Understand Needs**

One of the ways you can close the time window on technology adoption is by focusing on the technologies that will have the biggest impact on the company. But to make those decisions, digital media execs need to gather information from key stakeholders and analyze their needs. Doing so means having colleagues in other departments, especially on the business side, they can partner with in order to prioritize technology efforts. As Tejwaney says, “you need a bridge between tech and business.”

There are a number of ways this bridge can be built. Sitting down with the business team and building a formal business requirements document is a great way to get everyone on the same page surrounding a technical need. The goal of the business requirements document should be to get your internal team in agreement on a technology roll-out. In essence, this document becomes a key communication tool between the teams and allows you to discuss and agree on key business needs before a technology project begins. By having this foundation, business and technology teams can agree on what kind of solutions they should be shopping for. And the business requirements doc will help define the overall scope of a project and can

limit the amount of changes during the eventual roll-out.

Building a tighter link between digital operations and other teams, such as sales or editorial, can also create more momentum for technology investments. For example, when one media company was considering investing in a long-form article tool, the business opportunity became more clear when sales was able to express the native advertising potential, and editorial the storytelling and audience engagement potential. After that the investment was green-lighted.

Quarterly brainstorming meetings or networking events with colleagues outside the tech team could go a long way to open up lines of communication.

Sales is an especially rich source of intelligence because of the direct revenue connection. “You need to focus on sales and feedback from the market,” says Tejwaney. He adds that all organizations have key advertising and marketing partners. These partners (and their marketing dollars) tend to gravitate toward different products or technologies over time. Tejwaney says you need to leverage their preferences and try to bring new solutions to market through these partners.

Simply put, digital execs need to spend more time on sales calls.

## Set Tech Stack Investment Priorities

Before you can evaluate a new technology, you first have to understand how that technology fits into your overall tech stack.

Tech stacks at media companies are going through major changes. With advanced analytics and data products emerging, media companies are being tasked with reworking their databases, relying more on analytics tools, and getting more data about the interaction users have with their sites. Therefore, it's critical for a media executive to not just look at any new technology on the market, but to also understand the overall stack and look for holes. Once the holes are found, executives should look for new technologies to help plug the gap.

While the number of technologies that media companies are running have multiplied over recent years, many organizations don't have a disciplined way of tracking what technology is in use. By taking the time to evaluate your entire tech stack and doing a needs analysis, you can perform more focused searches, which in turn will reduce the overall time needed to evaluate and implement new solutions.

Anita Brearton, CEO and founder of Marketing technology management platform [CabinetM](https://www.cabinetm.com/) recommends creating a single

source of truth that documents your tech stack and having a clear process for auditing your tech stack. Brearton points to some key steps for sizing up your tech stack more effectively.

**1. Audit** the technology you are currently testing, using, and have recently retired. Include purchased technology and internally developed technology

**2.** Create a marketing technology **single source of truth** for the organization that everyone can refer to when considering whether new technology is required. Digital tech management platforms are available to make it easier for organizations to manage their technology environment, but a spreadsheet can be a good starting place.

**3. Align** technology requirements with business goals. Start by identifying the business objectives that you are trying to achieve (see above), and then define and map the marketing functions that will need to be supported by technology for each objective.

**4.** With a **clean stack** in place, each platform and product should be evaluated against an overall set of functions and technology requirements. By doing this it becomes easy to identify redundant platforms and platforms that are no longer necessary.



Enterprise marketing technology management platform CabinetM recommends creating a single source of truth that documents your tech stack and having a clear process for auditing your tech stack. Credit: CabinetM <https://www.cabinetm.com/>

## Identify Project Owners and Delegate

Not all technology decisions need to fall solely in the lap of a digital executive. One of the tips all executives mentioned is identifying project owners who can take the lead on evaluating, selecting and implementing a new technology. Identify the right people on your team and let them run with finding a solution.

Just make sure, once that person is identified, that you provide clear guidance on what your expectations are for the technology evaluation, trial and implementation processes, and where you want to be involved in the process.

This type of delegation also has a cultural component. Legacy companies tend to have trouble delegating and empowering independent work. Instead they rely on a chain-of-command approach to decision making and execution, which is intended to minimize risk but is also inefficient.

## Establish Internal Incubators and Set KPIs

Instead of attempting to roll out a new technology throughout an organization, media executives will find success (or fail quicker) by creating incubator groups to test out new technologies.

In any media company, there is typically a group or brand that is more tech savvy or highly-interested in a particular tool. Maybe it's setting up and promoting an Alexa skill? Maybe it's implementing a new analytics tool? Maybe it's creating a new data product for a brand's audience? And leveraging these groups as incubators can be an effective way to get new technology initiatives launched in a company.

Haymarket's Tejwaney says internal teams can be effective if they have the right skills. "You need to look on the publisher or sales side to find people that are the most digitally savvy," he says.

Morgan agrees: "Using an incubator is a great approach," adding that through the incubator you can take a lower-profile brand and try out a new technology and see how a new technology will perform.

But where incubators fail is when key performance indicators (KPIs) used to measure overall success of

a project are not determined at the outset. All too often media companies will allow a team to try out a new technology, but without a clear set of goals set up-front, judging success will be a challenge.

Incubator projects are "useless without meaningful KPIs," says Tejwaney. He adds that digital executives and incubator teams should make sure their initiatives have measurable results that drive key business objectives.

Setting clear metrics for tech incubator projects plays into creating an agile culture, where ideas can be quickly tested and judged whether to scale up across the organization or kill.

But incubators are not the only option for implementing new technologies. Since media brands get hung up with delivering on their day-to-day duties, they can get beat on the technology front by startups, says Kroski. Creating small "tech labs" can help combat startups and allow media brands to be more in touch with the latest technologies.

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## WORKING WITH VENDORS MORE EFFECTIVELY

*One question that continually arose when discussing how to accelerate new technology adoption was the impact that vendors have on the process.*

### **Communication with Vendors is Key**

Across the board, industry executives have indicated that communication breakdowns between vendors and their organizations have led to failures in new technology projects. Therefore, to succeed media brands need to have open and honest discussions with vendors pitching a new technology. According to Morgan, it's crucial that vendors understand your business model so a tech trial or roll-out is a success.

So how can you better communicate with vendors? From a best practices perspective, a business requirements document can be a big help. These types of documents provide the vendor with insights into your needs and directions. This can help you map and evaluate a vendor's technology against your needs. These documents also open up key questions and discussion points between your team and the vendor, which can ultimately lead to a better technology implementation.

### **The Costs & Benefits of Product Trials**

Today, more than ever, vendors are willing to work with digital executives to run trials or develop a proof of concept (POC) for their technology with a media brand. While some hesitate to have a deep relationship with a vendor, media companies increasingly see working with vendors as a positive approach

to implementing new technologies.

"I think it's worth running POCs," says Tejwaney. He adds that a POC helps validate whether a technology will deliver for your organization. "POCs can show sales the sunny day scenario for a new technology."

However, the success of a POC lies with how the new technology works with your current technology and products. Morgan says that Farm Journal engages vendors in deeper trials to show how a tool will work with their own data and technology. Morgan also says a trial can get internal team members up to speed on the new technology.

### **Getting to a Decision with a Vendor**

Running a POC is great, but one of the keys in this process is building out a plan to move from the POC phase to actual launch. To make that happen, executives should consider some key factors:

**1. Start the discussions right away** – As the POC kicks off, sit down with your team to understand what will be required to roll this technology out in full scale to your organization and put a plan in place to make it happen.

**2. Name a project owner** – We mentioned this above. But, if you don't have a project owner in place, now is the time to set one.

**3. Layout resource needs** – Get a good understanding of the resources you need to launch this project. If you don't have enough resource, consider bringing in outside help from the vendor or a consultant.

**4. How does it fit?** – Understand where this technology lies in your development priorities. Clearly, if the new tech is plugging a hole in your tech stack or is going to drive immediate revenue, then the timeline should be shorter than a project that may not show a return for several months past launch.

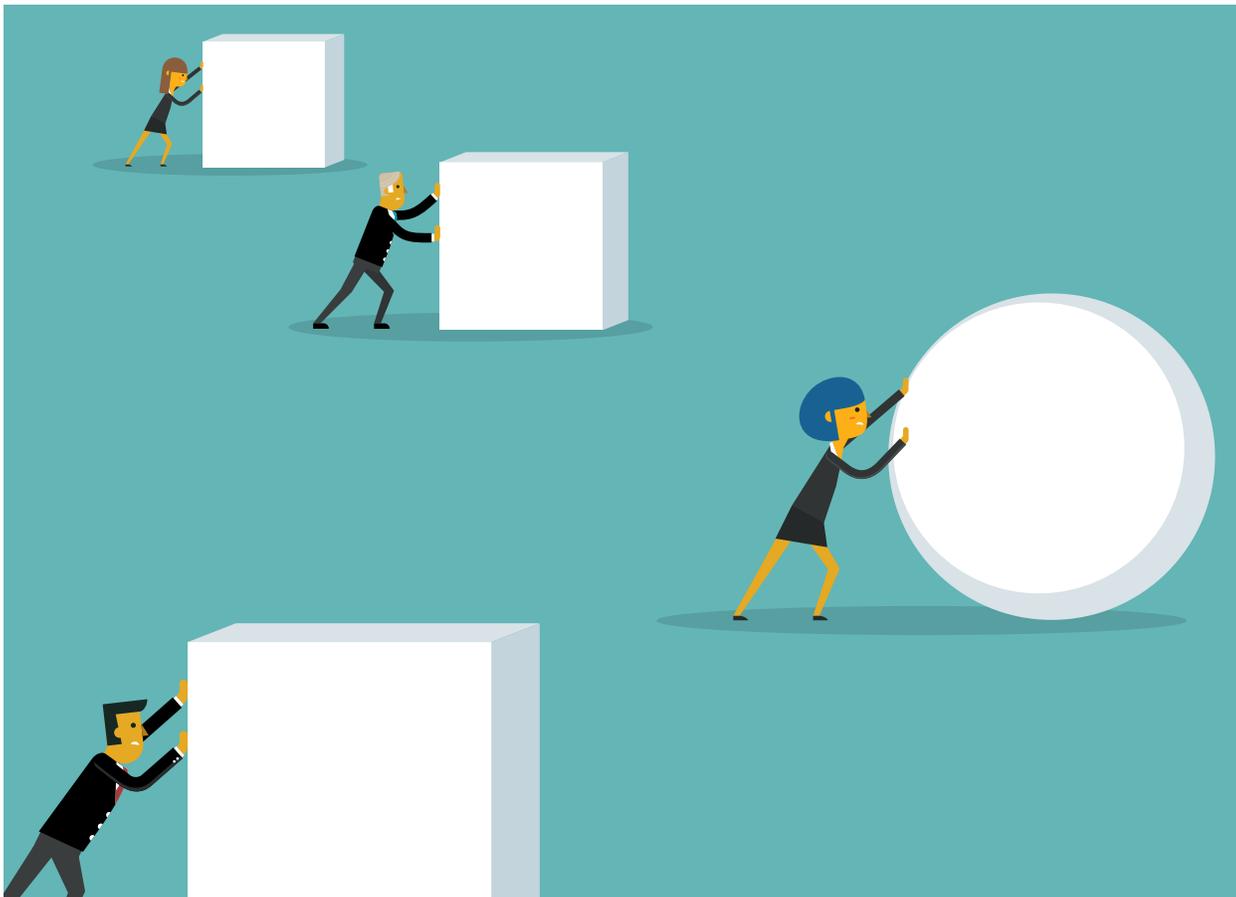
**5. Call references** – If you haven't done it yet, pick up the phone and call some of the customers that have implemented the new technology in their organizations. This is a great way to predict what challenges you may run into.

**6. Build in extra time** – Farm Journal's Morgan says it best when he indicates that you need to budget in more time for the launch to account for changing priorities and challenges that arise during the development process.

**7. Continually evaluate KPIs** – Finally, don't just wait until the end to evaluate KPIs. Be sure to evaluate KPIs along the way so the decision-making process doesn't have to wait until the POC is over.

**8. Make a decision** – Regroup with your team, KPIs in hand to review the results of the POC, and meet with key stakeholders to determine whether needs will be met by this tool and if an investment is warranted.

**9. Demo as if you will implement** - The key with POC's is that is that once one is in motion, digital media executives need to plan for the potential mass roll-out of the technology in their organization. In other words, the POC is not just a trial. It should be considered the starting point of the technology implementation process. Build in checkpoints in the POC timeline to review POCs and make liftoff easier if it looks like it's in the cards.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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