

The Art and Science of Partnering

Engaging the channel can have a big impact on your business.
Seems pretty obvious, but getting it right is hard.



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Introduction

The data is clear: channel partners are more important than ever to a vendors' revenue stream, market access, and customer satisfaction.

For vendors, elevating the partner experience is critical for revenue growth. How vendors design and execute partner experiences will improve partner satisfaction, reduce partner churn, and increase sales.

Why us?

We bring an uncommon perspective to channel-led selling. We are specialists in what matters most: optimizing the buyer experience. Our approach is rooted in the belief that vendors who transform the partner experience will create a sustainable competitive advantage.

How do we do it?

Our channel partner strategists think in terms of creating pull, not push. Our sales specialists understand that partners want to make money, get treated fairly, and benefit from access to resources.

This whitepaper shares our angle on what it takes to win with channel partners.

Avoid common missteps.

Let's start with feedback you may have heard from channel partners. Do one or more of these statements sound familiar?

- Frequent changes are an inconvenience at best, and a nightmare at worst: staffing changes, re-organization, stop-start interaction, and channel conflict.
- Your partner program is atypical and complicated. It needs to be easier to engage and measure.
- There is too much focus on the vendor solution and not enough emphasis on solving the customer problem more broadly.
- Vendors say they embrace and support partners; in reality, they just want to reach customers or don't understand how to embrace a partner program.
- Vendors think they will have unfettered access to your sales teams. All they need to do is hold a training webinar with your teams and the accounts will just roll right in.



The big trend impacting the Channel.

We see power shifting from vendor to partner. End customers are asking for full solutions to business needs.

For example, end customers want a rich ecommerce experience for their buyers, not just credit card processing. Customers are moving from investing in technologies or product sets to expecting quantifiable business outcomes, such as higher conversion rates and ROI.

So that we're on the same page, partners are the folks who design, develop, and deliver solutions to end customers. Often these are created from a variety of vendor products and services. Since partners are delivering these solutions, they are often accountable for the results.

The partner owns the relationship with the customer, and the customer considers the channel partner a trusted advisor.

All this is to say providing an excellent partner experience is more important than ever.

Partner experience framework.

Partner experience drives partner engagement. The better the experience, the better the engagement, which drives sales, market reach, and customer satisfaction.

Originating from our expertise in buyer experience, we have identified six critical success factors that drive partner experience:

1. People
2. Enablement
3. Infrastructure
4. Channel model
5. Program policies
6. Performance metrics

Do you know what is important to your partners?

Do you know if your company provides a good partner experience?

Are you measuring it?

Do you even know the factors to measure?

Let's take a look.



People.

Above all else, partners want prioritized access to the vendor’s support teams. This highlights a trend that has been happening for years: partners need resources, tools, and materials to be successful with service offerings.

Unfortunately, few vendors provide direct access to specialized partner support resources.

This creates roadblocks for how quickly a partner can respond to their customer. Making partners work through the first-line support questions, or worse, through their Partner Account Manager (PAM), slows response time and thus undermines customer satisfaction with the entire process/solution.

You can elevate the partner experience by providing dedicated support resources assigned to the partner. Create a virtual team between the partner technical teams and your support resources so that each knows the other’s capabilities, experience, and strengths.

And don’t forget two other important factors critical to the partner experience.

The first is the Partner Account Manager, or Channel Account Manager. Overlooked when things are going well and blamed when things go sideways, the role of the Partner Account Manager is no longer an entry-level role. The role is essential to partner success and growth.

The second critical factor is the alignment with the sales team on partner deals.

Why? Because so much of the partner experience with a vendor happens at the field level. Potential friction comes from the compensation structure for field sales teams. Assess how their compensation models impact behaviors with channel partners.



“Partners want direct access to vendor specialized sales and support resources.”

Enablement.

How you enable partners has a huge effect on their experience with you, their engagement in selling your solutions, and their profitability... and yours too!

We're often asked by our clients how to better enable partners for success. Considering the desired access to services and support people in the last section, our view shouldn't surprise you: post-sales services enablement outranks everything else.

Together with services training, partners value access to the methodologies and tools to effectively perform services. Vendors can increase the experience and engagement with their products by helping partners become successful and profitable with services. Keep in mind that partners make significantly more margin from professional services than they do from reselling products.

Lastly, you only get one chance to make a good first impression. That first impression is on-boarding. Vendors, ignore this at your peril. Partners cannot successfully sell your products as part of a full solution addressing customer needs if they haven't gone through the onboarding process.

While it hasn't been demoted to footnote status, certification has become a lower-tier priority. Partners are not enthusiastic about chasing the badge that comes with a rigorous testing and evaluation process if they can't win more deals or charge more.



“You only get one chance to make a good first impression – and it starts with on-boarding.”

Infrastructure.

It sounds geeky, but having a partner automation system and all the systems tied together with a single sign-on tops our list.

The reason why is these systems provide access to the tools, materials, and people they need to be successful with your products.

This makes life easier for partners. Partners carry an average of 20 product lines. That's 20 portals to log into. Quick and easy online access to tools, materials, and people scores big points for partner experience.

Access should be at the user level, not the partner company. This is better for you in security, reporting, and support.

Dashboards are a winner too. Partners want to check their own performance.

Rounding out infrastructure are communications, feedback, and automated recommendations. The frequency of communications is important. Partners love telling vendors what's wrong.

We recommend an easy feedback button for open-text submissions and regular mini-surveys built into your PRM systems. We're seeing success with vendors implementing systems that make recommendations.

For example, for partners that look like you, we've seen if you take these actions, then your revenues will grow this percent in 12 months.

We see great efficiencies in partner enablement and collaboration by automating all the program elements like materials and messaging, registration and lead management, access support, partner enrollment management and track training and certification.

“The well-conceived application of technology can make daily interaction easy for partners.”

Channel model.

A channel model consists of many elements: partner segmentation and profile, transactional relationships, partner sales and influence potential, and the engagement model.

The partner experience is at its best when it aligns with their business model. Since most solution providers have some portion of their revenues and margins coming from at least two, if not three different engagement models, working with a flexible vendor is important.

To learn more about what makes different partners tick, read the article, [Harnessing the Power of Channels](#).



“There are many sales channels, each with their own characteristics and leverage.”

Program policies.

Program policies have less effect on partner experience than many think. It's not that these are unimportant. They are mostly transparent to partners.

As we've highlighted throughout this paper, services and support programs are critical to partner experience.

Deal registration and co-marketing are important to partner experience, but if a vendor has good policies in place, the specifics don't significantly change their experience.

Partners are adaptable and can live within the vendor's program structure if policies are clearly communicated and consistently executed. This connects back to the people, enablement and infrastructure pillars.

We expected the vendor policies of directly communicating or transacting with the customer to be stronger factors in partner experience. However, these are not big issues when supported by good coordination and collaboration facilitated through PRM systems.

When we asked the partners what program elements – other than margin – they care most about, the answers were technical support, customer service, and pre-sales technical support. Quality leads are always in the mix too.

“Despite perceptions, the impact of policies on partner experience is less than you think.”

Performance metrics.

Vendors and partners need metrics to gauge improvement. Everyone likes to know whether they're doing well.

Measurement of end customer satisfaction is understandable. But, few vendors regularly measure customers' satisfaction with partners. These vendors are trusting partners to accurately and effectively market, sell, install, and support end customers with their products in the mix.

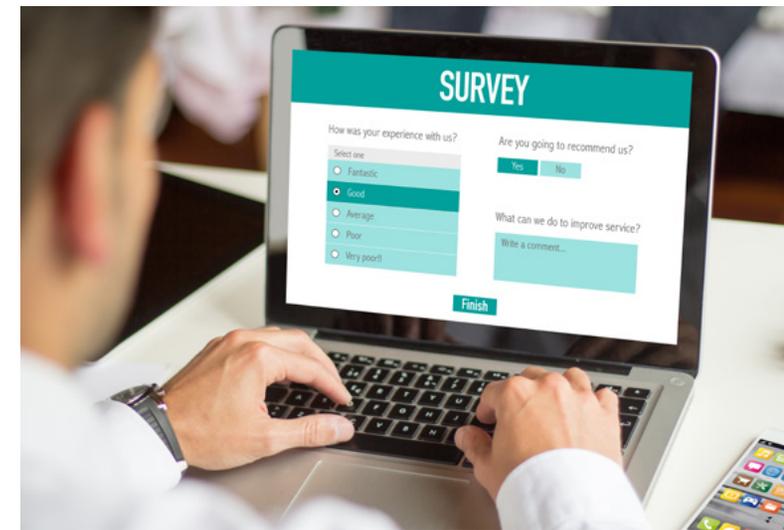
What if partners are doing it wrong?

Customers usually blame the vendor's product, not the partner's implementation. We believe it is the partners' responsibility to make customers happy. Since not all partners are created equal, measure and verify.

It's a similar result for the vendors who measure their partner's experience: few measure it with a customer satisfaction study.

Partner profitability is measured a bit more rigorously, but not always. If you don't do this now, it's worth prioritizing.

A few vendors employ a total partner experience study. This looks not only at program elements, but processes and people as well. This is a 360-degree view of a partner's interactions with the vendor. We expect this to be big.



“Looking ahead, we expect vendors will start to measure the total partner experience.”

Elevate the partner experience.

This year and beyond, think about the importance of partner experience.

Think about the critical success factors that support the experience and how each one is important to your partners. Start by giving more access to people when partners need that access. Take a hard look at all the elements of enablement and infrastructure and see where small changes can make large improvements in productivity and performance.

Channel model, program policies, and metrics should be tackled in turn. Even little fixes can cause ripple effects to improve the relationship you have with partners.

If one or more of the partnering mistakes we mentioned at the start of the whitepaper ring true, seek help. Whether you select us or someone else, we want you to succeed!



Let's chat!

We love sharing our perspective on how to make partnering world-class.

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