



Eight Essentials for Staying Relevant to Your Partner Base



Do I Really Matter to My Partners?

Whether you are at an early stage of building your channel or already have a mature network, that is the one question that you should never stop asking. This is probably the most important question for a channel organization seeking to be and remain truly relevant to their partners. In any relationship, you can't bask in the status quo forever. You need to keep bringing more to the table to stay relevant and interesting, and this applies particularly to the IT channel. If your organization doesn't constantly update the ways it helps channel partners stay competitive, agile and relevant to their customer base, then it's time to take a serious look at your **partner relationship management** programs and processes.

So, how can you find out how genuinely relevant you are to your entire partner base? For a start, companies commonly tend to ask—or more formally **survey their partners** to find out how they're doing, and that's where the disconnect starts. Guess who tends to respond? The top tier partners who offer more to and want more from their vendors and maybe, a few disgruntled partners who have a specific point to make. This leaves the voice of the majority of your partner base completely unheard; this is where opportunity is lost.

Most top tier partners have built strong businesses around the vendor so, while their feedback is very important to keep the relationship healthy, the real breakthrough lies in understanding why so many other partners are not committed to the relationship, starting with those who have left you. This takes backbreaking, time-intensive, but high ROI work. You

have to reach out personally to try to get an hour or just a few minutes with them to ask the most important question: Why did you stop reselling for us?

This is exactly what we have done on behalf of numerous vendor clients with thousands of resellers worldwide. Countless times, we've asked channel partners what is important to them and what elements of a vendor program they consider crucial to reestablishing and continuing a relationship with a vendor—assuming that the vendor remains potentially relevant to their business. From our this research, we have identified eight core success factors, in order of importance:

1. High Quality Technical Support

Above all and no matter what else you do for your partners, the number one item is, always, is how good is your technical support? Whether pre-sales or post-sales, your expert support is essential to enable partners to troubleshoot technical issues from a complex deployment to application integration, and come across as knowledgeable, dependable and reliable to their customers. This is critical in order for the partner to be able to grow the relationship with their customer base. Vendors don't always remember that partners don't work for you; they work for their customers. So, if you help them to win with their customers, you're off to a great start.

A word about offshoring: Far too many companies view technical support as a cost, and end up offshoring support to cut expenses. This is possibly one of the biggest mistakes they can make. Certainly the offshore talent pool is growing, skill levels are, on the whole, on the rise, and outsourced support companies can certainly help you expand the support you offer. But—and this is a really big but—you need to be systematic and scientific in figuring out how not to let deficiencies in language, communication or even technical knowledge get in the way of high quality and speedy support. We hear again and again that partner satisfaction levels drop exponentially when a vendor shifts their support overseas. If your partners report this as a problem, delve more into their complaints. Understanding a problem is the first step towards solving it.

2. Lead Flow

Partners have growth goals, and they need to know how you will help them build their business. You would never expect your direct sales team to generate leads on their own, so isn't it a bit unfair to expect your partners to generate leads on their own? We hear so often from our vendor customers that they are frustrated with their channel partners not generating enough leads on their own. Let's be realistic. There's a reason why they're called resellers, not remarketers.

Most channel partner businesses are purely sales organizations, with little if any marketing expertise or resources. In today's world of content-based **lead generation**, they don't have much chance of generating new leads for your product without access both to a marketing automation platform and structured lead generation processes. They and you will be frustrated if they end up just being a fulfillment arm. A proven, strategic solution is deploying a proper **partner relationship management** platform that can not only distribute leads, but also enable partners to generate leads by leveraging partner marketing automation and partner **marketing concierge services**.

3. Sales Assistance

Channel partners look to their vendors to provide them with the means to present themselves as experts to their customers. That includes thorough sales and technical training and full sets of sales tools, including product demos, cheat sheets, battle cards, technical guides and more. Today most vendors provide all these tools but not necessarily in an easily accessible way or all in one place. One of the biggest challenges for a partner is to find the right sales tools when they really need them, for example when they are face to face with a customer.

One of the best ways to solve this problem is to deploy a very easy-to-use partner **relationship management platform** that is designed to make sure the partner can quickly search through a plethora of content for what they need—and ideally on a mobile device.

Beyond sales tools, during complex deployment discussions engineering support is critical for success, yet many organizations underestimate the need for this important resource and under-invest in sales engineering. The more complex your solutions are, the more sales engineering resources are needed and moreover these must also be specialists in specific deployment environments.

4. Special Pricing

The next hurdle is to make sure you have put in place a complete and transparent process for special pricing beyond the list price. The larger the deal, the more resellers need to be able to offer special pricing for a deal because the buyer wants to make sure they got a bargain. We have often seen partners lose deals to competitors because of overly complex special pricing processes. This is usually because the end customer, lacking any kind of clarity about pricing and feeling that their requests are not being attended to during the sales process, dump the original vendor and go with someone else. This is less the case with SMB transactions, but is critical for complex and large deployments.

5. Marketing Funds and Programs

The next essential is helping the partners to drive leads on their own—although don't expect them to become digital marketers overnight! We have repeatedly seen that the vendors who are most successful in encouraging partners to market on their own are those who take a pragmatic, multi-quarter approach to building out their demand generation programs across horizontal products that sell in the highest volumes across all market segments, and then *(only then)* add specific, targeted vertical campaigns. This approach also calls for a state-of-the-art partner relationship management platform, which not only includes a set of tools to train the partner on various aspects of the solutions, but also a set of do-it-yourself marketing campaigns running on a fully integrated marketing automation platform.

6. Ease of Doing Business

We hear this again and again from partners. Most partners feel there are too many hoops and obstacles to go through to be able to sell a vendor's products. Challenges ranging from technical certification, demo purchase requirements, license key issues, availability of technical and sales support and accessibility of sales tools all make it far from easy for a partner to get and stay on board with vendors.

While vendors may want to try to remove all these hurdles at once, the more realistic way forward for a successful channel programs is to take a pragmatic approach. Start by determining what the partner is actually going to sell. If it is a transactional product, there is no place for complexity. Drop as many of the hurdles as possible, make it simple for the partner to find pricing and product specifications, and let them go sell. On the other hand, if they are aiming to deploy complex, large data center solutions for high profile enterprise customers, yes, make sure partners are willing to go through the necessary steps to learn and deploy the solution properly. Just bear in mind that separating the channel requirements for different types of sales goes a long way towards making sure your channel programs are easy to understand and will be adopted by partners.

7. Human Touch

Why do banks have human tellers as well as ATMs? Apart from the fact that some people don't trust machines with anything sensitive, the more complex the transaction the more variables are involved, and the more likely it is that we will have special requests. At heart, we all want to talk to a human unless it's a very, very simple transaction.

In the same way, channel marketing automation certainly has a place in driving productivity and growth, but it is not a replacement for the entire channel organization. Deploying a state-of-the-art partner relationship management platform should free up your channel organization from day-to-day, tactical tasks like tracking forms via emails, managing Excel spreadsheets and manual reporting, so that they can actually engage with partners, listen talk to them, and help them and grow their businesses.

8. Rewards and Recognition

Last but not least, celebration is a key way to excite your partner base, spark healthy competition and share best practices. It is essential for you to recognize your high performing partners on a consistent basis across all countries. While many companies have sales rewards and rebates as core programs, together with annual awards at partner events, the best way to build momentum is to make awards an ongoing activity, recognizing partners on a quarterly basis on the various aspects of your channel programs. With so many easy-to-use video conferencing software options to choose from (*like WebEx, Go To Meeting, Blue Jeans and others*), it is easy to set up quarterly virtual award ceremonies where senior channel management members reward partners for their latest achievements.

In today's hyper-competitive channel environment, loyalty is hard to come by without significant thought and effort, but a relationship can be earned, provided a vendor is sincerely focused on what the partners care most about. While channel marketing automation platforms comprising partner relationship management and partner marketing management are critical for scalability and success, not everything can be automated: the other critical components of channel programs such as technical support, sales assistance, lead distribution, relationship building and rewards remain s cornerstones for becoming a truly relevant partner to the channel.

“ Vendors need to be highly selective about the partners they select and what to do to make the engagement meaningful.”



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