

VENDORS: Give Channel Partners What They Need To Help YOU!

Channel partners who help their customers with products and technologies are also market influencers. Product and technology vendors have a vested interest in helping to make these influencers successful as they help each other to drive sales. Vendors that recognize what partners need from them and follow through to provide it, add to their own success. Regardless of the source of help that customers receive and whether they pay for it or not, customers buy more when they see greater overall value from solutions that are presented to them. Those that provide service and support add to value, and do a better job for mutual customers when they are supported via vendors' channel partner programs. If you do not have a program, it is time to consider one. If you have one, it is time to assess its value and make improvements.

Partner Programs satisfy needs on behalf of mutual customers

Influencers spend many hours conducting research and learning skills needed to do their jobs successfully. Companies that work with them to increase knowledge and experience and to satisfy special needs have advantages when it comes to getting their products to market. This is the role of partner programs. These marketing support programs range from informal, reactive interaction with partners using part of a single marketing person's time to extensive programs such as Microsoft's which is based upon formal, coordinated, proactive efforts involving multiple dedicated specialists. The first step in developing a program is to recognize the importance of influencers. The next step is to contact different types of service providers, e.g., consultants, solution providers, value added resellers, integrators and analysts, to explain that their company cares, understands their importance, then lets them know who is assigned to help them and how to contact them when assistance is needed.

Partner Programs reduce information overload

As consultants, we seldom receive all the support that we would like, especially to help us do our jobs well and meet all of the challenges associated with finding and facilitating the best solutions for our clients. Other market influencers and channel partners experience similar issues when they interact with large numbers of potential sources and need to pick and choose among them. Keeping informed about products and services that are available and recognizing those that are being planned for the future is increasing difficult. There is a growing list of people, companies, products and services, technologies, applications and architectures that need to be tracked on a regular basis. Partner programs help us to stay current and serve our customers better. There are important ways to make these programs more effective and useful.

Periodic reminders make a difference when done well

The choices that we make on behalf of our customers reflect our level of comfort and familiarity with products and services. Too often, it is the large companies with the big marketing and sales budgets that get our attention with prominent ads in the trade magazines that we read, large footprints at the tradeshow that we attend, and constant mail and email inviting us to attend special events and interact and receive assistance. Smaller companies are at a disadvantage, but certainly are not out of the game. Big is not always better. Startups simply must understand their markets and use marketing resources expeditiously. They need to understand the value of courting consultants and other market influences that extend their own resources.

It's Quality not Quantity that counts!

Certainly large budgets can provide an advantage. However, it is not just the smaller, less experienced firms that fail to get our attention or a favorable response. Even large companies that should know better contact us with messages that are not designed for us or are confusing and poorly written. Sometimes, we feel part of a quota. A certain number of messages at times seem to be sent out regardless of the audience. General purpose announcements are merged with a mailing list with little or no thought about relevance. Other messages are unclear, lack focus, lose our interest and are discarded before we bother to decipher the message and decide what is intended. Successful communications require planning that properly matches a message to an intended audience.

Successful relationships require commitment

Partnering between channel partners and vendors must bring tangible benefits to each party. However, to be successful in working together, it takes effort on the part of each of them. Vendors need to be proactive yet ready to help and partners need to invest sufficient time and effort to learn about the vendor and how best to apply its products and services to support specific customer needs. It can take time and no one should look simply to the short-term. There must be incentives of some type to encourage the necessary investments by each party. Do not misunderstand. Incentives do not need to be monetary. A reputation for objectivity must not be compromised when clients are paying for the best possible recommendations.

Focus on the needs of the audience

Personal preferences and circumstances dictate what will be appropriate for a particular application. Different partners may prefer or even require different types of service and support. It is best not to expect a one-size-fits-all solution that will work the same way in every instance for every partner. Instead, stay flexible and start with a menu of services that contain core elements yet sufficient choices that allow each individual to select what they need.

Getting great results doesn't always need to be costly

There are alternatives with different price points. It does not necessarily imply that one will be more or less effective just because there is a cost difference. Sometimes, even the least expensive proves the most effective. For example, the Internet represents an excellent, cost-effective replacement for print media that when properly maintained is always up-to-date. In addition to timeliness, the Internet provides search options that are otherwise not available and allows information to be quickly forwarded to others. Although Internet publishing has a certain mystique and level of difficulty, it continues to become easier to implement. It may still have its quirks, but with pre-designed templates, many professionals can add and publish their own information on company websites. Simple, inexpensive postcards and emails can then be used as reminders for customers and partners to visit the websites to view new information thereby saving printing and mailing expense.

We organize communications and support options into four categories

Careful planning, preparing and organizing of information make a big difference in the success of partner marketing and sales efforts. We recommend providing information and support by beginning with a high level overview as follows:

1. ***Brief Overview/Introduction:*** A single Web page or sheet of paper will suffice. Keep the message simple highlighting the basic facts and figures that influencers need to know about your business. Include company demographics, a brief description of products and services offered, markets served, and types of operations supported. Do this while emphasizing reasons why and how customers find your company to be attractive and worth considering. Be sure to focus on unique qualities such as new emerging products and services that differ from those of competitors. Focus on features and benefits that make it easier to prepare Business Cases to justify investments and obtain purchase approvals.
2. ***Knowledgebase:*** Give users the ability to access a well-organized, user-friendly, on-line knowledgebase that is searchable and provides answers to their questions. Collect information on search failures and make on-going enhancements to add more and better capabilities to satisfy future requests. Simple listings of Frequently Asked Questions with brief answers are also helpful who are looking for more general information.
3. ***Basic Training:*** Provide modules with details that key off points made in the overview. An alternative means of access can be organized into a brief curriculum that helps to build basic knowledge about your company, its products and services, and typical applications. If desired, track individual progress, ask questions and provide incentives for completion of all modules. Training can be delivered in a number of ways. Although some continues to be via in person seminars and training conferences, more and more training is delivered via the Internet. Sessions that begin as live presentations are frequently archived for later on demand broadcasts. Evenings and weekends are great since they do not cut into billable time.
4. ***On-going Assistance and Support:*** Enhance, add, and update the basic knowledge and experience skills of your partners on a regular basis. Use a mixture of communications and special

support tools such as templates to aid in RFP (Request for Proposal) preparation and support. Depending on costs and effort required, features can be tailored for all partners or selectively for certain participants or groups of partner members based upon their sales value to you.

Options to consider for On-going Assistance and Support include:

- Print and e-newsletter templates for partner to use in communications to customers
- Case studies, technical white papers and other documentation
- Financial considerations to facilitate preparation of Business Cases to justify a project using your solutions
- Specialized technical product training and certification
- Webinars, teleconferences, seminars, briefings, demonstrations, workshops and conferences for partner sales training
- Sample telephone scripts, sales presentations and demonstration guides to set minimum standards for sales calls and customer support
- Co-sponsored events for mutual customers and prospects
- Not for Resale (NFR) product samples (free or discounted) to minimize the cost of “selling” (recommending) your products
- Chat and toll-free priority help lines

Please note: It usually is possible to provide support services for partners using resources that are already in place for other audiences. Simply build a “front-end” that coordinates and facilitates separate access without duplicating functions and capabilities and add missing features as needed.

Getting started begins with obtaining high level commitment and support

Before proceeding, prepare a business plan that identifies expectations and defines and describes the metrics that will be used to evaluate the success of your program. Include an initial budget based on a very tentative list of service options and alternatives as described below.

Plan to introduce your program in phases using a rapid prototyping process. Before starting, be sure to obtain the enthusiastic support and commitment of those who will pay the bills. Make sure that they understand that relationship building does not happen quickly, especially to become fully implemented. Along the way, there will be successes that help reinforce and maintain encouragement for all the hard work and expenditure of resources. However, make sure you have a strong commitment for the long-haul. Anything less will annoy and confuse participants should funding be dropped. As you begin, we cannot stress enough the importance of gathering input from a sample of those that you expect will participate in your program. Also, include those who will be called upon to help from within your company. They need to be part of “The Team” and to be represented in the planning and implementation efforts from day one.

Start with a list of service options and alternatives

Consider all lists and planning documents to be subject to change as work progresses.

1. Use the brief starter list provided above. Make your own additions and changes, but do not expect to make it perfect from the start. It is an iterative process.
2. Put the items in a spreadsheet with columns for the different types and priorities of channel partners that your firm will support.
3. Include estimates of costs, resource requirements and timing.
4. Highlight those options that can be readily implemented with existing resources.
5. Assign responsibilities for specific services.
6. Identify additional options that can be added in the future and the value associated with each one.
7. Select prospective partners willing to assist in trialing and providing feedback. You may even want to begin an informal program to support high value partners on a select basis before making a formal announcement and opening up partner services to a broad audience.
8. Get inputs from your target audience regarding services, including any that may have been missed, and examine their priorities.
9. Update all plan documents based upon all recommendations and discussion from The Team.
10. Create a professional “front-end” facilitate access to your partner services.
11. Prepare internal and external program announcements and communicate regularly with participants.

12. Begin limited trial with those companies and individuals selected in item 7. Make any needed changes and continue rollout as appropriate to other groups.

Companies get much more out of partner programs than they put into them. A special benefit is including partners in a customer feedback loop that among other things provides specific inputs that permit developers to make product improvements.

However, do not expect a program to be a panacea that will offset adverse impacts from serious product and business deficiencies. It may even aggravate them. For example, partner programs are no cure for outdated products and services and poor customer service. It is simply one element in a series of complementary efforts that help a business increase its overall effectiveness and success in the marketplace.

If you do not have a program already, we encourage you to join the growing list of companies that do. If you already have one, think about making improvements. Either way, please consider us to help with your planning, setup, implementation and on-going fulfillment and support.

Please contact us

Rockwood Management Services
52 Johnson Drive
Chatham, New Jersey 07928-1168 U.S.A.
001-973-635-1970
info@Rockwood.com