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CHANNEL ENABLEMENT BLUEPRINT

4 REASONS **WHY CHANNEL RELATIONSHIPS FAIL?**

There is the old cliche that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing time after time, but expecting a different result. Bringing on new channel partners to sell your product or service can be a very similar situation. The channel sales model is a popular one for firms to use when they want to significantly ramp up sales without adding the internal infrastructure needed to do it in-house. Channel sales is an exceptionally common solution for driving sales growth beyond the internal capacity of the firm to do so. In particular, channel sales can be attractive because it can more quickly reach new buyers and market segments--especially overseas--that are beyond the reach and experience of internal sales teams. A firm may feel it lacks the experience needed to infiltrate new and unfamiliar markets, the management skills to oversee a large sales team, or the infrastructure or capital needed to cover large new territories. As a result, many firms gravitate toward the channel model to drive revenue growth.

The problem with this model is that businesses may have unrealistic expectations. They expect the model to yield revenues without significant efforts on their own part. As a result, they are surprised when the results from each new partner are a disappointment.

In this whitepaper, we are going to discuss these unrealistic expectations. In particular, we will look at 4 major things that firms think a channel partner should be doing, and why that isn't going to happen. Whether they are even aware of it, many businesses have expectations of what their channel partners will do to help sell a product, and these are rarely going to be met

Channel partners will not read your mind

Channel partners do not intuitively know or understand the vision and missions of their corporate partner. This creates a problem: channel partners who are poorly versed in the corporate partner's product narrative cannot be expected to communicate it effectively to their own prospects. The product message breaks down and prospects are lost because the message loses relevance.

As a competitor, you have developed your product or service with a precise set of targets in mind. You may have specific personas you focus on. For each of these personas, your marketing team has developed a series of pain points that you help resolve. If your marketing team has done its job, you have developed a very clear, strong message that is to be communicated to prospects. Most likely, that messaging has been completely internalized by everyone in your company, at the very least by those in sales and marketing. It is even taken for granted. What happens, however, when a new channel partner is appended loosely as a new arm of your sales efforts? The expectation may be that they will conduct their own internal training to communicate this message to every rep. This is unlikely. Even worse, and more common, is that your internal marketing team, which has so effectively internalized the product message, will assume it is apparent to anyone, and fail to communicate the messaging, in all its intricacies, to the channel partner

Clearly, either of these expectations are flawed. Channel partners represent many different lines, and do not have the time or initiative to discern and understand your product narrative on their own. Instead, they will "guess" about the basic message and assume they will get it right. Once this happens, the message is distorted, branding is diluted, and prospects are lost because the product loses relevance.

What can you learn from this? The lesson is that if you expect a channel partner to succeed, you have the responsibility to give them the knowledge they need. You need to enable them, and that means training them from the first day they sign on. This means walking them through your messaging and the pain points of the leads they will encounter. They need to be guided along the sales path, be told every obstacle and dead end, so they can get to a sale fast.

Channel partners cannot figure out what to do with all your marketing assets

Closely related to the above topic is the issue of your marketing collateral. What will your channel partners do with the assets you provide them?

The answer is, "probably not what they should, unless you've enabled them with specific and precise guidance."

Every marketing asset that you have plays a specific role within the sales funnel. Outside of that specific function, it has minimal value to a prospect. For example, a brochure that is primarily informational regarding the general value of a product line is wasted on a lead who already knows her precise needs and has narrowed the decision down to a brand choice. Using that informational asset this late in the sales funnel would be off-putting to the lead. She isn't getting the data she needs.

Our point here is that your channel partners, on their own, do not have your knowledge and experience to understand which assets work best in which situations. They do not have the history to determine this on their own. You are the only resource that can provide this information and if you fail, so does your channel partner.

In short, without guidance, assets will be misused and leads lost. As a result, your channel partner assumes your line isn't sellable, and will decide to promote another vendor's line instead. In turn, you assume the channel partner isn't qualified, and go out looking for another channel partner, and the cycle begins anew.

Channel partners will not use collateral that doesn't work for their region /area/target persona, etc.

Your channel partner wants to sell, and nothing is more frustrating for them than to recognize the need for personalized targeted marketing assets, and then be stuck with generic, one-size-fits-no-one-well collateral. Channels may find the generic, mass produced marketing collateral generated by corporate marketing departments to be ineffective in their regional or local segments.

In order to simplify their marketing, businesses want to create marketing assets that can be used across all channels in all situations. Basically, they want to limit marketing expenses by creating generic collateral. The difficulty for your channel partners is that they see the merit of attracting prospects with personalized, targeted marketing. If your collateral is too general, they will see only two options available to them. 1) they can try to tinker with the material or re-create it on their own, thus risking a degeneration of your branding, or 2) they can actively push the products of other vendors who give them the option to have targeted assets. Either way, you lose.

Channel partners aren't going to wait for you to show up and help

The last thing you'd better not expect to happen is that channel partners will sit around and wait for you to show up and help them with marketing or sales. Your channel partners are in this for the sale, and they have relationships with many businesses. Channel partners are going to focus their energies on the product line that is easiest to sell. Corporate partners have to deal with the reality that they are not, for lack of a better term, in a monogamous relationship. Theirs is not the only product or service line represented by an individual channel partner. As a result, if they don't succeed in making their products the most attractive to sell, they'll fall into the "back of the catalog." Corporate partners need to find a way to convince each channel that their product can be sold more easily, and with better revenue yields, than any other. If they fail to do this, they won't be given much attention. Corporate partners need to find a way to convince each channel that their product can be sold more easily, and with better revenue yields, than any other.

This means if you enable their sales with the use of sales playbooks and solid onboarding along with identifiable assets and collateral that can be targeted and personalized, they will be much more likely to put you ahead of the pack. When you enable your partners, they can sell more.

It is important to remember that a Channel partner is a separate entity, not a part of your organization. This fact can be easy to forget. Every partner has a distinct mission and priorities that are not always aligned with your own. In summary, channel enablement is a broad platform that is utilized to create a start-to-finish process the makes it easy for a channel to sell your product or service. By adopting this broad-based process, you can become the vendor of choice, eliminating the barriers to a successful channel sales model.

In summary, there are a variety of challenges to the channel model. However, that doesn't mean it isn't an excellent model. Once we recognize the challenges, we can recognize the opportunity to overcome barriers and enable this powerful model.

However, there is an approach or process, known as channel sales enablement that can be used to fully recognize the potential of the channel sales model.

ENVISIONING A CHANNEL ENABLEMENT BLUEPRINT

What does a fully enabled channel look like? Simply, it is a channel partner who perceives your product/service line to the be "go-to" one when it is time to sell to a new prospect. It is the one that markets itself, and is easy to sell. In a broader sense, Channel enablement drives channels to willingly take ownership. They feel they have the freedom to market effectively to regional and local markets, personalizing as needed without tedious reliance on the parent marketing arm.

Enablement makes your product easy to sell, so they focus on you, not another vendor. An additional virtue of the enablement model is that it takes the pressure off the use of the “price only” sales model. It helps avoid price becoming the preferred driver of channel sales.

How does Channel enablement happen? What is the blueprint for building a complete enablement platform? The blueprint consists of 2 key, interrelated segments. The first is the relatively linear relationship corporate has with a partner all the way from recruiting through campaign engagement to measurement. The second is enablement across the relationship.

1. **Recruitment** - You don’t hire just anyone off the street. The same principle goes for choosing a channel partner. You should have a structured, defined process very similar to the one you use to attract and nurture prospects for your products/services. This means landing pages for sign ups, lead scoring and segmentation, nurturing drips and activity monitoring.

2. **Training and onboarding -** No one can sell unless they fully understand you, your product, and what sales tools work best with what, where and when. More importantly, they shouldn’t be expected to figure this out for themselves. Playbooks can do much of this, then certification programs serve to assess and guide training, and partner portals provide ongoing access to collateral.

3. **Engagement -** Simply put, you never leave them on their own. Campaigns via email and SMS will keep you in constant touch. You guide them throughout your relationship, keeping them updated with your products/services and your end-consumer market. You prepare them so they can sell your product/service as much as you want them to. Ways to increase channel engagement levels include offering timely certification programs, releasing training videos, sharing information about new product/services or latest market trends and giving them new /updated sales collateral. These elements will ensure your channel partners come back to you because they make your channel partner’s job easier.

4. **Measurement -** You can’t improve what you can’t measure, so you need to know what is working and what isn’t. When you engage in multi-step, multi-channel marketing campaigns, developing usable metrics can be difficult. Consider the array of levels that need to be measured. There are the various channel partners, all operating somewhat differently. Each of those partners has individual players working within the organization. At any given point, everyone is tracking a set of individual prospects each of whom is active at any one moment in a unique place in the sales funnel. How can you possibly track and evaluate every actor’s behavior? Automation tools can do this so that you can finally wrap your arms around your entire sales and marketing apparatus.

Channel Enablement across the spectrum

This linear plane is not the only field on which enablement can occur. In addition to the above, there is the enablement which happens across the spectrum of the corporate/ channel relationship. It occurs on various fronts, such as corporate marketing, partner sales, and operations.

For example, Marketing is enabled through a platform that helps channel partners by providing lead nurturing, routing, scoring and tracking. Automated marketing cuts down the marketing department's duties , and allows partners to sell better because they know exactly how and when to respond to a prospect at any point.

Another example is content syndication. This allows you to publish personalized content on behalf of your partners. They benefit from the sales and marketing value of social media, but don't have to invest the resources to make it happen. It is things like these they couldn't (and wouldn't) do on their own. When you do it for them, you make yourself the vendor of choice for making an easier, faster sell.

On the partner sales front, they become more quickly engaged through playbooks that hand-hold through the sales process. They don't have to determine or guess what to do in each sales situation. They get tools like 360 prospect view, so they know where a prospect is in the sales cycle. From this they can determine the most relevant response.

Finally, there is enablement on the operations front. Managers need to know what's going on. For instance, enablement means providing data about every partner's lead registration, and status reports about all of their activities such as certifications, lead interaction, and profiles of their asset download activity. It also monitors co-op fund usage by channel partners and registers effectiveness. Corporate should only be using MDF if they can measure the value of these expenditures at the level of each channel partner. Quantifying the results of these expenditures is a critical part of "enabling" sales.

The lesson is that enablement is a proactive approach that you have to take that begins with onboarding and proceeds throughout the entire sales process. Your channel partners should never left alone to "figure it out," because they will figure out you aren't a very good partner.

Mindmatrix offers Channel & Sales Enablement software for direct and indirect sales channels. Mindmatrix is the only provider of a Single Unified Platform that combines PRM software, Direct Sales and Channel Enablement, Channel Marketing Software, Marketing Automation software and Marketing Asset Management. Mindmatrix takes you through every step in the sales process from lead to revenue, enabling your salespeople and channel partners to sell more, faster.

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