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Tune into Your Channel

by Brian Anderson

You've spent the money and time to develop a functioning sales channel but recent results are consistently inconsistent. The results aren't quite there. The signal is mixed at best. What steps should you consider without having to reset the dial? Often it is the little things that count. Small changes can lead to big results.

What's After Partner 'Training'?

It takes weeks, if not months to train your own sales force, with training sessions, sales meetings, webcasts, product demos, sales kick off events, the list goes on. On average, companies invested four hours a week per headcount over the last year across the entire sales team. No doubt you've invested a considerable amount.

How does that compare with sales training of your partners? Parity is not required but there should be a reasonable proportion. In most companies partner sales training is an ad hoc process: A webcast here and there; if you are lucky, you've done a joint sales call or two. How can you expect the same productivity from a partner's sales team when you only get a fraction of their 'mindshare'?

The answer? Provide multiple ways for your partner to learn more about your solution, starting with formalized classes (online and traditional).

- Start with the basics and repeat them often and thoroughly. What's your company's elevator pitch? Make it easy to know and access.
- Give them what they want when they want it: Online training. Make them feel exclusive by putting it in their partner page.
- Make sure they know who to call when they run out of what they know (which is early in the sales cycle).

The Price is Right

Start with the partner's view. Are they using your pricing tool? Most partners represent multiple vendors, and each one offers compelling solutions, many with overlapping messaging and technical roadmaps. Each vendor, including you, has unique tools and sales programs, creating confusion for their sales teams. For a partner, pricing your solution can be a cumbersome exercise.

Examine your pricing tool. How easy is it to use? It might be pretty straight-forward if you use it every day. Think about it from the partner's sales rep's perspective: Do they need to learn something new? Is it another spreadsheet? Is it web based? How do they know they have the most current version? You shouldn't expect your partner to do something that you don't do yourself?

- Make it easy on your partner to price your solution. KISS applies here.
- If there are pre-priced bundled offerings, be sure to list what's included and what's not.
- If there are customized elements, make the path to custom quotes and special pricing clear. If you don't, they will create their own, which can result in problems on all sides.

Fanmail from a Flounder

You are in daily, if not hourly contact with your own sales team. Emails, voicemails, and conference calls fill your day. But, when was the last time you engaged in a dialogue with your partners, other than asking for an order or to make good on their outstanding receivable? You might consider:

- Setting up a blog for your partner community. It's easy to do and easier to post and update. Just make sure you say what you want the world to know.
- Making your partners feel special. Each of us wants to know we are special. Congratulate them on an order, ask for their advice. Reach out in a predictable way, once a month or even once a quarter. Personal is best but even a newsletter will do.

Plan Your Business

When's the last time you reviewed your partner's business plan for your business? Hmmm, no business plan? If you didn't set that expectation at the beginning you have by default implemented the squeaky-wheel business model. If this is the case, you can change if you want to. You don't need to provide new incentives; they have already signed up to be your partner! You just need to reset some expectations and that is, after all, what the partner expects of you, non? So think about:

- What's in the plan?
- What are the metrics?
- Who has responsibility to create and manage a business plan with each partner?

Align the Organization

It is important that your organization supports you and understands that the channel doesn't come to you, you come to it. Whether you are managing the channel on a shoestring budget or have a large, developed channel for a global 2000 company, the same fundamentals always apply:

- Create awareness: Educate and inform your colleagues every chance you get about what the channel is doing for the organization. Pick up the phone, send timely emails, and invite yourself to team meetings where you can update your colleagues in Marketing, Engineering and Customer Support. Reach out and let them know.
- Create Support: Along the way, try this: "Can you help me?" Help is a word people just can't resist. All of their defenses seem to melt away and position you to get what you need. Tell them you need their brain power (compliments work well here as well). Be sure and trade the favor but also take the time to explain what you are up to and the reason behind it.
- Create Ownership: Longer term, you'll want to move to a model that is more proactive in its support of your channel activities and then the next step is driving toward functional ownership.

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