

## Partner Loyalty Framework Deep Dive: Strategy



Suppliers seeking loyal partners must develop market-leading strategies to innovate, communicate and share knowledge across their channel networks

Products and solutions, communications, and training offerings must be tailored to partners' market opportunities and challenges

Partners that see their input valued and acted upon are more likely to appreciate the supplier's commitment to the relationship

"You complete me," says Tom Cruise's title character in the 1996 movie *Jerry Maguire* when he realizes that Dorothy (played by Renee Zellweger) is his ideal life partner. Some critics have complained this statement is a warning sign of co-dependency, or blame the screenwriter for reinforcing unrealistic expectations. Fans, however, hear the actor's earnest words as a statement of loyalty that foreshadows a perfectly committed relationship.

As b-to-b suppliers attempt to extend their reach, they engage with many channel partners but struggle to sustain long-term partner loyalty. The result is a series of fleeting and unsatisfying partner relationships. In this brief, the last in a three-part series, we examine elements of channel program strategy that foreshadow successful efforts by suppliers to maximize their partner mindshare and increase long-term partner loyalty.

### THREE STRATEGIES TO BUILD LOYALTY

Because partners are generally non-exclusive in their supplier relationships, suppliers seeking to differentiate themselves to drive partner loyalty should ensure consistent focus on three key strategies throughout channel program planning and execution:

- *One: innovation.* Neither suppliers nor partners can compete effectively if their offerings fail to keep pace with market leaders. Customers seek solutions vs. single products, so suppliers should deliver impactful, solution-focused messages that differ from what partners typically hear and that partners can relay to their prospects and customers. Channel marketing often does not interlock with product management and product marketing teams, so partners' needs and channel readiness are not factored into decisions

on product messaging and delivery. Channel marketing should fill these gaps with channel-centric messaging and programs to create demand for partner-delivered solutions. When launching a new technology or offering, suppliers can add a partner loyalty incentive as an extra barrier to keep competitors out.

- *Two: communication.* A channel program must include a highly effective strategy for communicating to partners (supplier-to-partner), through partners (partner-to-customer) and for partners (supplier-to-customer). A consistent cadence of relevant, up-to-date information should be tailored to each partner. Communications to partners should include information on program offerings, product roadmaps, partner success stories and changes in the supplier's business model. A supplier can differentiate itself by sharing market intelligence (e.g. segment health, buyer trends) that will benefit the partner. Use automated social media content syndication to help partners publish relevant content to their customer audiences using their own social media accounts. Supplier-to-customer communications should validate partners by positioning them as trustworthy, qualified providers of the supplier's products, solutions and related services. After determining which communication vehicles are effective in reaching partners (e.g. emails, blog posts, social media), reinforce messaging by alternating these vehicles in an organized cadence to reinforce messaging and increase frequency. Suppliers also should create forums to exchange feedback with partners, as partners that believe their input is valued are more likely to appreciate the supplier's

commitment to enhancing and improving the relationship. A social media voting option for partners to “like” or “dislike” channel programs and content assets also can be a useful way to gather partner feedback.

- *Three: subject matter expertise.* Equip partners with specialized training and certifications that enable them to differentiate themselves from their competitors. Build out specialization paths focused on enhancing partner readiness to sell the supplier’s offerings into vertical markets (e.g. industries) or technology areas (e.g. cloud computing, virtualization). Some suppliers develop subject matter expertise in b-to-b channels through the development and delivery of channel ambassador (CA) programs. These programs enable and recognize highly trained partner sales resources who share their knowledge about the supplier’s strategies and offerings with other partner reps, customers and prospects. CAs and other partner experts can use social media to provide timely information as

buyers begin to research potential solutions before they contact a partner rep. Partner organizations that encourage valuable sales resources to become experts in a supplier’s solutions often receive preferred access to leads from the supplier. Incentive programs can also be used to influence partner behavior and reward training completed and certifications earned.

#### THE SIRIUS DECISION

Channel partners have multiple supplier options and actively seek relationships that will advance their business. Suppliers encourage lasting (and profitable) partner relationships when they offer market-leading (and channel-ready) solutions, plan and execute exceptionally effective communications to partners (and their customers), and aggressively reward partners that develop a high level of expertise in the supplier’s offerings. These strategic elements can help a supplier transform partners’ selectivity from a business risk into a lever for winning partner mindshare and market share.