

11 Channel Marketing Best Practices to Engage Partners and Earn Mindshare

Ah, channel partners—you gotta love 'em. They bring your company business on a pay-for-performance basis. They give you access to accounts that your direct team usually can't reach. They can also accelerate your revenue growth faster than any other engine.

But, like all valuable relationships, you have to nurture them to keep them warm and productive—no small feat when your competitors shower them with promises of fat incentives and partnership nirvana. Truth is, incentives and earnings matter (partners are in business to make money, after all), but delivering a high-value package that partners can rely on over the long haul can help you stave off irrational bidders and would-be poachers.

That stiff competition is, in large part, why you need best practices in place to ensure that you're engaging partners on their terms to earn their mindshare.

Setting the Foundation for Successful Channel Partner Marketing

We interviewed channel experts to identify best practices in channel marketing that you can use to jumpstart or refine your partner marketing efforts, and uncovered 11 essential practices in that process.

1 Look at Both Leading and Lagging Indicators to Measure Success of Channel Marketing

Break out the macro-level factors that matter most to your program's success—your pool of active partners, new partners, engaged partners, channel revenue, etc.—and leverage them as the foundations for your practice management. Be sure to track both leading indicators (like leads and/or opportunities) and lagging indicators (like bookings).

2 Pick a Measurement, Any Measurement for Channel Marketing

Marketing ROI is easier to identify in some cases than others. But if you estimate lifetime value for a typical end customer for the software-as-a-service (SaaS) solution you're promoting via pay-per-click (PPC), for example, you can back your way into a reasonable ROI estimate. Always measure so that you can establish baselines and pursue improvements in *relative* performance.

3 Take a Revenue Marketing Approach to Channel Marketing

We sometimes talk about unused market development funds (MDF) as a lost opportunity for partners and suppliers alike. But that's not the only missed opportunity, especially when you have high-performing content assets. Taking the time to customize and distribute those assets can maximize your potential ROI from them.

4 Build Content Partners Can Customize for Marketing Automation

Satisfaction with marketing automation is notoriously low across all industries. But that's less about the merits of marketing automation engines themselves than it is the content that goes into them. When you have good content available, putting it to work in automation routines can deliver your program a "force-multiplier" effect.

5 Include Partner Performance in Your Channel Marketing Measurements

Since not all partners perform equally, factoring individual partner performance into your assessments can help you better understand how your programs perform. For example, examining your new partners across the length of your sales cycle—say, six months—to see how many are closing deals or have legitimate options in the pipeline can yield insight into your program’s performance over time.

Those of us in the channel were revenue marketers before revenue marketing was a thing. When done right and fueled by the right content, channel marketing is like revenue marketing on steroids. Map out your marketing and media efforts and “channelize” them for partner consumption. You’ll gain partner mind share, pick up revenue opportunities you might otherwise overlook, and in so doing, further underwrite your branding and other “soft” marketing activities with hard marketing that makes the C-Suite happy.

Khali Henderson
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6 Always Seek Improvement in Your Channel Marketing

There are a hundred ways to debate ROI and revenue contributions from any individual marketing effort, but establishing baselines for measurement (see “pick a measurement, any measurement” above) empowers you to establish cycles of continuous improvement. Maintaining status quo won’t cut it, so help your partners always keep an eye on bigger, bolder goals.

7 Evaluate “To” and “Through” Channel Marketing on Their Own Merits

When you’re scrutinizing your to-partner side, you’re looking to drive leads and MQLs. Also look at your cost per lead, what that partner generated over its lifespan, and why the partner did (or didn’t) come to you. From a through-partner standpoint, it’s really all about engagement and satisfaction levels.

8 Bake Engagement into Your Channel Marketing Programs

One way to ensure partner engagement is to build it directly into your programs. Such planning can include training, feedback and special accommodations in both to- and through-channel marketing.

9 Offer Marketing Services or Consulting to Your Partners

Increasingly, vendors are looking at ways to provide hands-on marketing services to help their partners (especially those understaffed in marketing). So consider how you might consider how you can offer marketing training, consulting or campaign deployment as a service to partners (ideally on a shared-cost basis).

10 Feed Your Channel Marketing Programs with Feedback

Nobody knows what your partners need more than your partners do, so ask them. To embrace a partner-first mentality, listen intently to your partners and what they feel they need to succeed. Then make it a special point to add value in those ways.

11 Ask Partners for Their Plans

Partnerships are two-way streets. When your partners want support for marketing initiatives built around your products, you can challenge them to develop plans you can review. They’ll have more skin in the game and will be driven to perform better to keep those opportunities open in the future.

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