

Painting the Channel Training Landscape



Historically, most efforts to train partners have revolved around products and basic sales skills

This limited focus isn't enough in a world where much more is expected from the channel

Organizations that prioritize the transfer of marketing knowledge and skills will drive incremental partner performance

Former NASA engineer Charles Garfield made a career of describing how when pushed to the limit – a concept he called “peak performance” – humans find ways to do extraordinary things. Also an Olympic weightlifter, Garfield trained every day as if he were competing, which prepared him to be the best when things mattered the most.

We believe that taking a similar approach to training in the channel makes the difference between partners that thrive instead of merely survive. In this brief, we examine three cornerstones of a complete channel training effort, detailing specifics within each that drive revenue growth.

ONE: PRODUCT KNOWLEDGE

Product training isn't just about features and functionality anymore. Best-in-class suppliers are taking a multifaceted approach to this first cornerstone, with categories that include:

- *Technical.* Setting up a mock environment where partners can practice a variety of unique situations offers them a chance to make mistakes and learn in a safe environment. SiriusDecisions has noticed a trend with distributors utilizing supplier MDF funds to build out solution centers so that reseller partners can access demo equipment in order to develop their own skills or to leverage them for opportunities with customers.
- *Support.* Partners that offer first-line support to a supplier's customers require specialized training on how to diagnose, troubleshoot and escalate issues. Leading suppliers offer partners an internship which includes a week shadowing support representatives and learning best practices related to solving customer inquiries.

- *Pilot.* Pre-sales engineers must be able to assist customers during the sales cycle, which often includes the facilitation of customer pilots. For a pilot phase, these engineers must be able to understand a customer's environment and how a solution fits; to easily install a solution; and to position themselves as trusted agents. Creating modularized pilots that can be readily plugged into a customer's environment without starting from square one, then training on these modules is a best practice.

Product training often relies on learning management systems delivered via a partner portal or as a standalone entity so that partners can train staff when most convenient. While Web-based training is both cost effective and efficient in that materials can be created once and used many times, it often lacks the sharing of ideas and approaches that spring from direct dialogue with subject matter experts; thus, we advise using a balance of in-person and self-directed learning for maximum effect.

TWO: SALES SKILLS

If suppliers want to get serious about driving sales through partners, they need to enable them to compete and win as they would their own sales force. Our second cornerstone includes categories focused on skills improvement, including:

- *General.* This first category comprises basic blocking and tackling skills that every partner should know. Suppliers should offer training in the internal methodology used by field reps; this will help to ensure consistency in both nomenclature and approach. Other general training should include prospecting, face-to-face selling and negotiations.

- *Competitive.* As a trusted advisor who often takes an objective role in helping customers arrive at the best solution, knowing how a company's products and services stack up against the competition is critical. Training must focus on a partner's ability to articulate the comparison between your organization and another, particularly for a buyer that has already purchased from that competitor in the past.
- *Situational.* Predicting which partners will perform and which won't, sizing up individual competencies, and prioritizing time and resources can only be done through experiencing lifelike customer situations. We strongly advise creating a number of role-playing exercises, then breaking a partner's staff into teams and having them deal with the situations thrown at them. Leading suppliers record these sessions and use them to offer constructive advice that may point out strengths and weaknesses that partners can either overcome or emphasize to increase their sales effectiveness.

THREE: MARKETING SKILLS

Suppliers often struggle to get partners to adopt and execute marketing campaigns, primarily due to the strategic and tactical skills these partners lack. Thus, our third training cornerstone focuses on marketing, with specific categories that include:

- *Lead management.* Our research has shown that process-based lead management – that includes everything from standardized lead definition(s) to service-level agreements, regimented handoffs and flows to handle the nurturing of leads that are not partner-ready – drives incremental performance. An increasing number of organizations are building these processes in the channel as they have done in the field; key partners must be training on these

processes so that they can take advantage of them and provide feedback over the long term.

- *Current account marketing.* Knowing what to upsell or cross-sell, or how to increase wallet share are key to the success of any demand generation program focused on existing customers. As suppliers attempt to gain more traction with the base, including training elements that describe how to use specific tactics (email, newsletter, white paper, online event) and which methods for deployment have proven to work best (email, Web, direct mail, telephone) allows partners to better target existing customers and maximizes the effectiveness of supplier-delivered programs.
- *Buying process.* As suppliers adopt their own marketing vocabulary to describe the different stages of the buyer's journey they are trying to facilitate, they must train partners in their definition and use. This includes teaching about key audiences that participate in these processes, as well as what content to deliver during which stage to better convert inquiries to leads and later to opportunities and closed business. If suppliers develop programs geared toward cycle stages – for example, pipeline acceleration targeted to late-stage prospects – they must train partners in their use.

THE SIRIUS DECISION

Training channel partners is not a single event; in an increasingly complex b-to-b world, it's more like the decathlon, where the athlete posting the best overall score competing in several events wins. If your training effort falls short in any of the areas above – or has no mechanism to drive continuous improvement – it's time for an overhaul. Given the choice to sell products for a supplier who has trained them thoroughly and one that hasn't, which one do you think a partner will choose?