Channel Marketing: Planning Assumptions 2015

SiriusDecisions has identified five key issues that should drive the agenda of channel marketing leaders in 2015

Invest in channel program technology to achieve broader engagement with partners and increase their marketing effectiveness

Focus on creating a better partner experience and strengthening demand programs to drive partner performance

Many simple art projects designed for children incorporate everyday objects (e.g. fallen leaves, rainbow-colored macaroni, empty shoeboxes). Through creative use of free or inexpensive items, these projects allow budding artists to produce paintings, sculptures and collages, improve their concentration and dexterity, and have fun – all at little cost to parents.

B-to-b channel marketers are often tasked with managing, improving and creating partner programs with little incremental funding or additional resources. Therefore, channel marketers must identify the most productive investments and processes for guiding and enabling partners to achieve increased success. In this brief, we outline five initiatives that can help channel marketing improve partner program participation and drive performance improvements in 2015.

Technology: Improve Partner Experience Through the Partner Portal

Our research indicates that less than 20 percent of partners consistently visit supplier portals, leaving suppliers searching for ways to improve partner engagement. Many seek to improve their portals' content, processes and tools in order to drive partner traffic and improve portal relevance.

Suppliers can improve the partner experience by matching content on the partner portal to the five stages of the partner's journey toward a highly relationship with the supplier: offering, qualification, commitment, investment and enablement, and productivity (see the brief "Understanding the Partner's Journey"). They can also fine-tune the types of content delivered, tailoring the experience to match partners' tiers, geographies, industries or products. Suppliers also can customize content based on individual partner roles (e.g. sales, marketing, executive), creating alerts and featured content for each partner persona. Channel marketers also can improve the partner experience by extending portal capabilities to the field, where reps are likely to use mobile phones or tablets to access content (e.g. real-time news, pricing updates, talk tracks, sales tools that push just-in-time supplier messaging and enablement).

SiriusAction: Create a cohesive content strategy that aligns to each stage of the supplier/partner relationship, and integrate applications that are essential for ongoing partner support. Identify how and where partners consume content (e.g. desktop computer in an office, mobile device in the field), and audit partner processes to identify which need to be re-designed in order to drive partner usage

and support partners' sales and marketing efforts (see the Core Strategy Report "Improving Partner Portal Utilization").

Interlock: Create Successful Alliances With Other Suppliers

When suppliers enter into business alliances with other suppliers to jointly promote and sell products, services and solutions, they usually expect effective resource use and cooperation to create a mutual competitive advantage. Unfortunately, it takes time to recoup the investment required for alliance marketing programs, and few supplier alliances achieve the intended results. B-to-b suppliers often lack knowledge of effective strategies to fuel sustainable alliance growth, and few organizations share the same channel strategies or types of channel partners. Channel marketers may struggle to integrate alliance-specific marketing activities, since doing so requires pre-planning and coordination of each supplier's strengths and messaging to bring solutions to market.

To increase the likelihood of a mutually beneficial alliance, get upfront commitments and set expectations early. From sales and marketing leaders to field sales and local marketers, cross-organizational and cross-functional mindshare is critical to the success of alliance partnerships. Identification of target markets and establishment of a joint sales strategy are essential to drive field program engagement and interlock.

SiriusAction: Develop rules of engagement and establish joint marketing commitments upfront. Identify the investments required to meet each alliance partner's needs (see the brief "Using TRED to Optimize Alliance Relationships"). Conduct internal marketing to ensure that each supplier's employees are onboard and understand their contributions and the value that will be received. During the relationship, maintain a cadence of carefully crafted communications programs and events to strengthen the relationship and increase adoption within the alliance members' direct and indirect teams. Use incentive programs to engage and educate alliance partners on how to market and sell the new broader solutions.

Measurement: Implement or Improve Closed-Loop Visibility and Reporting

Channel marketing often struggle with visibility and measurement when delivering demand creation programs through partners. Typically, the results of demand programs delivered by partners are visible only to supplier field reps, so reps must close the loop on any leads shared with partners, capturing any available information about prospects and customers. This manual process of passing leads to partner reps often results in critical information gaps, making it difficult for suppliers to track progress or hold partner reps accountable.

To address these challenges, some suppliers are investing in channel marketing and management (CMM) solutions that can capture closed-loop data and track lead progression in a more systematic, scalable way. These CMM solutions (also known as through-partner marketing automation solutions) deliver leads

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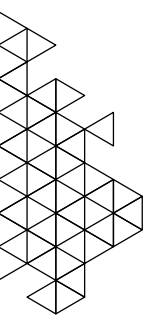
directly into partners' existing sales force automation (SFA) systems and pull reports on sales touches, conversion-to-opportunity status and pipeline stage, inputting the data back into the supplier's SFA system. This enables partners to receive leads without logging into portals or partner relationship management systems, and allows suppliers to measure and scale high-performing demand creation programs that encompass all campaign phases.

SiriusAction: Determine whether current lead management processes (whether manual or automated) track conversion rates as leads progress through the demand waterfall. Guide partner reps through each step of the demand creation process, and inform them where and how to report on leads. Before including partner leads in forecasts, implement definitive lead registration rules (see the brief "Navigating Channel Leads Through the Rearchitected Waterfall").

Organization/Structure: Build Channel Marketing Competencies

After defining the channel marketing function's responsibilities, suppliers may require the team to take a new development path to increase their effectiveness and drive partner results. Channel marketers must develop more extensive and specialized expertise in the areas of program development, measurement and ROI. Rather than simply providing tactical support (e.g. events) and responding to ad hoc partner requests, channel marketing must shift to planned, outcome-based and measurable activities, including both scalable one-to-many volume marketing plays and tailored one-to-few value plays (e.g. account-based marketing). Extending this learning to partners is equally important, especially as suppliers fund partner-led demand creation programs. Inbound marketing, content optimization and persona-based marketing are critical for reaching today's elusive buyers. Offering marketing certification can help improve the skills of partners as well as in-house channel marketers.

SiriusAction: Assess individuals' competency levels and remedy any gaps by load balancing, hiring, outsourcing or introducing training paths to enable individuals to meet the current and future needs of the channel marketing organization. Based on identified gaps in baseline knowledge, shared concepts or role-specific skill levels, identify and prioritize training needs, create educational content and establish metrics for success (see the brief "Mapping Competencies: Channel Marketing").

Execution: Improve Program Delivery and Performance

Suppliers often allow partners to assemble and deliver marketing programs on their own. However, channel marketers may find that these programs demonstrate weak performance. To drive program effectiveness and partner results, suppliers can offer partners pre-packaged, menu-based plays and program execution guidance. Suppliers that create an end-to-end process and provide a formal partner development program can accelerate partners' learning curve and increase marketing program ROI. Partners should be educated on marketing fundamentals to provide a foundation for continued

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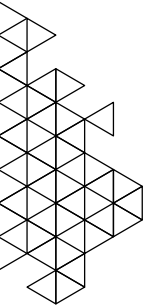
growth, and they should be provided with sales tools (e.g. video, reference guides) to help them apply their knowledge. Suppliers may also invest in outside demand creation vendors to create marketing program offerings mapped to buyer audiences. By offering marketing resources (e.g. content tools, digital marketing campaigns, teleservices) funded through market development fund programs, suppliers can develop channel programs that exceed industry standards for adoption and ROI.

SiriusAction: Review the current go-to-market process for delivering programs to partners. Evaluate whether the process prescriptively guides partners to the next step, and identify any gaps (see the Core Strategy Report "Fast-Tracking Demand Creation in B-to-B Channels"). Pilot new partner-led demand programs before rolling them out across a broad partner network (see the brief "Fast-Tracking Channel Demand: Piloting the Methodology"). Review pilot results and identify weaknesses that may hinder partner performance or impede full deployment.

The Sirius Decision

In 2015, as channel organizations look to apply slender channel marketing resources, they must identify the biggest opportunities for improvement at little cost. Assess the current state of the partner program, identifying where partners and/or programs are performing and where there are major gaps or other areas that can be significantly improved (see the brief "The SiriusDecisions Channel Marketing Maturity Model"). Based on this analysis, prioritize specific technology, measurement and program investments that can drive significant gains in the overall productivity of the channel.

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