

Agents Identify Seven Best Practices for Channel Managers

In the interest of improving relationships between channel managers and agents, the Technology Channel Association (TCA) recently began holding member conference calls to determine the best ways to elevate the professionalism of this industry overall. In late July, we discussed Best Practices for Channel Managers.

Agents shared their points of view on what can be done on a daily basis to ensure the best possible customer experience. Generally speaking, agents feel that a good channel manager

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is one who manages relationships well, is responsive, knows how to delegate responsibility and is knowledgeable about the business overall. Agents believe a long-term bond can truly develop and strengthen with a channel manager who possesses all of these characteristics. Because of this, agents caution suppliers to think twice before shuffling channel

managers unless something is broken — the channel manager/agent relationship takes time.

More specifically, the following actions and expectations ranked high on the list of suggested channel manager best practices.

1. Respond quickly to questions. Agents said the No. 1 element of a winning partnership with a channel manager is the ability to respond quickly to questions. Moreover, they said channel managers should try to learn how each agent they work with likes to communicate — in person, via phone, text or e-mail. Communication preferences can vary by generation and other criteria. Most agents said face-to-face communication is still the best way to cultivate a relationship with a channel manager, but being responsive and effective in general will make a great foundation for building trust.

2. Recognize the importance of channel manager assistance. From the agents' perspective, a good channel manager is someone that knows their guidance is essential to making a sale. Agents rely on channel managers for their knowledge base and, consequently, channel managers must reciprocate by realizing the urgency of their response sometimes results in the agent making the sale or not.

3. Offer ways to keep the agent engaged and updated. Agents also find increased success when the vendor offers different avenues for staying engaged with the agent in a scheduled, consistent and structured way, such as quarterly calls or regular updates on new products. For example, some agents have found "Product of the Month" Webinars beneficial. Regular newsletters, live video conferencing, on-demand video training and Telepresence sessions also can be effective, they said.

4. Offer transparency by allowing contact with other departments. The channel manager should offer transparency by introducing the agent to personnel in other departments, such as billing, pricing, provisioning and repair. By bringing in whoever can handle the issue or question at hand, rather than delaying an answer because they don't know who or how to get the issue resolved, channel managers can help reduce costly disruptions in the sales process. It is beneficial to all involved to make those resources available to the agents while serving as a leader or conduit for the process. After all, being a channel manager is about managing relationships. Their achievements are based on the success of others' work. Cultivate this process and the right outcome can be achieved in a timely manner.

5. Know the agents' business and accurately represent them. A good channel manager should be the champion of the agents' interests within their company. Agents said they sense that supplier personnel think agents are unreasonable because often by the time the agent ends up with the right person who can answer the question, they are feeling frustrated. The agent, they said, should be treated more like the customer they're trying to help.

6. Channel managers should never know less than the agent. A good channel manager has product and application knowledge, long-term industry experience and a feel for the competition. Most importantly, they have a comprehensive understanding of the inner workings of indirect sales. TCA members found it was extremely counter-productive to work with channel managers that were not properly matched to their role — particularly those coming from direct sales. Agents agreed, however, it is ideal to work with a channel manager who has a solid history with the company, as these are often the most successful relationships.

7. Understand the agents' focus on product quality. Based on agents' past experiences, what appears to be a good spiff doesn't bring value if it is not a good product to start with. A good agent pays more attention to the product quality when selling, not the spiff. Channel managers must be mindful of this focus and work to deliver to agents comprehensive information on products that will bring beneficial results to the customer.

At the end of the day, the customer always will be the winner as the caliber of service they receive becomes markedly improved through the cultivation of mutually beneficial channel manager-agent relationships. +



Lynn McCullough is association manager for the Technology Channel Association (TCA), where she is involved with the direction and management of the association, as well as membership recruitment and retention. She can be reached at lmccullough@tcasite.org.