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How to recruit, train, enable and incentivise

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**channel partners in the modern
B2B technology market**

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In all industries, routes to market never sit still.

But in the B2B technology space in particular, the market has shifted rapidly in recent years – **and it shows no signs of slowing down.**

With the rise of cloud solutions, the products and services enterprises sell to their customers have changed completely. Channel partners have adapted to this shift, moving their focus from selling hardware units, to offering extensive consultancy on how to best deploy and manage new digital solutions.

As channel marketing and sales continue to see big changes like this, the old channel partner playbook becomes increasingly ineffective.

Today, businesses need new ways to effectively recruit the right partners, educate and enable them, and maintain their motivation.

Channel marketing in the era of digital transformation

As cloud services continue to dominate enterprise IT, the perceived value of hardware has changed. Hardware margins have dropped, and regular solution upgrades and license renewals have made way for regularly updated subscription services.



At the same time, the conversation around IT purchasing has changed. Discussions aren't around the infrastructure anymore, but around the challenges it solves, and the business benefits it offers.

In addition, the customer is no longer strictly the IT department. Now, the purchasing process often starts with line of business first, not IT leaders. Again, the lines between a technology conversation and a business improvement conversation have blurred.

This all means there's less scope for partners to just shift units. Now, channel partners need to add unique skills, services and consultancy around solutions to stand out from the competition.

As partners look to offer more value, it also means the businesses that work with them must do more. It means you need to think more carefully about how you recruit, educate, enable and incentivise your channel partners – and how it all fits in with modern B2B markets.

And these are just the new challenges. The old channel marketing obstacles are still around, and no less deadly than they were in the past.

For instance, many partners still aren't solely motivated to offer the best solution to their customers; they might promote the offering that gives them the best margins the services or solution that give opportunity for recurring revenue or customer tie-in, the vendor that offers the best bonus, or the option that's easiest for them to supply.

Vendors still have to find a way to convince partners to sell their solutions over a competitor's offering.

In the same vein, today's vendors – much like their counterparts from a few decades ago – need to find ways to gain mindshare, manage pipeline progression, simplify compliance, and adopt a successful channel strategy without cannibalising their own market.

The different types of channel partner

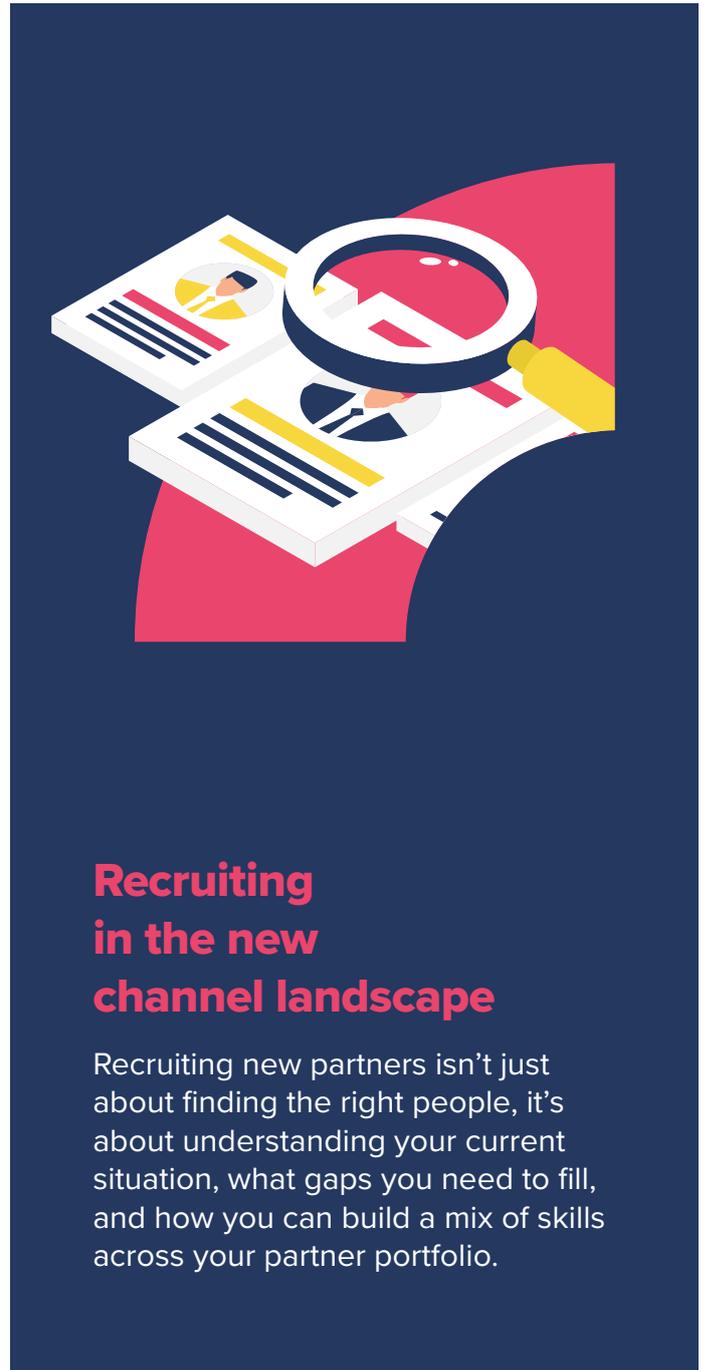
As the B2B tech market continues changing, partners that merely move boxes have fallen by the wayside. Now, partners need to add unique value.

In general, channel partners do this in a few different ways:

- **Industry specialists**
bring unique experience on niche industries
- **Technology specialists**
have skills and knowledge on specific solution types
- **Brand specialists**
tend to work with only one vendor – and have a deep understanding of their full product range
- **Managed service providers**
combine vendor solutions with their own technologies, software and services to deliver solutions with a broader scope
- **Systems Integrators**
design complete solutions for clients, often combining technologies from multiple vendors

Naturally, the needs of these different partners and managed service providers are diverse.

While a brand specialist will need little in the way of product information, they may benefit from incentives to motivate reps. Similarly, an industry specialist may already have lots of marketing in place to reach their niche audience, but would need more support and training on your products to close more deals.



Recruiting in the new channel landscape

Recruiting new partners isn't just about finding the right people, it's about understanding your current situation, what gaps you need to fill, and how you can build a mix of skills across your partner portfolio.

Understand your current position

The first step to success is making sure you have the right mix of skills in your channel. Your partner ecosystem is an extension of your sales team, and you want the right mix of product, industry and service-oriented capabilities.

You want a mix of solid, regularly transacting partners, and rising stars. You want partners who will position your solutions favourably against your competitors. And most importantly, you want good coverage, without cannibalising your own market.

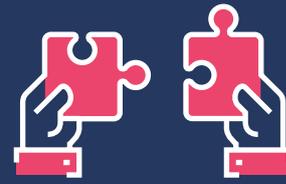
Understand your current partners

Once you've got an idea of your current situation, you need to think about the state of your current roster of partners. Begin by profiling your partners. Consider their strengths and weaknesses, and any gaps you have (in different sectors, for different solutions offerings, etc).



From there, you'll want to think carefully about your customers. Do you know how they prefer to buy? How do your partners fit in to their preferred ways of purchasing?

The final step in understanding your partners is to know how your competitors are incentivising and educating their channel. Knowing this can help you understand what helps motivates partners, and what unique incentives you can offer.



Finding the ideal partners

In some ways recruiting the right partners is the same as it has always been. Even in the new channel marketing era, you still have to carefully assess which partners will be the best fit for your products, your sector, and your organisation.

However, the digital age has given organisations a whole new set of tools to help identify ideal channel partners. Social analytics, for instance, are a great way to quickly see who's selling and talking about different types of solution.

You can also use social channels to investigate who's selling your competitors' solutions and see if they'll be willing to bring their experience of the sector/technology and apply it to selling your solutions. Again, online resources helps drastically simplify this research process.

However you find new partners, the key is to assess them thoroughly and map them against product requirements. Some partners will be better suited to high-end low-volume products, while others may be better at selling solutions aimed at SMEs in greater bulk.

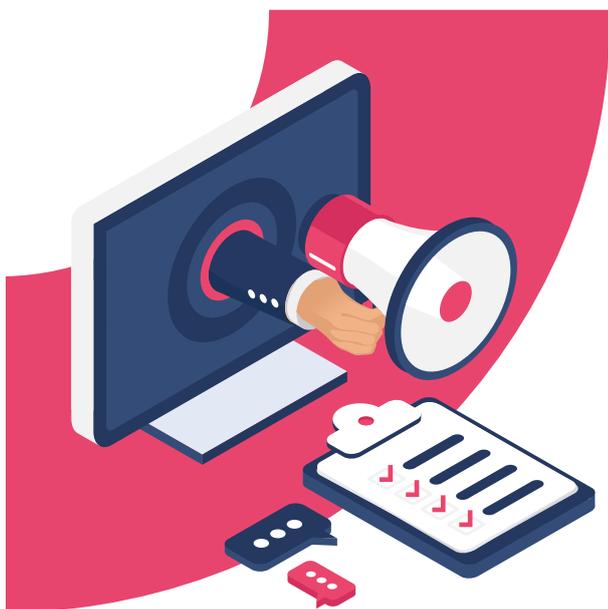
After recruitment: building partner skills

Your first post-recruitment step is to assess where your new partners are currently. How mature are they, and how much knowledge do they have about your products and the industry you work in?

More importantly, you'll want to think about how much investment each of your partners require in the future. Are they experienced in your industry, know about your solution areas and only need minimal attention and investment? Or are they rising stars who show potential but could do with additional support?

Some organisations may use KPIs that look at overall revenue or units moved to assess partner capabilities. Others may have more complex bandings that group partners into different tiers of maturity based on a range of criteria.

This kind of channel mapping is crucial. As with many areas of business, the Pareto Principle (aka the 80/20 rule) applies to the channel as well, meaning a large majority of revenue will come from a small group of partners.



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This revenue split can make it easy to spot the ‘big’ partners that only need occasional support.

From there, you can identify the other players in your channel ecosystem: the, ‘medium’ partners that need training programs focused on growth, and the ‘small’ partners that need more general support across the board.

Whatever method of measurement you use, you’ll want a clear picture of which partners need more support, and which are already delivering results. From there, you can begin considering what kinds of training partners need – and the best format to deliver it.

Common partner training methods

Webinars

are a great way to reach a wide audience – even across different locations – while still offering participants a way to interact with speakers and training materials. Ideal for both offering new information to partners, or just helping them shore up their fundamentals.

Study tours

offer a deeper dive into a new product or service over a longer period of time. These events are a great way to bring new partners onboard or help existing partners hit the ground running with a new solution launch. And if the tour involves a stop at a demo centre or manufacturing facility, these trips can also include hands-on demos to help partners get first-hand experience with your solutions.

Workshops

are shorter than a study tour but still offer a huge amount of information to partners in person. These are a great way to introduce new solutions to partners as reps can get a hands-on feel for what your offerings can do.

Training sessions

are much shorter events, run either live or delivered on demand. These are best placed for solution updates that can be quickly condensed into a single tutorial.

Newsletters

are a quick, easy and cost-effective way to reach your entire partner network in one go. They're well placed to spread non-essential updates and information.

These are just a few of the most common training methods. But there are plenty of ways to combine these into larger training programs, or to think outside the box entirely.

For example, IBM offers its Business Partner Connect program.

Using IBM Watson, the program helps IBM partners find other like-minded partner organisations they can work with on upcoming deals. By putting partners with complimentary skills together, IBM helps its channel partners learn from each other over time.

While there are plenty of tried and tested ways to train partners, keep in mind that these methods are changing as the channel market continues to evolve. While in the past training was often a live event delivered to large groups by a single teacher, the models are quickly changing. With reps constantly stretched for time, on-demand content is fast becoming the preferred method of training.

Today, reps want to get support when and where they need it. So, if you can create an online repository that offers videos, podcasts, guides and other training materials around the clock, you may help partners get better results than if you rely solely on traditional, live training events or rely on one kind of training program alone.

It's all about enablement

Even with the right partners and the right training in place, there may be more your channel needs to successfully navigate the modern B2B sales environment.

At a basic level, partner enablement means ensuring channel reps have easy access to the information they need: including product information and USPs. But that's just the beginning.

Enablement can also include providing pre-sales support, from subject matter experts or technical sales resource, and demo or lab facilities for proof of concepting or benchmarking. This of course, provides enablement at the point of potential sale. Partners may also require support in generating demand and driving pipeline opportunities. This kind of enablement can include supporting marketing activities and offering co-marketing funds.

But how can you ensure the right partners are getting the right level of funding and support?

This is, again, where partner banding and maturity models can help.

With a careful assessment of your partner ecosystem, you can clearly understand which partners will make the best use of co-marketing funds. Likewise, accurate banding can help you identify other partners that are struggling and may need other kinds of enablement.

For instance, you may be able to see which partners are successfully closing larger deals, and which ones may need additional resources and deal support when engaging with prospects.



We helped Lenovo partners make the most of the social marketing opportunity.

Our ThinkSocial platform offers Lenovo partners everything they need to find success on social media: including a curated selection of Lenovo content and marketing materials, and pre-written social media posts.

[Find out more](#)

Incentives: Give partners what they want

Over the long term, partner morale can play a big role in how much revenue your channel can generate. After all, you might not be the only vendor your partner sells for. So, how do you convince that partner to spend the majority of their time and resources selling your products?

It's all about effectively communicating what's in it for the channel partner:

What are their margins?

What incentives can they expect?

How easy is it to sell your solution?

Can you easily communicate its USP?

Ultimately, it comes down to showing partners why they should sell your solutions instead of those from a competitor. Their reputation depends on the value and effectiveness of the solutions they provide their customers. Communicating the unique value you offer successfully can be the difference between having your pick of partner organisations or struggling to recruit for your channel. Even if you aren't competing against other vendors, channel incentives are also useful for motivating individual reps to sell more units. There are a few things to consider here. First, you want to ensure reps can get the info and quotes they need quickly and easily. Nothing harms motivation more than complex quoting processes and arcane, opaque product information. Once you've made this information available, you want to offer some kind of direct reward for hitting key metrics.

The key is to choose the right rewards and metrics; ones that work towards your organisational goals. While sales figures are an obvious metric you can reward, you could also benefit from incentivising trade-ins on competing vendor technology, or upgrades from an old solution depending on what your business needs at the time. And your rewards need to match the kinds of people in partner sales teams. While a team comprised of younger reps might enjoy a day out testing sports cars on the racetrack, a team of forty-somethings with families may prefer a direct cash bonus.

Whatever rewards you decide to offer, make sure to check the compliance of your chosen reward. This is particularly important for businesses with a global footprint. As the laws and tax around incentives will vary by country, organisations with a global workforce will need to comply with multiple regulations.

Take a strategic approach to supporting your channel

As you look at how to best recruit, educate, enable and incentivise your partners, it's important to consider how each of these four elements influences both the short and long-term well-being of your channel.

A structured partner program can help ensure your channel efforts are effective – both now and in the future.

When creating this kind of program, you'll need to answer some key questions:

Do you offer different levels of investment based on a partner's status?

What do they have to do to earn status?

Building a channel community can make it easier to manage your partner ecosystem. These communities offer a way to communicate and engage with your partners, through things like microsites, newsletters or social groups.

Just like with any marketing program, these community groups can help partners feel a deeper connection with your brand. This makes them more likely to support your business. Building a sense of community with your channel also helps foster important two-way communication. Your channel can provide insights from the market to help strengthen the resources you develop.

If all of this sounds like a lot to keep track of, channel management software might be able to help. As dedicated solutions designed to help manage channel partner activities and enablement, these tools can handle some of the heavy lifting and admin burden, so you can focus your resources on creating the best environment for your channel partners to thrive.

Navigate the modern channel environment with confidence

If you want to get the most from your channel partners, you need to understand their strengths and skills gaps, what they're looking for, and what they need to succeed in the modern sales climate.

We can help you get clarity on gaps in your partner ecosystem and how best to engage with them.



TBT works with some of the biggest brand names in the B2B tech space, helping them market their solutions more effectively.

For 20 years we've supported organisations across the entire channel to market, from OEM vendors and distributors, to resellers, managed service providers and system integrators.



With our expertise and experience in both the channel and the products you want to sell through it, we can help you better understand the culture of your channel and get the very best out of your partners.

To learn more about TBT marketing and how we can help you achieve your marketing and sales goals, [get in touch with our channel marketing experts.](#)