

I Need A Program

Gerry Dehkes

I know I need a partnering program, but where do I start?

Somewhere between your first and second partnership, you realize you need a partner program. You looked at other companies' websites and saw dozens of "precious metals" programs that mimic airline frequent flyer programs with levels such as Platinum, Gold, Silver and Bronze. You also saw "disguised level" programs with partner participation names such as Premier, Catalyst, Executive and Master that seem intent on hiding which level is better. Most programs tie benefits to volume. Will cloning a similar partner program differentiate your company and support your partnerships better? Is a partner program merely "table-stakes"? Can a me-too program actually drive results? No.

Volume Isn't They Key

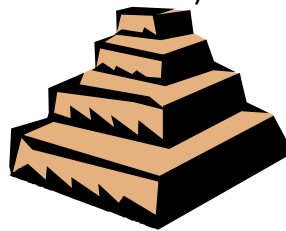
Volume based partner programs fall short because they do not help the partnership succeed. For example, many programs provide varying levels of sales or support training depending on a partner's level. Does this make sense? What if one of your lower level Bronze partners is working a deal with a key customer and isn't trained extensively on your products because their program level doesn't provide it? Is that how you want your product represented? Conversely, what about the top level partner who gets a hundred people trained at your expense, but still brings your people in to qualify leads and close deals? At all levels, are the varying market assistance fees really an additional rebate or do they actually drive the market awareness you seek? The problem is one of complexity being over-simplified.

In the well over one hundred partnerships my teams have managed, not one was the same. Even relationships with a single partner varied when we jointly worked different markets or industries. Every alliance or partnership's needs are unique and all change or evolve over time. Cloning a typical partner program will not adequately support your partnership nor efficiently use your resources to drive business.

Simple, Yet Sophisticated

Imagine instead a simple, yet sophisticated program that delivers the right support to the right people at the right time. Imagine a well-conceived, well-executed program that makes a real difference in the success of your alliances and partnerships. Partners will come to you because they see your company as different from, and better than, your competition. Your program demonstrates your commitment to partnering and gains real commitment from your partners. Your partner program helps your partnerships work at every level from executives to sales to service delivery. Your program targets your investments to make your partnerships generate real results.

The best partner programs focus on supporting each partnership as it goes to market. It begins with a clear understanding about how you and your partners will go to market together and who will perform what roles. Then it targets program elements to enable each partner to execute their part. Solid partner programs also support partnerships as they move through the partnering process from a new relationship to one that performs and adjusts to results and change. You will want to make your partner program 3-Dimensional with a balanced focus on the joint offer, the markets and, especially, the people in your partnerships.



Me-too precious-medal pyramid programs may be popular, but most are ineffective at getting the results you need from your partnerships.

Go-To-Market Model

Designing a 3-D partner program begins by having a detailed idea of how each partnership will go to market. You will need to know every step in:

- developing and integrating a joint offering,
- marketing and selling the joint offer,
- delivering what you've sold, and
- sharing the risks and rewards of the partnership.

You will want to be very clear about which steps or roles your company will perform, which roles you want your partners to perform and how you will manage the hand-offs and communication along the way. You will need to adjust this value delivery system to each market segment you target—the roles will change.

Motivate Behavior

Next, you will want to design program elements to support each step in the go-to-market system. Many program elements target enabling the partner (education, training, support tools, etc.) Other program elements will motivate key players within the partner's organization (incentives, recognition, etc.) Be sure to include your own company's people in designing your program. Many of them will need support to effectively play their roles in the partnership (joint account planning, training on the partner's technology, etc.)

Your partner program will also sustain each of your partnerships as they begin, mature and renew themselves. You will want your program to enable and reward:

- joint business plans,
- training as your partners invest their time in learning your products and services,

- joint selling that effectively generates demand and closes deals for the joint offer, and
- renewing the relationship, making changes and increasing commitment to your company and the partnership.

You will need to put in place program elements and the underlying infrastructure that strengthen and nurture your alliances and partnerships throughout their life.

Review, Evolve, Improve

Finally, you will want to review, evolve and improve your partner program over time. Naturally, you will want to measure the impact of each program element. Is every player doing what you expect and want? As you monitor the effectiveness of your partnerships in driving sales, check for changes in the marketplace and verify that your go-to-market plan or value delivery system is still correct. As you modify your go-to-market approach, you'll need to update your partner program to support the changes. Listen to your partners as well. They want the partnership to work as much as you do. Use their insights and experiences to enrich your partnering program. Keep a balanced focus on integrating the joint solution, covering the target markets and especially, enabling and motivating the people from both companies who make the alliance succeed.

Top partner programs avoid artificial tiering approaches as too simplistic and average. Instead, a good design focuses on the desired go-to-market plan and helping every person involved to execute the plan. A sound partner program also addresses the different stages of the partnership—from formation to renewal. In short, the best partner program ensures that every player plays their part. Your partner program will strongly influence your partnering success. Invest the effort upfront to make your partner program drive your results.

***Your partner
program
actually helps
your
partnership
work ...***
