

Communicate With Your Partners And Help Them Generate More Business For You



In a Best Practices study of Partner Relationship Management performed by Front Line Solutions, communications tops the list of challenges. The primary question is how to reach the right partners at the right time with the right information.¹



It's no easy task to support and engage a channel partner network of VARs, distributors, brokers, and franchisees. Getting and keeping their attention, sharing the expertise and information they need to succeed, and earning their loyalty is just as challenging as creating satisfied, repeat customers.

With any sales channel, there is a continuous need to communicate effectively and efficiently to keep partners informed, educated and excited about your products and services.

Capture the mindshare of your partners, help them thrive, and your profits will skyrocket. A healthy, growing, loyal partner network, provides other benefits, as well:

- assistance developing new products and services
- expert help improving existing products and processes
- more effective marketing initiatives
- better service
- new business opportunities.

Is PRM overkill?

Vendors are being offered a whole new class of software to manage partner relationships; PRM, or Partner Relationship Management, is a subset of Customer Relationship Management (CRM). These products continue to gain market acceptance and new corporate users, yet most PRM packages are expensive, enterprise-level implementations that require extensive planning, key executive support, and outstanding execution. For many vendors, these PRM solutions are overkill.

The problem that most businesses are wrestling with is this: How do you get heard and remembered in the bazaar environment of the channel marketplace? And how can you cost-effectively develop the channel loyalty that is so vital to long-term success?

¹ Thompson, Bob. "PRM Best Practices. A Study of Partner Relationship Management. Solutions for Indirect Sales Channels". Front Line Solutions. July 2001. www.frontlinehq.com.

Improve Your Channel Communications

Probably the most cost-effective strategy is to improve how you communicate with your channel partners. You may not have a budget for that killer PRM package, but you do have a few tools at your disposal to make a difference in your channel relationships...today.

Take a look at this pickup truck over here. It's dependable, inexpensive, and a true workhorse. It's a little beat up on the outside and it's definitely no Lexus, but it gets the job done. The "truck" I'm talking about is e-mail and the Internet. You can connect with your partner network and get them listening and collaborating with you by using these basic tools and a strong dose of focused thinking.

Partner Communications Isn't Easy

Communicating efficiently with your channel is no walk on the beach. Partners are geographically separated and most likely represent multiple product and service lines—maybe even your competitors'. Channel turnover is constant.

Partners require a substantial investment in training, support, and ongoing education to help them sell effectively for your company. Often, they are your only link to the end customer, and the customer's perception of your business is completely influenced by your partners' actions. In short, partners require personalized attention and service and they have unique information needs.

For communications to have a tangible impact, they need to be anticipated, relevant, and repeatable. Only a well-structured communications process will insure that your company can communicate consistently, effectively, and easily. That means setting aside the time and resources to adequately manage the process and to create communications that are worth paying attention to.

One example of an industry where up-to-the-minute partner communications are imperative is the anti-virus software products industry. These companies have a pressing need to keep customers and partners informed of new viruses, threats, and hoaxes. Time can be a critical factor and simply placing warnings and notifications on a corporate website is not enough.

The anti-virus software businesses need to proactively reach out directly to customers, and via their network of partners, to ensure that clients are protected. When this communications process breaks down and end-users are left uninformed, they face catastrophic data loss and expensive downtime. But by excelling at the communications process, they can protect their stakeholders and create loyal, satisfied partners and customers.

If your company doesn't earn partner mindshare, you will miss out on the opportunities that loyal, informed partners can create: increased sales, expert feedback, front-line ideas for new products and services, and higher customer satisfaction. Using e-mail and the web to communicate more effectively with your channel is an affordable way to get started with PRM.

Communications Are The Foundation Of Profitable Relationships

To create loyal partners, your company first needs to establish trust with the channel. Trust is a direct result of your company's ability to communicate, and to deliver on the

promises it makes. Exchanging valuable, relevant, anticipated communications with your channel partners is not only cost-effective with e-mail and the Web, it may be an untapped opportunity that your business can leverage.

Permission E-Mail Marketing Applied To Partner Communications

A practical communications model that serves the challenges of partner communications is permission e-mail marketing. It not only works, it also uses technology that your company already owns, so you can get started quickly.

The secret of permission e-mail marketing is getting “permission” or “buy-in” from the individuals who will receive your communication. Obtaining your partners’ consent to communicate with them in advance makes them more receptive to the messages they receive and more likely to take action on them. Since they can rescind their permission at any time, your challenge is to make your channel communications useful, unique, and compelling.

Put A Face On Your Audience

The first step in any e-mail marketing or communications campaign is to define the different constituencies of your target audience. Not all your distributors will need the same information as your value-added-resellers (VARs). Brokers selling into the chemical industry may not want or need the same content as agents who sell into the financial services industry.

The attractive part of using e-mail and the Internet to communicate is that the delivery cost is low, the production time is minimal, and these features enable you to personalize and target your communications to a much greater degree than you could using direct mail or printed materials.

Engage Your Channel Partners

One of the goals of any permission marketing campaign is to get your audience to interact with you. An engaged audience listens, offers valuable feedback, and has a stake in the success of your business. The engaged partner is a goldmine. This is what your email and Web communications program should strive to accomplish.

Lotus’ Model Partner Program

Lotus Software, a subsidiary of IBM, has a first-rate Business Partner program. Lotus has always used e-mail and a partner website to inform and serve the Business Partner channel. One unique piece of technology they developed several years ago is called the “Partner Forum.” It is a beefed-up discussion database, available to all Business Partners, that Lotus employees actively participate in.

The Partner Forum allows Business Partners to communicate with other Business Partners and Lotus directly. Partners can pose technical questions, search for help, offer ideas for product enhancements, complain, provide expert advice, and more. The gloves come off in the Partner Forum as members are always willing to comment on different aspects of the company, the product line, and the problems they and their customers are facing.

The value of these interactions is monumental to Lotus. Business Partners are usually experts with Lotus technology, work face-to-face with customers, and are barometers for the marketplace. The Partner Forum is Lotus’ periscope into the real-world problems the

Lotus community deals with.

What Do I Communicate?

The most important question of all is this: What information, knowledge, expertise, know-how, insights, best practices, intelligence must your company deliver that will help your partners succeed?

Most of the information your partners need already resides within your company, stashed on a portal or database somewhere, or exists as intangible chunks of employee knowhow. Delivering the information in an organized and structured manner will improve your partners' ability to understand and use it.

Suggested Topics

Here are some suggestions of topics that you might discuss to make your e-mail and Web communications world class:

1. Changes in product status, price, availability, or delivery times.
2. Product and service information
 - New products/services offered
 - Marketing collateral
 - Product support information
 - Pricing information
 - Sales/call scripts
 - Product knowledge
 - Ideas for repositioning old products
3. Key sales metrics
 - Percentages and units sold compared to objectives
4. Industry news
 - Legislative and regulatory changes that affect your products, services, or customers
 - Competitive intelligence: any information or knowledge about competitive
 - Companies' products, services, or marketing campaigns
 - Industry opportunities that your partners can leverage
 - Industry trends and statistics
 - Reports about unmet needs or unsolved problems in the marketplace
5. New policies and procedures that affect partners
 - Changes in partner programs or procedures
6. Sales strategies and techniques
 - Strategies of successful partners
 - Sales and marketing book reviews
 - Articles from sales and marketing speakers or consultants
 - Excerpts from company sales manuals or training books
7. Feedback
 - Testimonials, comments, suggestions, or constructive criticism from customers and partners
 - Survey responses
8. Training opportunities
 - Conferences, seminars, or other event information
 - Continuing education programs
9. Incentives

- Spiffs, promotions, or sales incentives
- Recognition for outstanding partner contributions
- 10. Company vision and objectives
 - Spread the organization's philosophy or vision
 - Report changes in that philosophy and implications for partners
 - Changes in organizational structure--include why, how, when or who of changes
- 11. Customer news
 - Press highlights about customers
 - Account issues
 - Compliments or "wins"
 - Referrals to new customers
- 12. Advertising campaigns
 - Dates and times of ad campaigns
 - Marketing collateral
 - The purpose, rationale, assumptions, and goals of the campaigns
- 13. Company calendar information
 - Trade show, conference, and event information
 - Registration deadlines and appropriate forms
- 14. Product knowledge
 - Updates, fixes, and enhancements
 - Technical tips
- 15. Fun or entertaining stuff

Cost-effective, measurable results

E-mail and Internet communications are not the magic bullet to solve all the problems of supporting and serving an indirect sales channel. But improving communications is an action you can take today to make a powerful difference in your business. It's cost-effective, it produces measurable results, and your partners will thank you with improved sales performance and loyalty.

About Maarga

Maarga Systems, Inc. is a software company based in Iselin, New Jersey. Maarga offers comprehensive IT solutions to small and medium businesses with its strong product and services portfolio. Maarga acquired the kNEWS suite of products from Gallatin Technologies, Inc in 2007. Maarga Systems, Inc. is a wholly owned subsidiary of Maarga Systems Private Limited, a leading offshore outsourcing firm, based in Chennai, India offering high quality custom application development, application maintenance and system administration services around the Lotus Notes, Domino platform. Maarga is an IBM Business partner.



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