

A man and a woman in business attire are looking at a tablet together. The woman is smiling and looking at the man. The background is a blurred office setting. A large blue circular graphic is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing a white icon of a satellite dish and signal waves.

**Improving the
Channel Experience**
across the Customer
Life Cycle





CONTENTS

Introduction **4**

The Partner Experience **5**

Partner Portal **6**

Partner Programs **9**

Partner Marketing **13**

Channel Operations **16**

Conclusion: 5 Key Takeaways **18**

Is your company user-friendly for your partners?



Best-in-class companies average

205

channel partners

per

\$100 million

in revenue



42%

of manufacturers

use

50+

channel partners



Channel partners transact
daily business with

7 vendors

and communicate with

30 vendors

Source: Aberdeen Group

INTRODUCTION

Partners often cite the user experience as one of the most critical aspects of their relationships with vendors. How does your business stack up? If you offer partners complex programs, cumbersome processes, and a poorly designed partner portal, you will leave them frustrated and unable to contribute to your mutual success. The more time it takes them to transact business with you, the less likely they may be to expend precious resources and energy to focus on their relationship with your business rather than on other vendors.

Many vendors don't recognize the potentially negative impact of their communications, program requirements, and processes on partners. This is particularly true for large vendor organizations whose multiple product groups and vast channel organizations all compete for partner attention. It's important to remember that you are not the only vendor on the partner's dance card.

But if your programs are intuitive and your processes are streamlined – and if it all flows through a user-friendly portal – your partners will be able to contribute more to your top-line and bottom-line profitability. That was the whole point of partnering in the first place, wasn't it?



THE PARTNER EXPERIENCE

Making it easier for partners to do business with their top-line vendors is all about the Partner Experience (PX). Vendors must thoroughly assess the partner experience and put themselves in their partners' shoes. For example, they may put a channel chief on the "receiving end" of a partner program for a few days and let them experience the flow of information, processes and interactions from a partner's perspective.

Furthermore, vendors that invest the time and resources needed to facilitate the partner experience will gain a critical advantage over competitors, as partners shift their efforts to vendors and programs that are easier to participate in.

Vendors no longer have an excuse to not get it right. New channel management-related technologies and platforms are now available, from partner portals with consumer-like interfaces to easy-to-use partner marketing platforms. These technologies can significantly enhance the partner experience. However, simply launching a new portal or channel platform is not enough; vendors must develop a comprehensive strategy for creating a holistic partner experience and define the requirements for each component. The supporting technology and platforms must create a unified, consumer-like partner experience, and they should be seamlessly integrated.



PARTNER PORTAL

It all starts with partner portal best practices. The partner portal is the information, communications and procedures hub for vendors and their partners.

Industry blogs by Sirius Decisions, vendors and service providers including Konica Minolta, Microsoft, and Successful Channels summarize the challenges many technology vendors and their partner portals face today:

- Fragmented and inefficient systems
- Poor content management
- Solutions that are difficult to scale
- Bad partner experiences that impact competitiveness
- Lack of effective measurements and metrics to optimize performance





- Program information
- Sales and marketing collateral
- Performance metrics
- Payment statements
- Activities and status



- Claim submissions
- Marketing proposals
- Enrollment requests



- Discuss program details
- Broadcast alerts
- Negotiate contracts
- Review marketing proposals
- Approve and resolve disputed claims or payments

Partner portals have long been overdue for a new and innovative approach. New SaaS-based partner portals now deliver digital experiences across a multitude of systems and content sources, and provide a tailored experience to the partner.

Channel-focused companies need a partner portal that:

- Seamlessly integrates with CRM and PRM systems, as well as Learning Management System (LMS) and partner marketing automation tools
- Facilitates the management of multiple programs with multiple participants, both internal and external
- Provides a secure place to exchange statements, contracts, updates, ideas and best practices
- Provides access to the latest communication, documentation, and program status info
- Allows for the capability to attach and share files for collaboration and discussion
- Displays the status, action items and history of partner projects or other activities
- Enables vendors and partners to manage their program participation more effectively by defining the right roles and associated team members



PARTNER PROGRAMS

Let's face it: The problem with partner programs in the technology sector is not a lack of programs, but the quantity and complexity of programs. For many vendors, the number of partner programs has expanded over time and additional complexity has been added. Increased complexity often results in decreased partner participation and utilization. Most partners simply do not have the resources and time to fully participate in all available programs from multiple top-tier vendors. (The exception being large partners who can afford to employ program administrators to track program requirements and benefits, ensuring they take advantage of all the benefits and rebates on an offer.) The reality is that most partners do not have the resources to manage large and complex programs.



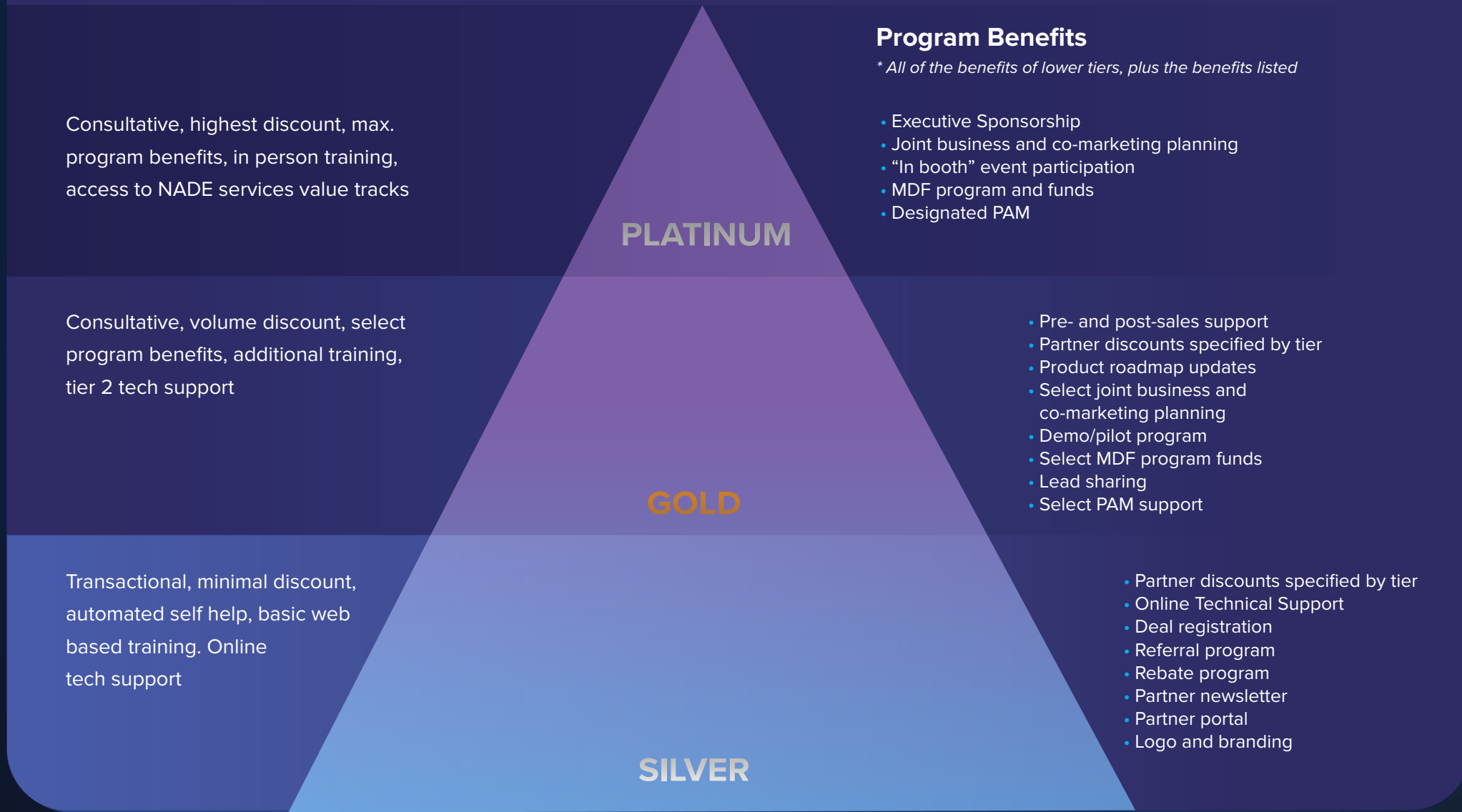
For vendors with mature channel programs, it's time to take a step back and re-examine program participation and ROI. What do you want your partners to focus on and how do you motivate them? Most would agree that the following priorities are paramount. You want to motivate your partners to:



Having re-examined your core objectives, you need to determine how you can best simplify and streamline your partner programs. Focus on programs with the greatest ROI. Re-examine your program requirements, can they be consolidated or simplified? How can you best support different partner types? A significant trend we have seen in recent years with cloud partners is that they prefer programs that are focused on providing solution expertise and training with an emphasis on pre- and post-sales support. Support with demand generation and marketing automation continues to be important. We also see a shift from incentivizing partners at the point of sale to focusing incentives on different stages of the customer life cycle.

Channel Program and tier structure

Program structure and tiering should be easily understood with a minimum of program tiers as shown in the example below. This example illustrates a program and tier structure for one category of partners. Vendors with multiple partner types including referral partners and influencers may have multiple programs or value tracks specifying requirements and benefits for each partner type.



Finally, vendor partner programs should be totally transparent:

- Share program and benefit statements with your partners. Benefit statements showing financial gains and other benefits as a result of program participation are now commonly used by technology vendors
- Provide technology insights and product roadmaps with top-tier partners
- Give partners ample time and information about partner program additions and/or changes

The screenshot displays the Velocity Partner Portal interface. At the top, the Velocity logo is on the left, and user information (Viki, Portal, wmatthews) is on the right. The main content area is titled 'Wallet' and features three program cards:

- Transactional Rebate 2017:** Earnings: 39,393.90 USD, Payout: 39,393.90 USD, 01 Jan 2017 - 31 Dec 2017, 2 Months Remaining.
- Unit Threshold Rebates 2017:** Earnings: 145,159.55 USD, Payout: 145,159.55 USD, 01 Jan 2017 - 31 Dec 2017, 2 Months Remaining.
- Special Price Agreement 2017:** Earnings: 68,240.00 USD, Payout: 68,240.00 USD, 01 Jan 2017 - 31 Dec 2017, 2 Months Remaining.

Below the wallet cards is a 'Statements' section with a table:

Period	Description	Date Generated	Statement
September 2017	Monthly Statement	02 Oct 2017	[Download Icon]

At the bottom is a 'Claims' section with a search bar and a table with columns: Claim, Claim Type, Status, Claim Date, Total Amount.

On the right side, there is a 'Gold Partner Collaboration' chat area with a text input field and a 'Post' button. Below it is a 'Notifications' feed with three items:

- Negotiation Changed:** Tachmart has completed editing a negotiation. Velocity Inc can now make changes. (11:18 AM)
- Negotiation Completed:** Velocity Inc has completed the negotiation as "Update Agreement". (Last Friday at 9:12 AM)
- Negotiation Changed:** Tachmart has completed adding a negotiation. Velocity Inc can now make changes. (Last Friday at 9:10 AM)

Collaboration tools provide up-to-the-minute access to program history, status and action items.

PARTNER MARKETING

An important component of the partner experience is partner marketing, also known as channel marketing. The partners' need for "through-partner" marketing support has been well recognized and documented. The support and solutions offered by vendors have often been ineffective due to complex programs and participation requirements, lack of marketing automation, and lack of marketing expertise among partners. The effectiveness of technology vendors' through-partner marketing continues to deliver uneven results with regard to program utilization, and ROI.

Figures vary, but even at the low end of the estimates, partners are leaving a lot of money on the table. In fact, many companies featured in the 2017 CRN Partner Program Guide report that only 1-10% of their MDF funds go unspent at the end of each quarter, with a number of them stating that 10-25% of funds are unused. Worse, some companies noted that their partners leave 25-50% of MDF unspent each quarter. According to channel surveys by Baptie, Forrester and others, as much as 60% of MDF goes unspent.



Below is a set of best practice recommendations regarding partner marketing programs and program automation that are likely to encourage increased participation and utilization among partners and improve program ROI:

Simplify marketing program requirements and workflows

- Can requirements be streamlined or simplified?
- Are Point-of-Purchase (POP) spot audits an option versus a full set of POP documentation for each campaign?
- Are available fund balances, pre-packaged campaigns, and third-party marketing services easily accessible?

Provide a marketing concierge service

- Many partners lack skilled marketing resources required to develop and execute marketing campaigns. Include access to a skilled marketing telesales team to provide campaign development and execution support

Increase program and funds utilization

- Pro-actively alert partners to available funds balances
- Suggest campaigns that best fit specific demand generation models and available funds

Offer integrated and robust automation tools and resources in your marketing toolkit

- Digital marketing campaigns help users:
 - Create emails that look great on mobile and desktop displays
 - Customize landing pages to promote their offers
 - Employ calls to action to convert leads
 - Share offers on social media and blogs
 - Add syndicated content to their sites to expand reach

Support partners with social content publishing

- Provide social posts for partners to edit and share
- Enable channel partners to promote campaign content offers from your marketing platform via social
- Manage social scheduling with an easy set of tools

Help partners organize events

- Provide users with pre-built event templates that include automated email workflows for event management
- Features include:
 - Events in a box
 - Webcast registration services
 - In-person event registration services
 - Social sharing
 - Provide webcast replays



Along with offering a best-in-class partner portal, vendors need to implement a well-managed communication plan.

Key components of that plan should take into account:

- Partner-related content should be targeted and prioritized by partner tier and role
- Partner communication should be managed holistically rather than separately
- Research your partners' communication methods and preferences by partner persona to determine the optimal communication tool by content type
- Prioritize the use of email, social media and the partner portal accordingly
- Leverage the partner portal as your partner communication “hub”



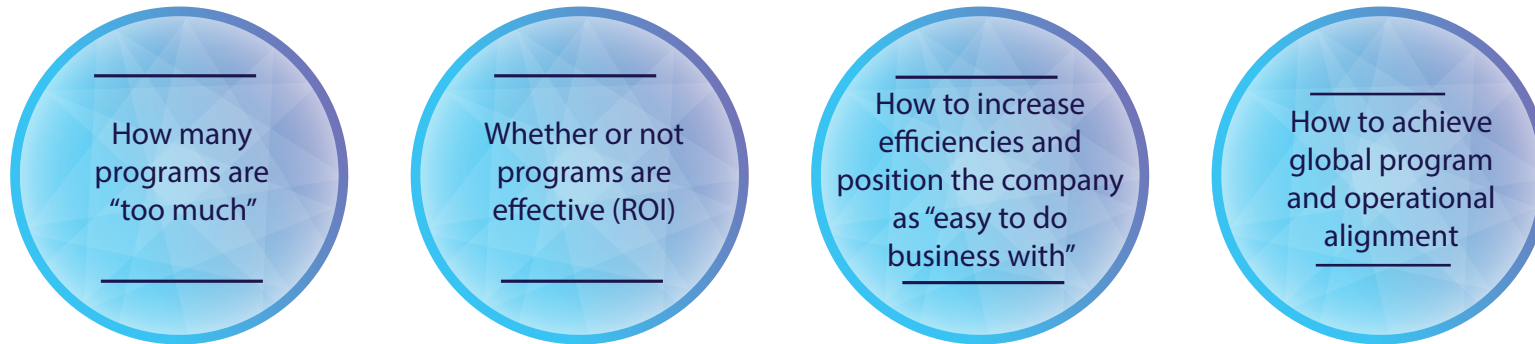
CHANNEL OPERATIONS

Developing, implementing and managing channel-related processes and workflows typically falls under the authority of Channel Operations in most vendor organizations. While channel operations may appear to be something that goes on in the background, the complexity of daily transactional business processes with the vendor has a significant impact on how easy it is for partners to do business with the vendor.

From placing orders to checking on product shipments or licenses, to tracking rebates, a partner's daily interaction with top-line vendors requires multiple communications and transactions. Streamlining and automating these transactions with partners has a direct and positive impact on the "ease of doing business" between partners and vendors.



Channel Operations often function as the hub of the wheel in a vendor's channel organization, helping to define and determine certain core objectives, such as:



In addition to coordinating and expediting operational and financial processes on behalf of partners with departments such as Finance and Legal, the Channel Operations function often has a major influence on or even complete control over workflows and processes related to all partner programs.

Vendors need to task their Channel Operations teams with responsibility to enhance the partner experience through streamlined and automated processes and the simplification of procedures. They need to establish specific KPIs for these objectives. A good starting point is to conduct a thorough assessment of daily interactions and processes from a partner perspective. An operational efficiency assessment following both large and small partners through their daily interactions with a vendor organization will quickly bring to light costly, time-consuming workflows and processes that should be prioritized to improve efficiency. Streamlining and automating those transactions from the partner perspective should be a top priority.

CONCLUSION:

5 Key Takeaways

Vendors should take these five steps to improve the channel partner experience:

1

Ask your partners

Conduct a brief survey and ask your partners about their experience in doing business with you. Such a survey would provide a current and accurate benchmark from which to go forward. The survey should include questions such as “How do I compare and who does the best job?” and “Which functions/transactions are most cumbersome?”

2

Develop efficient workflows and automate daily transactions

Conduct an operational efficiency assessment to identify the most time-consuming processes and workflows to develop an action plan for improvement and automation. Key objectives here are to make day to day interaction between partners and vendors less cumbersome and more transparent.

3

Re-assess your partner portal

Are you providing your partners with a best-in-class experience? How long has it been since you launched your portal? When have upgrades and improvements been made? Benchmark your partner portal against best practices including a tagging and role driven interface and seamless system integration with PRM/CRM.

4

Make your partner programs fully automated and integrated

Fully automate and integrate your partner programs. Ensure program requirements are easily understood and not overly complicated. Focus on core priorities within the program requirements. Reducing the number of requirements will lessen the burden on partners and shorten the time frame needed to conduct business with top-line vendors.

5

Provide robust marketing support

Marketing is often the Achilles' heel for your partners. They often lack the marketing skills and resources needed to be highly successful demand generators. An easy to-use digital marketing platform and marketing concierge are quickly becoming table stakes for vendors who want to compete effectively.



About channelConduit

The channelConduit Suite from Vistex is a solution set designed to engage your indirect sales channels and equip you and your partners for program success. From marketing enablement and incentive management to channel payments, the channelConduit Suite provides companies with strategic insights into channel activities while optimizing the partner experience, and facilitating global program administration.



Marketing Enablement

Manage Co-op & MDF, marketing planning and campaign execution easily and efficiently to measure the impact they have on overall revenue.



Incentive Management

Obtain valuable insights into rebates, rewards and promotional program performance to increase engagement and channel satisfaction while improving ROI.



Channel Payments

Make global payments in more than 135 currencies accurately and on time while reducing operational costs.

About Vistex®

Vistex provides enterprises with solutions that manage pricing, incentive, rebate, rights and royalty and channel programs to enhance business performance while reducing labor and infrastructure costs. The software and services provided by Vistex are optimized by industry to deliver an end-to-end solution for the design, management and administration of the entire spectrum of go-to-market programs. Enterprises are empowered with unprecedented visibility into program performance, and gain deeper insights to better enable fact-based decisions that drive revenue, control cost, minimize leakage, and streamline processes.

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