Channel Management INSIGHTS
Your Guide to Successful Channel Partnerships

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Selling Through the Channel

Strengthening the final links in the chain

Channel Management Insights speaks with Andrea Sittig-Rolf, President and Founder of Sittig Incorporated.

Each year, vendors spend countless hours and thousands of dollars creating channel marketing programs. They carefully choose the products they want to feature, determine the best ways to use their marketing development funds, and struggle to find the right incentives to build excitement for the programs and gain the enthusiastic participation of channel partner salespeople.

But despite all this preparation, the programs often don't produce the kind of results vendors are looking for. Why? Even though channel partner salespeople want to move product, they simply may not have the necessary skills to sell them, which creates another problem. If they don't fully understand how to sell to end-users during a promotional period, how could they possibly produce adequate numbers the rest of the year?

Channel Management Insights recently spoke with Andrea Sittig-Rolf, president and founder of Sittig Incorporated, about selling to end-users and the role vendors play in helping channel partner salespeople become more successful in their efforts. Here's what she had to say.

***Channel Management Insights*: What are some of the common obstacles channel salespeople encounter when trying to secure meetings with end-users?**

Andrea Sittig-Rolf: There are a variety of options, from "I'm not interested" or "We're all set" to "We once had a bad experience with your company," "We're working with your competitor," "It's not in the budget," "That decision is made out of the corporate office" and more. If you can get good at overcoming these, you'll increase your meeting ratio.

***CMI*: How can they do that?**

Sittig-Rolf: "I'm not interested" is the most common objection. The best way to respond to this is to say, "That's exactly what ABC Co. said when I first called them, and they've since become a customer and saved 30 percent on their energy bill as a result of this upgrade. I could do the same for you." Use a solid result with numbers or a percentage, instead of saying something vague like "I saved them time and money." If you can't give a specific example, you can say, "I've done a lot of work in your industry, and clients tell us they often save 30 percent on their energy bill as a result of this upgrade."

For any of the other objections I mentioned, the No. 1 response is, "That's exactly why we should get together." But how you say this is important. If you have to, stand up or smile while you're on the phone. Either of these actions will make you feel more confident. And remember, at this point, you're not trying to sell; you're just trying to get a meeting.

***CMI*: With all the means of communications today, why are meetings necessary?**

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Sittig-Rolf: All things being equal, face-to-face time and building rapport with customers will win out. The human touch, the personal time together, is a breath of fresh air with all the technology we have today.

Plus, meetings allow you to see nonverbal cues, which account for about 80 percent of communication. You can't pick up on these with e-mail or even videoconferencing. In the meeting, you can also get to know the personality of the prospect. For example, is he or she analytical or extroverted? This helps you know how to sell to that person.

***CMI*: What techniques should salespeople use during their appointments with end-users?**

Sittig-Rolf: You want prospects to get to the nitty-gritty of what's important to them. One of the best questions to ask is, "What are you trying to accomplish?" They don't need to know how you can solve the problem, just that you can do it.

During the meeting, maintain eye contact and take time for small talk, so you can discover common interests and begin building a relationship.

At the end of the meeting, ask for the next meeting. Don't look for or expect to close a sale with the first meeting, but do set up the next time you will meet to keep the sales process going.

***CMI*: How can salespeople increase their odds of closing a deal?**

Sittig-Rolf: The close has more to do with the beginning of the sales process than the end. At the beginning, discover the prospects' pain points, what's important to them. Unless you do, you're stuck if price is the objection at the close. But if you know their pain points, you can build on the value of the solution instead of focusing on price and get back to why you're meeting in the first place.

Also, the close is more about listening than talking, and it should happen naturally. The timing must be right, maybe after a few meetings or contacts. Ideally, customers will close themselves.

If not this doesn't happen, ask, "Well, can you think of any reason why we can't do business together?" Look for a specific reason so you can handle it, since it's worse to have an objection out there you don't know about.

***CMI*: Is follow-up important for selling? If so, what's involved and when should it take place?**

Sittig-Rolf: The purpose of a meeting is to get the next one, so never leave without lining up another meeting. Don't say, "I'll call you next week." Instead say, "Let's get together this time next week." If you don't close the sale, close the next meeting. Also ask how the prospect likes to be communicated with, via e-mail or phone. Then keep following up until you get a resolution, one way or the other.

For example, I've left a meeting with a scheduled follow-up meeting, had it canceled, tried to reach the client repeatedly via e-mail and then finally called and left a voice mail saying, "I've tried contacting you and haven't heard back, so it looks like you may have decided to go another direction. I won't be calling you again, but please feel free to contact me if you decide to proceed with the solution we've discussed." About a third of the time, prospects call me back when I say this.

***CMI*: What is the role of vendors in improving the performance of channel partners' salespeople?**

Sittig-Rolf: Vendors must provide training if they want to increase sales. They spend money on a golf outing, which is nice, and they provide technical training on products, features and widget stuff. But these things don't make salespeople better at their jobs.

Sometimes, vendors may need to go to a third party to find the right sales training or training for proposals, or even for spelling and grammar, since communication is a huge part of sales. It's up to vendors to pay because many channel partners don't have the funds for it.

Remember, training doesn't just increase sales, it creates loyalty between vendors and partners. In fact, many partners come back and thank vendors for the training.

***CMI*: How can vendors get channel partners' buy-in for sales training?**

Sittig-Rolf: Vendors must get away from the word "training." People have misconceptions about that. Call it something like "pipeline development" instead. Speak to the end result of the training -- to fill the pipeline, improve close ratios and increase sales. *Sell* the training to the channel partners.

Or you can present it as an exclusive offer: "This is expensive training, but you're worth it." If a partner declines, you can add, "OK, but if you don't want it, I'll go down the road and offer it to someone else."

***CMI*: What kinds of results have your clients realized following your work with them and their channel partners?**

Sittig-Rolf: After "The Blitz Experience," vendors have seen as much as 10 times back on their investment in terms of revenue. Partners have gotten as many as 50 new opportunities on training day alone, which is a huge, immediate ROI. Vendors and partners also get sales down the road because of this sales training.

Frank Rauch, a VP at Hewlett-Packard, may have said it best: "We've had great feedback from partners on The Blitz Experience demand generation program. We are seeing solid ROI and revenue results. More blitzes = more sales calls = GROWTH through new customer acquisition."

Andrea Sittig-Rolf, president and founder of Sittig Incorporated, helps sales organizations inspire change, maximize sales and increase bottom-line results. With her business savvy and a passion for people, she understands how to help salespeople be their best and has what it takes to inspire them. Andrea is a successful entrepreneur, author, frequent media guest and sales trainer and is in high demand as a speaker and workshop leader.

Her Blitz Experience® is a one-day, activity-based new business development program that empowers partner salespeople to schedule appointments with qualified prospects the day of the training, resulting in a pipeline full of new opportunities at the end of the day. For more information, call Sittig Incorporated at 206-769-4886, or e-mail info@sittiginc.com.

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