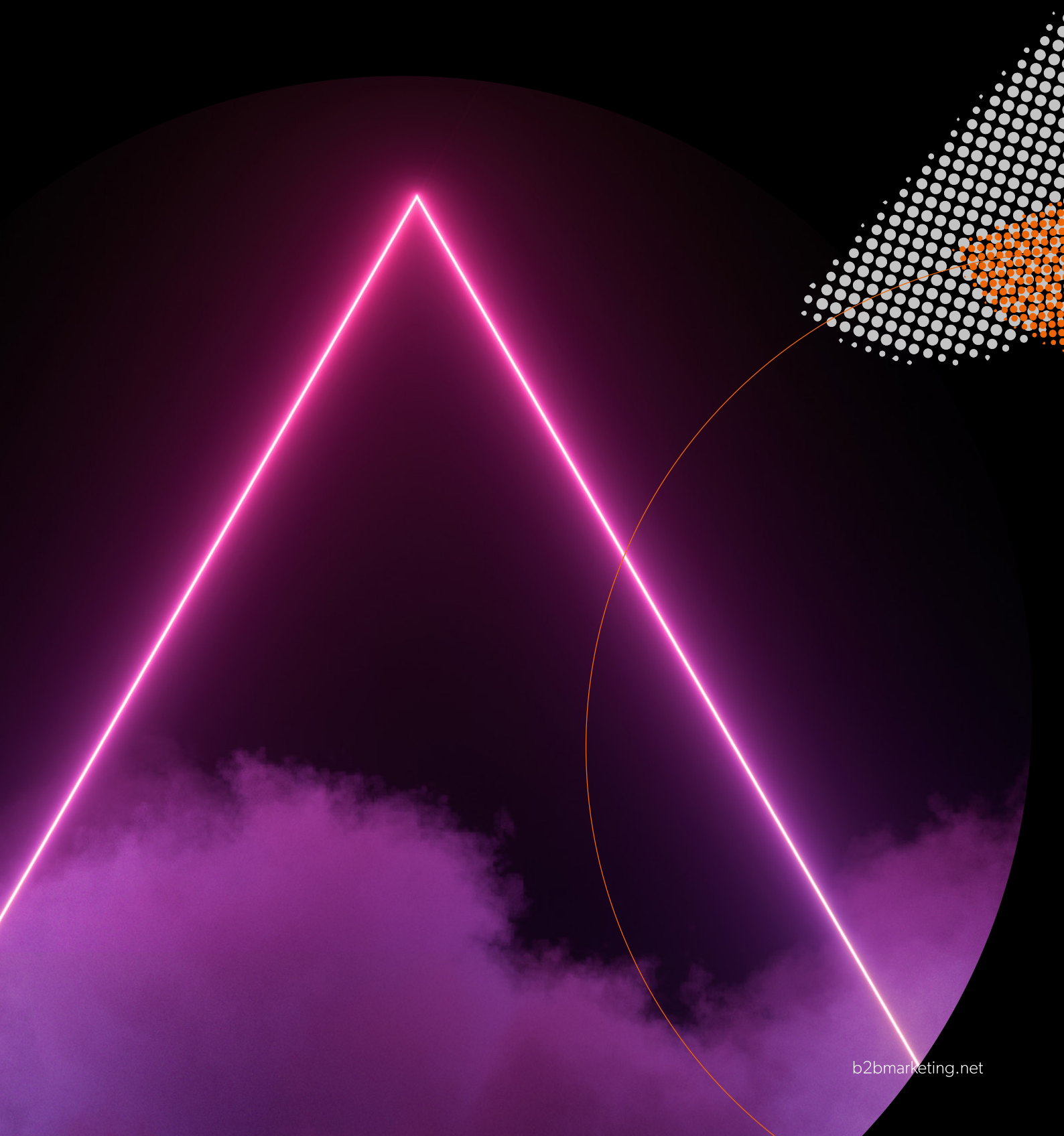
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Laser-focused channel marketing

How tech Vendors and Partners can reap the benefits of a hyper-targeted approach to channel marketing



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Foreword



David Rowlands,
editor,
B2B Marketing

Build it and they will come. Or so they say. The reality for tech Vendors, however, is that building a product is only the first step. Step two is getting this product to market. Enter, channel.

Channel Partners are an essential, but often under-valued route to market for many tech Vendors, providing scale, reach and focus that Vendors may not necessarily achieve by themselves. As a result, unlocking the potential of channel Partners and their audiences is a perennial conundrum for Vendors.

As Vendors often rely on a huge pool of Partners to market their products, they sometimes revert to a 'campaign-in-a-box'. In other words, a standardised, non-targeted campaign that can be executed by any one of their Partners, regardless of their strengths and weaknesses. The intention of such campaigns is for the Partners to be self-sufficient, and to execute and manage these campaigns themselves instead of relying on the Vendor, which is a demand on Vendor resource.

This report will take a closer look at the problem with 'one-size-fits-all' Partner marketing campaigns, and present the case for better developed marketing support from Vendors and more focused channel marketing programmes. It will also demonstrate how these more effective programmes can help create a more fruitful and engaging relationship for Partners and Vendors.

Introduction

'Campaign-in-a-box' programmes are intended to be relevant in every situation and for every Partner, regardless of their size, audiences, available resources or objectives. The result? Under-utilised campaigns that often fail to engage the target audience, and ultimately don't contribute to cohesive and profitable long-term relationships.

To facilitate Partner marketing which genuinely delivers for both sides, the relationship between the Vendor and Partner deserves a huge amount of focus, with hyper-focused, targeted, customer-centric programmes tailored to each individual Partner.

Each Partner has a niche, whether that's knowing their audience better than anyone else, segment visibility, geographical location, or perhaps they have developed complementary tech. Whatever it is, Vendors should play to this. By doing so, they can ensure their offering is presented in the most effective way, boosting ROI.

It's also fundamental to note that this is not just beneficial to the Vendor. By tailoring programmes to each channel Partner, the Partners themselves will see far more success in their efforts to market the product. The result is a strong joint value proposition.

Developing this Partner-Vendor relationship, therefore, is a no-brainer.

With a myriad of different Partner types now in existence, a campaign-in-a-box is even less effective. The current campaigns rolled out by Vendors more often than not are created for a reseller Partner, and do not take into consideration other Partner types, such as: value-added resellers, managed service providers, systems integrators, distributors, independent software Vendors, and alliance Partners. Each of these Partner types has its own niche, and so Vendors need to tailor their programmes accordingly to ensure each Partner is getting what they need to succeed.

Vendors should, therefore, ask: 'What do you need? What will help market this product in the most effective way?' The result will be an increase in revenue, greater visibility into ROI, and a more productive relationship – a relationship that doesn't lead to both parties being dissatisfied or underwhelmed with the results, but one in which they see the value in being loyal to one another, and in which they can see long-term, sustained success.

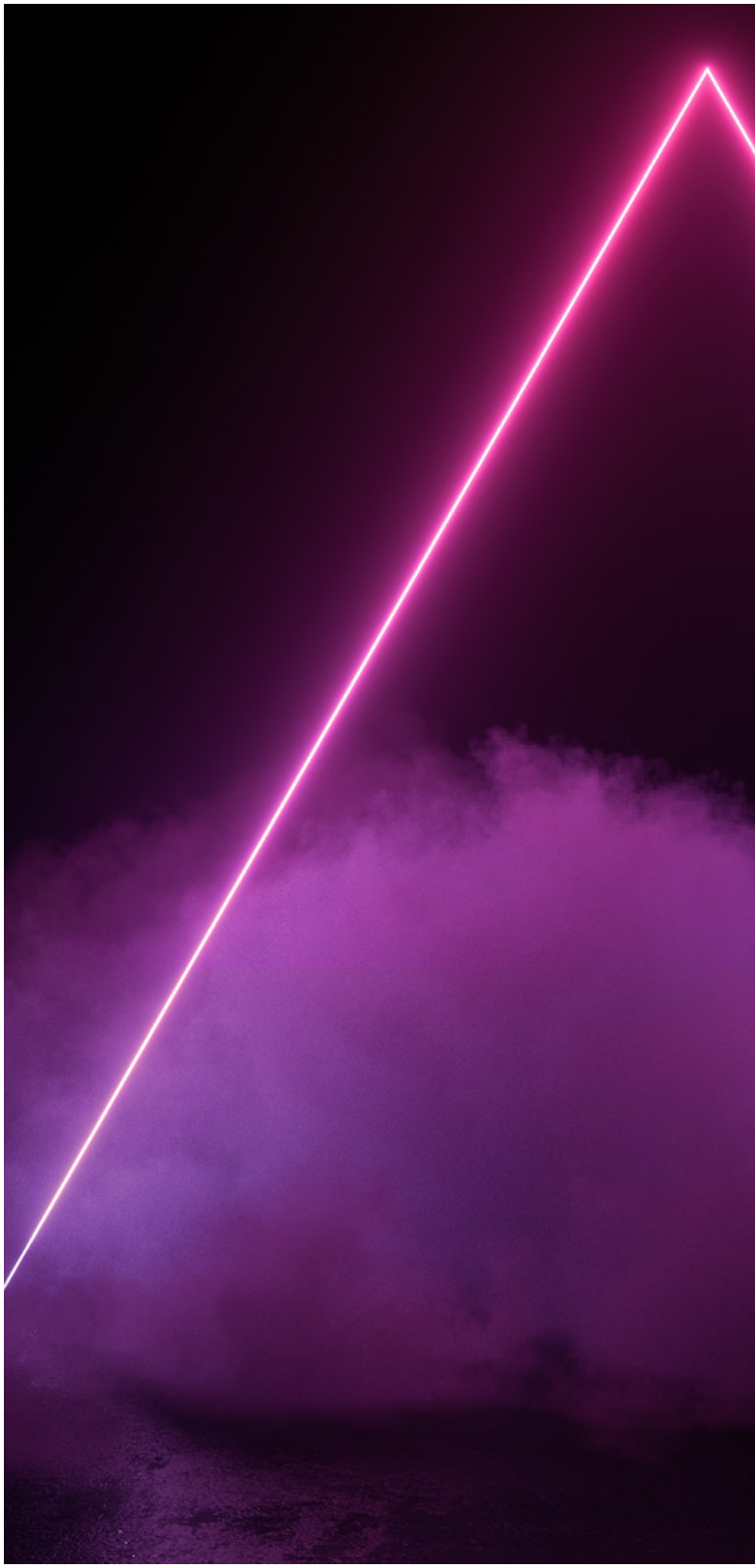
And who doesn't want that?

How channel has reacted to the Covid-19 pandemic

The impact of Covid-19 has been keenly felt in channel – with so many moving parts and cross-border relationships to juggle, its growth was always going to be stunted by such a significant blow. And, with different countries experiencing varying levels of lockdown restrictions, the drop in demand from one Partner in one market will cause a knock-on effect that will carry over.

But, there's a prevailing sense of optimism in channel circles, that any short-term blows to growth will recover, and that opportunity has emerged from the chaos of the past few months. "We're seeing our Partners becoming more accomplished at wading through the Covid chaos, and business is beginning to re-ignite," says Amanda Holmes, APAC & EMEA marketing director at Kodak Alaris.

Rob Reynolds, head of EMEA channel and tech partner marketing at Verizon Business agrees, noting that the pandemic has significantly accelerated certain elements of digital transformation. "The pandemic restrictions have pushed and escalated trends that were already there – retail bricks to clicks and remote working to name but two," he says. "It is about making sure that our customers have the right technology to be able to continue to do business in a really productive way."



Down with one-size-fits-all: The channel marketing opportunity

One of the biggest challenges facing channel marketing is an overreliance on a one-size-fits-all approach to campaigns and programmes. It's understandable that many marketing teams should revert to this tactic – after all, with so many Partner relationships to juggle, sometimes it can be easier to stick a campaign-in-a-box and shoot it across to Partners – box ticked, onto the next one. The result though? Generic and underwhelming campaigns that fail to engage with Partners and resonate with end customers.

Specifically, the problems of a one-size-fits-all approach include the following:

- **Content not relevant to the Partner's audience.**

  If this content isn't totally relevant to the Partner's audience, why would they want to engage with it? Ultimately, the one-size-fits-all approach leads to wasted time and effort on everyone's behalf, with very little to show for it. It may seem easier to roll out the same content for all Partners, but if it's not having the intended effect, what's the point?

- **A weak relationship between the Partner and the Vendor.**

  As campaigns are created in a silo and passed over to all Partners, there is a very real disconnect between the Vendors' aims and how Partners can help them achieve this. No questions are asked (or answered), and the result is a lack of visibility on both sides, with little understanding of what each party is trying to achieve, and how they can do this. Long-term, Partners and Vendors are not getting the most out of their relationship and, as a result, the most out of their business.

Long-term, Partners and Vendors are not getting the most out of their relationship and, as a result, the most out of their business

- **Non-existent joint value propositions (JVPs).**

  A one-size-fits-all approach focuses far too heavily on the Vendor's requirements. Done correctly, channel marketing should create value for both sides of the coin, ensuring a stronger relationship and better use of each other's resources and expertise.

Ultimately, channel marketing is all about individual relationships and joint value realisation. It should come as no surprise then, that standardised marketing campaigns have the potential to hold the industry back.

The very essence of channel marketing should be built on cohesive and, ultimately, profitable long-term relationships for both parties, and without that targeted element of personalisation, programmes and campaigns can fall flat, and relationships put in jeopardy.

Fortunately, many Vendors, Partners and agencies work together to create and deliver a more strategic, focused and selective approach to channel marketing, providing tangible value to both Vendor and Partner, and ensuring long-term success.

Five elements of a successful channel marketing programme

1) Make content your one-stop-shop

"It's a huge cliché, but content really is king in channel marketing," says James Houselander, director of field and channel marketing at Silver Peak. "We're noticing that content is becoming much more relevant, with buyers, personas and audience segments in mind – and campaigns are becoming more targeted as a result."

But, there remains a pinch point between the Vendor and Partner when it comes to content, be it overloaded inboxes, irrelevance, or just too much choice. For Vendors like James, optimising their content library is a key tactic for enabling Partners to derive as much value as possible from their content.

"We've invested heavily in optimising our online Partner portal, making search functions much more fluid," he says.

"Increasingly, Partners are seeking different kinds of content, and, as a Vendor, it's our responsibility to give them the tools to take our content and repurpose it in multiple ways."

This represents a tangible attitude change among Vendors – the focus really is swaying towards more personalised, relevant and easily adaptable content, as James explains. "Partners want to take bite-sized chunks of your content and use it in a way that's most relevant for their audience – if you can empower them to do so, you'll both reap the rewards."

Amanda's team adopts a similar, hyper-targeted approach by crafting flexible content toolkits that can be adapted on the fly and segmented for different Partners and audiences. "In some ways, creating the content is the easiest part," she admits. "It's the content adoption that throws up the most difficult challenges, encouraging Partners – who are already strapped for time – to go-to-market with our content."

"Partners want to take bite-sized chunks of your content and use it in a way that's most relevant for their audience – if you can empower them to do so, you'll both reap the rewards"

2) Connections are critical

Of course, in channel marketing, good content won't work without the right people to distribute it. The key here is building personal and authentic relationships that encompass every touchpoint between Vendor and Partner, from content delivery to holistic go-to-market campaigns, and JVPs to market development fund (MDF) programmes.

When it comes to content especially, what Partners crave is a curator, a dedicated person or team to signpost the most relevant content and services that will truly add value to their marketing efforts. "The best Vendors assign you someone to truly understand your environment, your limitations, and to keep you informed on future events and points of interest, be it a Partner workshop or virtual events," says Dave Hughes, head of marketing at Ideal.

However, you can possess the best channel marketing programme in the world, but, unless you truly understand the Partner in question, it just won't carry the same weight, which is why the Vendor-agency relationship represents one of the most critical elements of a stand-out programme.

This rings especially true for Rob, who says the value of interpersonal connection often upstages KPIs as his key indicator of a successful channel marketing programme. "This isn't something you can explicitly measure, but if you combine qualitative and quantitative feedback, you can accurately judge success," he adds. "For me, it's about the people in the programme and the Partner experience, rather than the programme itself."

Rob's point suggests that a successful Partner programme should not just based on revenue alone, but also through Partner engagement – whether that's through surveys, regular business reviews, or Partner advisory boards. Engaged Partners are typically better educated about a Vendor's solutions and, going further, will be willing to evangelise and position a Vendor's solutions above others during difficult times, which feels more pertinent than ever right now.

3) The power of the JVP

A vital cog in the Vendor-Partner relationship, JVPs are often a rushed affair, or too heavily focused on the Vendor. A JVP lives or dies on its ability to explicitly identify shared goals and objectives for both sides of the relationship, and ultimately offers the end customer value.

For Rob at Verizon Business, JVPs are fundamental to his business, and represent the foundation and building blocks for any successful Vendor-Partner relationship. "We work with our channel marketing agency to really get under the skin of our Partners, analysing their capabilities, the markets they operate in, their value proposition, how they see themselves working with us, which of our capabilities they're going to be selling and, together, what that means for the end client.

"Going through that process with every single Partner is such a grounding experience, for both of us" he adds. "It makes sure that we create content with the Partner from scratch, based on a joint value proposition, and they really appreciate this approach."

Using these shared goals and objectives, the JVP serves as a constant reminder that joint value should be baked into every aspect and every step of the journey, not just at the outset, and that this requires a cultural shift on behalf of the Vendor.

As Amanda explains: "I constantly ask my team whether they truly understand what the Partner is trying to achieve, not just what they're trying to achieve on our behalf," she says. "It's about realising what we're trying to achieve together, and how our different skillsets can complement each other in order to realise those goals – how those goals enable growth for both of us."

4) Manage and measure

Without proper management or measurement, channel marketing programmes will never be as successful as they could be.

With MDF investments frequently reaching six figures or more, Vendors need to be able to see how well programmes are performing. This will enable them to analyse the data, see what's missing, optimise their programmes, and ultimately prove that their Partner relationships are delivering value.

The most effective way of measuring the value of these partnerships is to utilise the appropriate platform – platforms that can take multiple, disparate data sources and processes, and merge them into a single, actionable view, providing the Vendor with greater control and visibility.

These platforms ensure regional accountability, with the Vendor possessing central control over the entire operation. This allows Vendors to: increase productivity, with less time wasted on data collection; make data-driven channel investment decisions; and generate internal buy-in, as everyone in the business can clearly see the value generated by channel.

In addition to this, they also allow Vendors to easily upload or update content for specific Partners, prompt Partners to meet deadlines, communicate with their Partners about their solutions and products, and more.

In turn, Partners also receive the content and information they need, when they need it, allowing them to be as efficient as possible.

By using the appropriate platform, therefore, the value of the entire Partner-Vendor relationship is put at the forefront. Vendors can measure the success of their Partner relationships and programmes, looking for ways to optimise and improve, and Partners are provided with the tools they need to meet their end of the bargain.

5) Leverage agencies to appeal to niche markets

Amanda sees the value of an agency in helping to develop joint marketing plans. "For smaller, more niche Partner relationships, agencies can play a huge role on the strategic side, be it creating a framework or getting hands-on with the field marketing team," she says.

The value they also add in the long-term can't be overlooked. If agencies look after the self-service and pay-to-play tactics – a Vendor's in-house team is freed up to focus on producing laser-targeted programmes and campaigns with their top tier Partners and targets.

James agrees – for him, agencies act as a valuable extension of a Vendor's marketing team, forming a vital bridge between Partner and Vendor, particularly when it comes to messaging, content creation, and value proposition. "Every Partner operates differently – some have in-house resources, but others don't even have a marketing presence," he says. "For Vendors that boast multiple products and services, agencies play an important role in not only articulating the value of each distinct solution, but also determining how to align that to the Partner's own strategy."

Channel marketing agencies also play a key role for Rob at Verizon Business. "Agencies bring ideas, allow you to scale, and unlock the ability to become more agile," he says. "For me, they're a vital third player in the Vendor-Partner relationship, and essentially act as my marketing team."

How to improve the Vendor/Partner relationship

Clearly, the relationship between Partners and Vendors needs improvement – for both their sakes. Coming from the Partner perspective, Ideal's head of marketing, Dave Hughes, shares five top tips for improving the Vendor-Partner relationship:

1) Be upfront with what you're offering

"I receive upwards of 20 invites from Vendors every week," says Dave. "The sheer amount of stuff that's pushed at you, from events to webinars to roundtables, is overwhelming." For Dave, being part of a small in-house marketing team at a Partner brand, he needs to know, straight off the bat, exactly what value he's going to get from an invite. Content overload is a problem across the entire marketing world, and it's keenly felt in channel marketing circles.

2) Recognise your Partner is seeing other people

One of the biggest misconceptions in channel marketing is that the Vendor-Partner relationship is a monogamous one. "As a marketer working with Vendor brands, I'm often faced with the misconception that they're the only Vendor that I work with," says Dave. "In fact, we do business with over 10 different tech Vendors."

Working with so many Vendors, each with their own content library and range of resources on offer, can be a daunting task, as Dave explains. "A constant challenge for me is determining how to properly take advantage of this vast amount of resources and content that's available to me – as in, how do I use what's on offer to actually impact my organisation in a positive manner?"

3) Tailor your process for your Partner

An offshoot of working with so many Vendors is that already time-poor Partners have to navigate and become fluent in a number of different processes and ways of working. Where one Vendor will request customer data per quarter, another may only want it at end of the year – each Vendor has a different way of doing things, and this can cause huge headaches for Partners.

Vendor processes need to be tweaked for the individual Partner in question – they can certainly meet you half-way, but Vendors must play their part. "Make it easy for me," says Dave. "And then I'll be much more likely to get involved in these programmes and initiatives that you've poured a huge amount of time and effort into."



4) Be wary of overstepping the mark

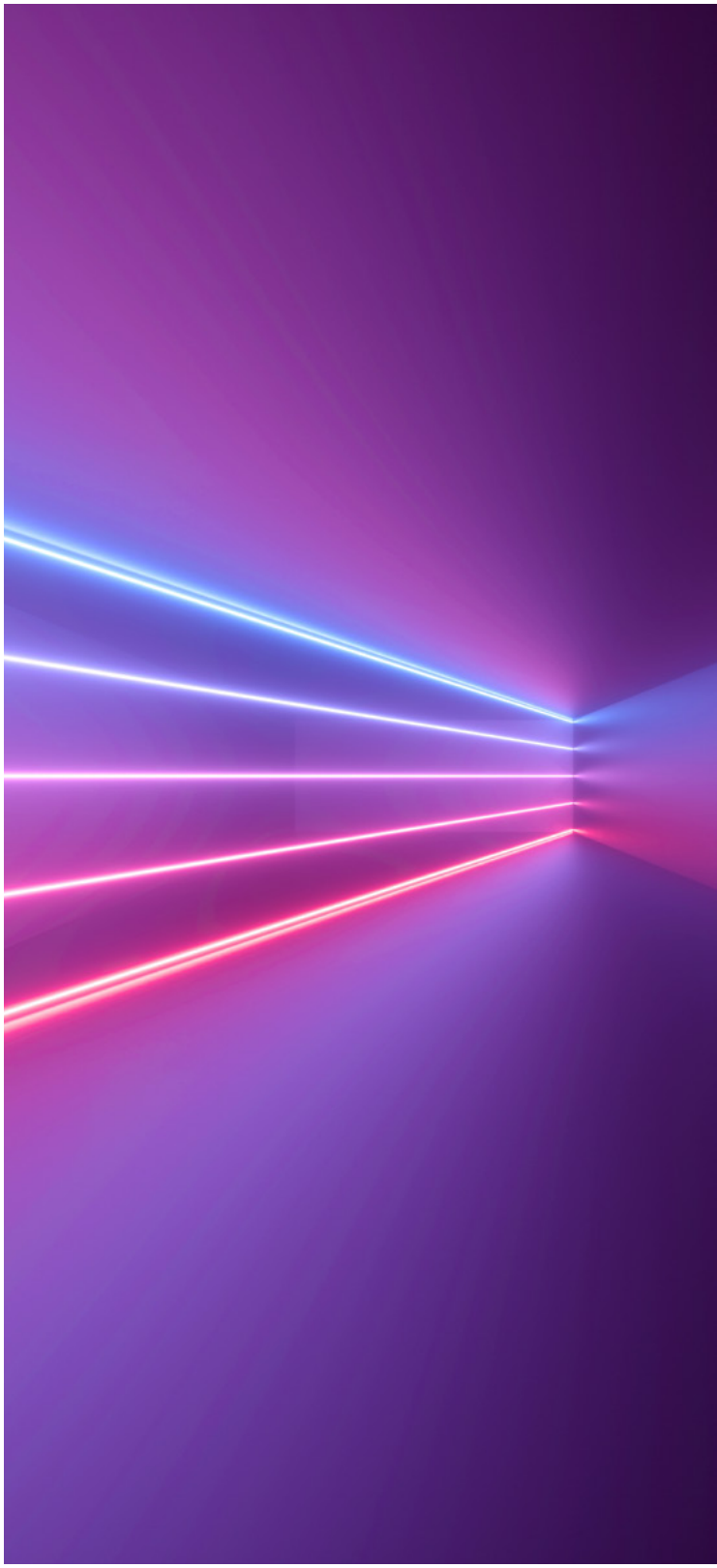
The rise of SaaS has completely revolutionised the marketing function, as channel marketers become increasingly focused on customer lifecycle management, but Dave remarks that Vendors can often overstep the mark when it comes to encouraging a Partner's end customer to renew their subscription.

"I've noticed recently that Vendors want to take it upon themselves to intercede on your behalf and directly contact your customers, urging them to renew subscriptions or sign up to a new service," he says. "It highlights the importance of that personal relationship between a Vendor and Partner, to prevent that whole ecosystem from becoming overwhelming."

5) Use distributors to your advantage

In Dave's opinion, there's a vital third player in the Vendor-Partner relationship that's often overlooked – the distributor. Distributors are typically there to shift goods and services from Vendor to Partner, but savvy marketers from both sides of the Vendor-Partner relationship are starting to realise the added value of expanding a distributor's role within the channel.

"We work with distributors who possess microsites that will literally signpost to us the most relevant Vendor content," says Dave. "Many distributors also assign dedicated account managers to better connect you with the tech Vendor in question, they typically have an in-depth understanding of the local market context and other cultural nuances. A good distributor adds a huge amount of value, giving me much more freedom to innovate."

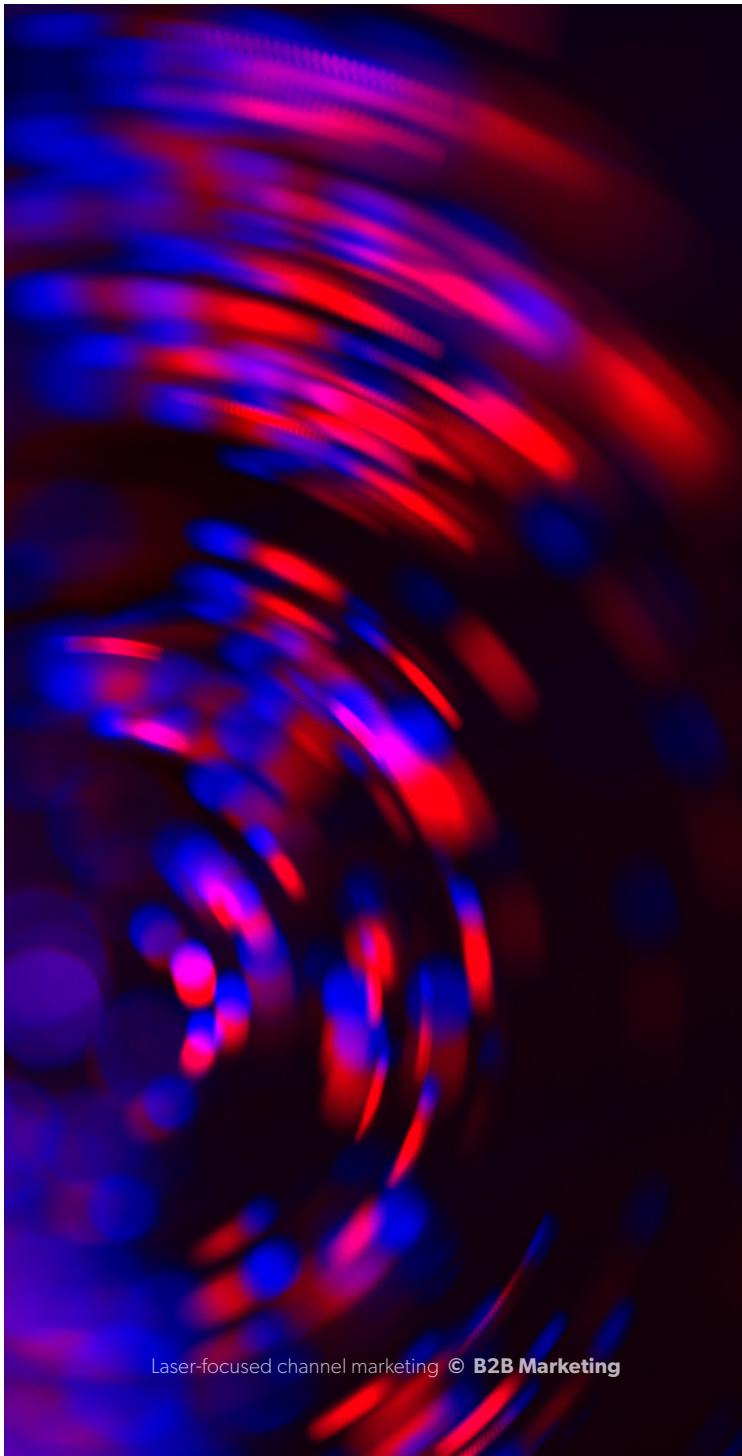


A new chapter for the channel and channel marketing

While 2020 proved one of the most challenging and unpredictable years in living memory, the world of channel has been quietly working behind the scenes to rejuvenate the industry.

In terms of the challenges facing Vendors and Partners, 2020 didn't alter them, but instead thrust them further under the spotlight. For too long, Vendors relied on standardised marketing campaigns that were expected to satisfy every Partner, regardless of their size, scale or niche.

But, as we've seen, the age of traditional channel marketing is on its way out, replaced with considered and targeted approaches that leverage agile content, agencies, and personal experiences to provide mutually-beneficial relationships that will last long into the future.



Laser-focused channel marketing © **B2B Marketing**

Conclusion



Tom Perry,
CEO,
Sherpa

In 2021, the channel and Partner landscape is already beginning to evolve at an incredible pace as c-level executives and CMOs, in particular, prioritise leveraging more from their channels.

While this report considers how channel marketing strategy should evolve to help Partners thrive post-Covid, it also demonstrates that the appetite for channel transformation is still very much alive with Vendors at the heart of it.

Partners and the marketplaces within which they operate are changing and we are seeing the quick establishment of new ways of doing business through the channel. We now have channels with multiple Partner types who require a much more sophisticated channel model.

Partners no longer merely resell a Vendor's technology and products – they seamlessly blend multiple technologies and solutions to deliver for the end customer. This requires Partners to work with multiple Vendors and, as such, they require a far greater level of support and service from all Vendors.

The Partner experience, or PX, is at the heart of what Vendors need to be considering. This is because Partners now have numerous choices around which technologies they sell and access to these technologies is becoming easier and easier.

Vendors are required to have up-to-date channel marketing platforms and programmes with which to support their Partner communities. When key channel marketing activities are also measured, analysed and then optimised for better performance, both parties see a win-win. It's time to place the Partner experience at the heart of channel marketing.

Deficiencies in any aspect of support will lead to a loss of revenue market share and mind share amongst Partners. 2021 is a key year for technology companies to be investing in their Partner communities and the technology associated with supporting them.

As we've seen in this report, blending together the right technology platforms and managed programmes is essential. As is the ability to work closely with Partners to develop joint value propositions and meaningful vertical programmes.

There is a new channel dynamic coming to the fore in 2021. Those Vendors that are investing in their channels and the programmes and technologies associated with them will see significant revenue and market share gains over the next three to five-year period.

About

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B2B Marketing is the comprehensive information resource for B2B marketers. Its mission is to provide practitioners with the information they need to perform better and achieve more, whatever sector of the B2B space they are operating in.

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Sherpa

Sherpa is a strategic, global, 100% channel focused tech agency that understands and manages all elements of Partner development. Sherpa works with many of the world's leading technology companies, enabling channel transformation using six pillars of channel development; from planning and enablement to growth and measurement.

These pillars allow Sherpa to assist with any element of channel management; with specialisms in Global System Integrators, Alliances, Vendors, Partners and Master Agents development/support.

Often the missing link between the large analyst firms and in region execution, Sherpa is the world's only true activation agency for transforming the Partner ecosystem.

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