

# Boost Partner Program Participation & Effectiveness By Implementing Behavior-Based Channel Programs

Successful channel leaders have always understood that maintaining channel loyalty depends on the value they help their partners capture.

As the measurement of “value” for many partners shifts from quarterly revenue results to longer-lasting and more profitable client relationships, channel programs need to identify, communicate, enable and incentivize activities that help partners win business *and* extend customer lifecycles.

[A Forrester study](#) found partners’ main motivation for participating in vendor programs was virtually even among staff support, training and enablement (50%), and product/solution development (52%). The same research also revealed that for many partners, the most challenging aspects of engaging in vendor programs are:

- > Difficulty to participate
- > Basic or non-existent training and development programs
- > Insufficient marketing/sales enablement

## Adapt & Overcome

This challenge to participate is compounded by the rapidly changing B2B buyer's journey. It's increasingly important for vendors to adapt and evolve while helping partner teams do the same.

Adaptation requires focus on key elements in order to continue capturing partners' attention and dollars:

- > **Digital buyers' journeys** are empowering customers to do more research, evaluation and selection online—in some cases all the way through the decision process.
- > **Exceptional customer experience** is an expectation and differentiator. Considering how many service-related elements are built into solutions and how buyers experience brands, especially through partners, will ultimately drive trust, purchases and continued business.
- > **Retention** can no longer be sustained on the idea that delivering a solid product will automatically keep customers satisfied. Whether it's recurring revenue services or products that require implementation and up-sells, a passive effort isn't going to cut it.

Vendors must train, enable and incentivize partner organizations to address critical touchpoints at the most important stages of the buyer's journey—even post sale—to continue earning customer dollars and provide the value partners have come to expect.

### More Ways to Boost Channel Loyalty

Indeed, incentive-inclusive partner programs that enable partners to capture the ongoing value related to an initial purchase can significantly boost channel loyalty.

For example, [IDC](#) estimated in 2019 that every \$1 spent on a Salesforce solution would generate another \$4.29 for its channel ecosystem. By 2024, that figure is projected to climb to \$5.80.

[Google Cloud partners](#) were expected to earn an estimated \$5.32 for each \$1 of Google Cloud technology sold in 2019, according to IDC. By 2025, that figure is expected to jump to \$7.54.

"We are seeing a trend of equipping partners to maintain an extended lifecycle with a set of touchpoints with their end customers," said Brian Steele, Channel Partner Engagement Strategy Advisor at ITA Group. "This ultimately leads to selling more of the wraparound services that they're providing as value-add, which increases their revenue models."



Successfully aligning partner activity with a never-ending B2B buyer's journey can be a heavy lift for many vendors but when thoughtfully planned, behavior-based programs can successfully empower partner staff to partake in incremental but important value-generating activities. By reinforcing and rewarding those behaviors and creating new habit loops, vendors can involve more partner staff in the overall effort to successfully engage a customer.

"Customer experience is tied very heavily to touching a customer far beyond the transactional moment," said Insights & Strategy Leader at ITA Group, Ellen Linkenhoker. "Your partner program is late to the game if you don't evolve where you want behavior to happen. To help vendors control the pipeline better, pull partner staff participation further up the funnel and reward behaviors sooner and earlier for the buyer."

## Aligning With the Buyer's Journey

Identifying and incentivizing behavior for specific partner staff can be game-changing. Data discovered by the [Demand Gen Report B2B Buyer Behavior Study](#) shows how important it is to identify and reward incremental but critical activities that enable partner marketing teams to remain more than a few steps ahead of their targeted customer's buyer's journey.

For example, incentivizing partner marketing staff to optimize their websites and content for search is critical. According to the report, most buyers start their journey online, searching for specific topics related to their business need.

Enabling and rewarding partners to post content that is relevant to targeted buyers is equally important. According to the survey, 70% of buyers ranked "relevant content that speaks directly to our company" as very important.

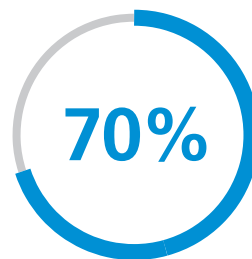
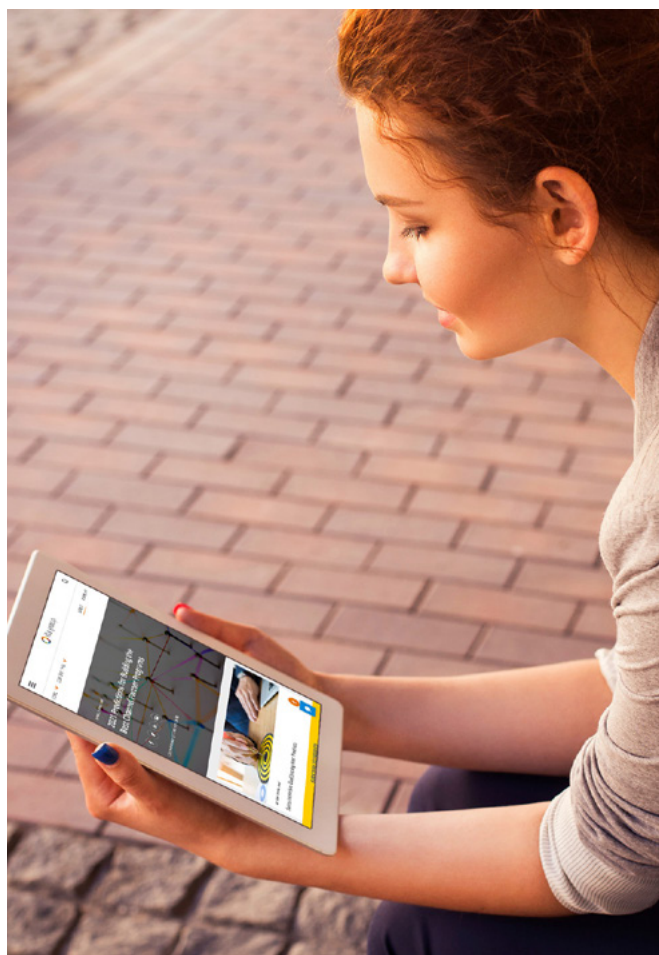
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**In addition, 96% of B2B professionals considered messaging that "spoke directly to our industry needs" to be important.**

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Incentivizing partners to learn and adopt behaviors that provide B2B buyers with relevant experiences at every stage of their purchasing journey can be game-changing. Seventy-six percent (76%) of buyers said they now expect more personalized attention from solution providers based on their specific needs.

By implementing behavior-based programs that identify and reward incremental but critical activities that align to these changes in buyer behaviors, vendors can ensure that their partners will be wherever the customer goes.



**of buyers ranked "relevant content that speaks directly to our company" as very important**

*—Demand Gen Report B2B Buyer Behavior Study*





## Constructing Behavior-Based Programs

Developing successful behavior-based programs requires reframing several traditional partner program practices.

### More Than Sales Rewards

When incentives are only tied to a single sales outcome, they often fall short on enabling and rewarding partners to market service contracts, upgrades and solution extensions—all vital to retention and growth. It's also a lagging indicator of partner success and provides a narrow view of the entire customer lifecycle.

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**Focusing channel incentives on partner behavior as opposed to rewarding more traditional transactions is critical to driving channel success and loyalty, according to Jay McBain, Forrester's Principal Analyst for Channel, Partnerships and Ecosystems.**

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"Brands that excel at deploying the right mix, level and cadence of incentives will improve revenue and profit from the channel, expand the breadth and depth of customer relationships, and increase mindshare and loyalty of partners."

### Communicate Value

Programs that communicate priorities and value propositions to partners—as well as the rewards that reinforce alignment—drive adoption more effectively. "What behavior-based programs are really about is getting that alignment," said Brian Steele. "You have to build that relationship with the partner."

Ellen Linkenhoker recommends that when vendors begin to develop behavior-based programs, they prioritize communication of a core brand statement and general value proposition that "can be personalized and segmented to be relevant to the partner who's entering your portal. I prefer to think of this strategy as a 'personalized engagement program' vs. just behavior change. It's about more than just incentives—but rather engaging with partners at every step of their journey in order to impact that of the buyer's journey."

Vendors should be careful not to assume that even generous incentives can be sufficient to sustain program engagement. "I see a lot of mistakes in the design of programs where vendors are looking at the buckets they put their funds into for execution and think they can skinny back the communications if the rewards value proposition is strong enough. That frame of thinking is incorrect," Steele said. "What's critical to a reward program is communicating it."

## Constructing Behavior-Based Programs (Cont.)

### Personalization & Relevance

Segmenting programs—or crafting campaigns to address specific offerings or markets—can leverage foundational components of the core program and minimize messaging confusion.

“When brands promote different messaging, often to the same partners, they’re compounding the amount of effort and work a partner has to do,” said Linkenhoker. “We’re in the age of the partner. If you’re not easy to work with and somebody else is, you’ve essentially lost market share at that point.”

### Engaging Partner Staff—One by One

A key component of behavior-based programs is ensuring that criteria is specific to individual partner staff. Unlike many traditional incentive programs, behavior-based programs are designed to reach out to a variety of partner may not typically be offered rewards for completing specific tasks or achieving milestones.

This expansion of the incentivized audience can be daunting for some vendors, said Steele. “[It requires] a deeper understanding of who is doing what and when. Many vendors don’t know who’s downline inside a partner organization, in the specific role of an architect or solution engineer versus the salesperson, etc. It’s critical to identify who is in what role at any given time or part of a selling team structure, to funnel the right message to the right person.”

Programs should be crafted to ensure appropriate incentives are being offered to focus individual partner staff on their tasks. “We’re seeing the need for segmented user experiences that unlock content. There’s a lot of different things that you can do to enable partner staff and make it attractive enough for them to want to participate,” said Steele.

Using points to reward behaviors or activities helps make this scalable, notes Linkenhoker, allowing vendors to roll something out quickly if you need to see an uptick in a behavior at a specific time or even to target ‘X’ segment with a tailored strategy. It’s all possible because you have such a standardized way to create a program currency when you’re using points as a backbone. We also recommend knowing where you need to incent; simply don’t blow your budget trying to drive every activity. Know where you can make the biggest impact inside each segment and start there.



A point-based incentive also supports a more direct association on a specific activity with an award. “It’s important to draw the action and the reward as closely together as possible to create a line of sight between the behavior you’re driving and the positive reward reinforcement,” said Linkenhoker.



## Sales Readiness: Why Early Education Matters

Although many B2B buyers are researching products heavily before contacting a seller, spontaneous requests for information require vendors to enable, prepare and incentivize partner sales staff to knowledgeably address prospects.

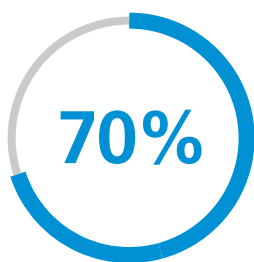
According to the [Demand Gen Report B2B Buyer Behavior Study](#), more than three quarters of buyers said they engaged with a sales representative from their selected vendor within three months of their research, and more than a third of respondents said they connected with a salesperson within the first month.

Of those that agreed the vendor was educated and offered valuable information, 81% said their experience with their sales rep positively influenced their decision to select that vendor.

Additionally, 91% of buyers said they felt the sales rep they engaged with was educated about their company and communicated relevant information that was customized to their needs.

Enabling and incentivizing partners through a behavior-based program can help them address critical factors that shape a buyer's decisions, including:

- > Demonstrating a strong knowledge of the solution and business landscape (69%)
- > Providing content that makes it easier to build a business case for the purchase (62%)
- > Demonstrating a strong knowledge of the buyer's company and needs (65%)
- > Providing higher-quality content (55%)
- > Timeliness of the vendor's response to inquiries (54%).
- > Providing a better mix of content to help the buyer through each stage (52%)



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—Demand Gen Report B2B Buyer Behavior Study

## Winning With Behavior-Based Programs

The impact of building behavior-based programs that align partners with the buyer's journey is substantial.

For partners, a well-designed, incentive-supported program provides appropriate onboarding. It offers more supportive lead generation activities through impactful enablement, allowing partners to capture transactions and stimulate growth through cross-sell, renewal and up-sell offerings. Overall, it helps them attain the value their vendors offer.

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**As brand reputation is improved and customer advocacy increases, vendors experience sustained and increased revenue.**

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Customers benefit from an improved customer experience that provides them with improved messaging and clearer product positioning. Continuous engagement of tailored or specialized interactions helps build client confidence in renewal or retention decision-making.

Behavior-based programs provide vendors with insights on how to drive more partner engagement in buyer-aligned activities. Measuring partner participation against the desired outcome of specific plans can provide a clearer understanding of where and what type of enablement investments should be made and gain insight into gaps or areas of improvement.

And, as brand reputation improves and customer advocacy increases, vendors experience sustained and increased revenue.

## Conclusion

To enable partners to realize the full value their companies represent, channel leaders must rethink their incentive practices. Shifting reward budgets into comprehensive behavior-based programs is foundational to enticing partners to develop business-winning habits.

By enabling and incentivizing activity that addresses critical buyer journey milestones and post-purchase touchpoints, partners can be better prepared to close deals and optimize customer experience for extended customer lifecycles.



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