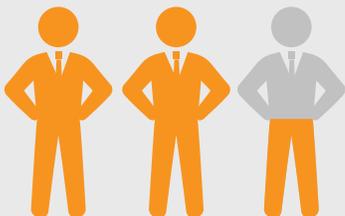


Understanding

THE PARTNER'S JOURNEY:

How channel partners arrive at technology decisions



86%

of solution providers plan to add either a new technology from an existing supplier or a new vendor relationship in 2016.

Solution providers are searching... Help them find you.

Whether adding a new technology from an existing supplier, forming a new vendor relationship, or adopting a new business model, solution providers taking transformative steps to grow their business have a long road ahead of them. They need and even seek out the guidance and expertise of myriad information sources at every step of the journey—not just at the moment of decision.

This presents a golden window of opportunity: the opportunity to capture coveted mindshare among solution providers before they have joined—or even become aware of—your partner program. Proactive promotion of your company throughout the *Partner's Journey* toward a new technology or business decision gives you a competitive advantage in winning their business.

Do you have a concrete strategy and game plan for recruiting new partners?

This is the real “Partner’s Journey.”

You may have heard the term “Partner’s Journey” in reference to a solution provider’s relationship with a technology supplier once they have joined a partner program. But this relationship actually comes *after* the

Partner’s Journey. When a solution provider joins your program, they embark on a new phase in growing their business: the *Partner Experience*. There is a whole, complex process leading up to this phase that must be taken into consideration.

Why? Because if you are not participating in the Partner’s Journey, you are missing out on valuable opportunities to capture partner mindshare, win new partnerships, and motivate existing partners to sell more.

The Partner’s Journey is very similar to the oft-cited “Buyer’s Journey.” Research has shown that the average consumer completes 70% of their journey toward a purchasing decision before ever contacting a salesperson. The Partner’s Journey is no different—solution providers begin the process of decision-making long before you hear from them.

Meet prospective channel partners at the beginning of their journey—not at the end of the road.

Too many technology suppliers mistake the end of the Partner’s Journey for the beginning. They wait until the solution provider is on the verge of making a final decision, mistakenly believing this to be the moment at which a prospective partner will be most receptive to their value proposition. But by this time (the final,

“Decision” stage of the journey) the solution provider has already done most of their research and whittled down their options—meaning that the vendor’s window of opportunity to capture a significant portion of the partner’s mindshare and influence their final decision has narrowed dramatically.

Third-party media is by far the most-used source of information during the first two stages of the Partner’s Journey, “Awareness” and “Consideration.”

By contrast, stepping into the solution provider’s path at the beginning of their journey allows you to get their attention at a crucial moment: when they are most in need of guidance, when they are most open to new ideas and relationships, and when fewer of your competitors are vying for their mindshare.

Building a relationship early on in the Partner’s Journey by educating, offering practical advice, and promoting positive associations with your brand establishes your company as a trusted ally and thought leader, giving you a competitive edge when solution providers reach the decision phase.

You cannot rely solely on CAMs to capture new business.

So how do you step into the solution provider’s path?



Channel Account Managers (CAMs) are typically tasked with this—the job of finding, contacting and recruiting new partners. Commonly, the expectation is that they will do this while simultaneously growing existing their accounts. But no matter how ambitious their goals or how explosive their enthusiasm, this is too much responsibility for any one person to handle, especially an account manager who is already stretched thin. Such expectations have proven unrealistic and unfruitful time and time again.

Why? The well-known “80/20 Rule” applies here: The bulk of a CAM’s business comes from just a handful of key partners. This means they spend most of their time on these top accounts, leaving very little for the recruitment of new partners.

In order to do both things well—nurturing current partners and recruiting new ones—a technology supplier (even a small one) must take some of the burden off of CAMs by transferring a certain amount of the responsibility for recruitment to channel marketing.

These channel marketing resources can be existing, designated employees, freelancers who specialize in marketing, outside agencies or media companies. The bottom line is that prospecting is not merely a sales responsibility—it is the shared responsibility of sales and marketing and should be treated as such. Effective prospecting and recruitment requires the sales and account management skills provided by CAMs as well as the expertise of seasoned marketers.

Aside from requiring more resources than CAMs alone (i.e., “bandwidth”), meaningful prospecting requires careful, well-thought-out strategy. This strategy doesn’t have to be complicated or vast in scope, but it should be planned, focused and measurable. The first step is evaluating and understanding your existing partner ecosystem and its capabilities. This will allow you to identify any gaps in it, as well as any risks your existing partners might pose, and to design a plan to address them.

Once you know what your challenges are, you can begin to tackle them with strategic marketing initiatives. Even if your organization is stretched for existing resources or it’s hard to justify the expense of adding a marketing resource, there are simple, effective things you can do at various points along the Partner’s Journey to capitalize on each of the three stages of the solution provider’s decision-making process.

These stages follow a pattern that looks very much like that of the Buyer’s Journey, but which has fundamental differences that make it unique to the Channel. The stages are: 1) Awareness, 2) Consideration and 3) Decision.

The IT channel is unique in its business practices and sales cycles, necessitating a new, channel-specific model of the solution provider’s decision-making process. The Buyer’s Journey and even the B2B Buyer’s Journey are helpful comparisons, but do not capture the complete picture and nuances of the Partner’s Journey.

STAGE 1: AWARENESS

The solution provider's journey begins with the discovery and exploration of new technologies, brands or business models. This phase can be overwhelming for partners, as the range of options is enormous. From the Internet of Things to Big Data to the Cloud, there are more directions to go in and more technology decisions to be made today than ever before. The result is an endless, confusing onslaught of choices for solution providers and an unprecedented volume of competition for you, the technology supplier. You can view this as a discouraging roadblock... Or as the source of an enormous revenue opportunity.

Cloud Network Connectivity SDN
Converged Infrastructure IaaS
Managed Services Big Data Security
Hyperconvergence Internet of Things
App Development PaaS

No solution provider is an expert on every available technology, and new solutions pop up almost daily. As with any other uncharted territory, they need help understanding and sorting through the options and determining which are beneficial to their business. This puts technology suppliers in a great position to help prospective partners understand and navigate the complex landscape of today's IT ecosystem while promoting their value proposition.

Seize this opportunity to introduce your business as a knowledgeable, helpful resource, sowing the seeds of a potential channel partnership.

This tactic will also help you cut through the deafening noise of competition and stand out. A prospective partner may not be ready to adopt your (or anyone else's) technology or to join your partner program just yet, but when the time does come to make a decision, a long-established familiarity and trust of your business may very well tip the scales in your favor.

How many times have you considered all the options in a particular market, only to choose the services of a business with whom you have a personal relationship built on trust and familiarity? The IT channel is no different.

Always be visible.

Partners are constantly on the lookout for new solutions, informing themselves on a regular, ongoing basis through a wide variety of digital, print and human resources. **You can tap into this constant flow of opportunity by making your brand and contribution to the channel visible at any time and place a solution provider might be looking.**

In the Awareness phase, the solution provider's primary sources of information are:

Independent technology websites and magazines	74%
Distribution websites	58%
Independent technology events	58%

You can "meet" solution providers at these points along their journey and influence their decision-making process in a number of ways, including:

- Running banner ads on industry websites (many partners access these from their smartphones—make sure your site is mobile-friendly)
- Publishing print ads in industry publications like CRN Magazine
- Attending or sponsoring industry events (such as The Channel Company's XChange events)
- Taking advantage of PR opportunities, even small ones such as issuing an occasional press release to announce a product launch or an improvement to your partner program. Submit applications for industry awards and other recognition, such as CRN.com's annual Partner Program Guide or Channel Chiefs list.



Ads



Public Relations



Social Media



Industry Events



92%

of partners read CRN Magazine or visit CRN.com for industry news.

84% visit CRN.com at least once a week—more often than they visit all their strategic suppliers' partner portals combined.

Partners not only consume these resources on a regular basis—they also act on them. The Channel Company's research shows that nearly 9 in 10 solution providers go online to investigate companies they have read about in CRN Magazine. It also shows that solution providers take real action as a result of the content they view in CRN digital media, such as going to a technology supplier or distributor's website for more information or looking into a new partner program.

In addition to marketing activities like these at the main sources solution providers turn to, you can augment your brand exposure with less time-intensive, but still strategic, initiatives. For example, regularly posting solution-focused nuggets of information on social media such as Twitter and LinkedIn can be a simple and powerful way to promote your brand and establish your technology expertise.

It's important to keep in mind that **you do not have to do all of these things; in fact, focusing on one marketing initiative at a time (such as weekly posting on your company LinkedIn page) and doing it well will go much further than a splintered effort to do everything at once.**

As discussed earlier, there is more competition for partners' mindshare than ever before. Solution providers are bombarded with emails, offers, press coverage of exciting industry innovations, and more vendor partnership options than they ever had in the past. This is another reason it is so important to preemptively reach out to them where they spend time every day, and to make your unique value proposition abundantly clear at those "places" that serve as informational resources.

Partners visit the portals of their less strategic suppliers even more seldom than those of their top vendors: only 54% visit secondary suppliers' portals at least once a week and only 32% visit those of tertiary suppliers at least once a week.

Another potential pitfall for vendors is to mistake this initial phase of the journey for a contained one with a clear-cut beginning and end. The IT channel is a dynamic,

ever-evolving landscape with new technologies and new challenges arising moment-to-moment. Solution providers must therefore constantly be on the lookout for potential solutions and keeping pace with the latest IT trends and best practices. This means that you must always be visible and accessible, constantly pushing your brand out into the channel for solution providers to see and absorb.

The Awareness stage—and the Partner's Journey as a whole—is a continuous process, not a finite path ending in a contract.

If you don't make your presence in the channel known, solution providers may never know you are there.

At the end of the *Awareness* stage, the solution provider homes in on a particular technology or business model and decides to consider adopting it. While continuously cultivating brand awareness, you should also be mounting more sophisticated marketing efforts to appeal to solution providers in the next stage of the Partner's Journey: *Consideration*.

STAGE 2: CONSIDERATION

The second phase of the journey involves the identification of practical business applications for a certain technology, as well as the consideration of specific products or services on the market. The partner begins comparing vendors' products, and thus evaluating the vendors themselves. They might also look at how other solution providers are partnering with your company to see if they can find some commonalities and get a sense of what you are like to work with.

To find and compare actual products and services, solution providers look to:

Independent technology websites and magazines	70%
Peers/competitors	61%
Technology supplier websites	58%

At this stage solution providers still turn mostly to what they view as independent sources of information, like the media or their peers. But they are now looking for more in-depth information than they were in the *Awareness* stage. If they discovered your company during the *Awareness* stage, for example, this is the point at which they may first visit your website. Investing in high-impact, interactive online banners on industry websites, like expandable banners and video ads, can be effective here, as they are capable of telling a much more detailed, multi-dimensional story than standard online banners.

By the end of this stage, the partner will have assembled a short list of potential products and suppliers and be well on their way to making a deal. This means that this point in the Partner's Journey may be your last chance to make a real impact on their final purchase or partnership decision. So make it BIG.

70% of solution providers report that articles and ads found on websites like CRN.com are a valuable resource in the *Consideration* phase of a technology purchasing decision.

Demonstrate your value by providing value.

Solution providers are still looking—you still have a chance to influence their final decision. Make your value proposition clear: What problems do your products or services solve and how do they solve them best? Can they



make any money selling your product or partnering with your company? Will your technology help them attract new customers?

The most powerful way to demonstrate your value is to *provide value*—in the form of educational content that concretely answers questions about the technology you specialize in. Some examples of this are:

- Webcasts, such as CRN ChannelCasts, that educate solution providers and position your company as a thought leader
- White papers about your technology
- Short videos describing your technology and value proposition
- Demos at live events
- Advertorials



White Papers



Webcasts



Advertorials



Live Events



86%

of partners visit CRN.com to learn more about new technology suppliers.

Nearly **9 in 10** go online to investigate companies they have read about in CRN Magazine.

When a prospective partner downloads your white paper or reads your advertorial and finds the information they need, this is a powerful signal that your company has the expertise and innovative edge they are looking for. It creates a lasting impression and a positive association with your organization's name. If your content is downloadable, you may even be able to capture the solution provider's contact information and make a direct connection with them.

This kind of knowledge transaction marks the beginning of a meaningful relationship. By educating and advancing them along their path, you have effectively become a(n indirect) partner in the solution provider's journey.

This is precisely what is meant by the term "thought leadership"—positioning your company as a credible expert and an innovative force in your field by publishing content that demonstrates your expertise and ability to solve real-world problems. As with any consumer, if they can trust you and rely on the information you provide, you have an "in" with them.

80% of solution providers report that when they see messaging from a technology supplier in any CRN vehicle, it is a positive sign that the company is committed to the channel.

This knowledge-sharing approach to partner recruitment has the added benefit of helping you build a targeted, high-quality pool of prospective partners. By providing honest, substantial information about your technology field and your company's role in it, you are attracting and connecting with those partners who are a good match for your business and are thus solid, long-term business prospects—not weak links who won't sell your products effectively.

Your company's website or partner portal is an indispensable tool in this kind of deep content marketing. In fact, it's more of a foundation than a tool at this stage

of the Partner's Journey. A well-constructed website leveraging search engine optimization (SEO) and search engine marketing (SEM) can serve as a platform for white papers, on-demand webcasts, product information, blogs, emails and more. Driving traffic to your web site will be the basis of 95% of all your marketing efforts. **Without a strong, functioning website or portal, you cannot launch any serious marketing initiatives. It is worth the investment.**

Events are another key to getting on the solution provider's short list and convincing them that you are the One. Once a prospective partner has developed a real interest in your products or partner program, nothing beats a face-to-face conversation to try to seal the deal. But they won't come to you at this stage. You have to come to them.

STAGE 3: DECISION

The *Decision* phase marks the beginning of the end of the Partner's Journey. In this stage, the solution provider defines a concrete strategy for implementing the chosen technology or business model. By now, they have compiled a short list of possible suppliers and are faced with the task of further narrowing it down. If you aren't on the short list at this stage, you might be too late.



Solution providers report relying more heavily on co-workers, peers, and technology supplier reps and websites for direction at this point. Having done most of their “browsing” through online and print resources, they are now looking for recommendations, real-world experiences, and direct conversations with suppliers to support their leanings and draw conclusions. This is the stage during which partners are most likely to reach out to your sales reps, distributors or peers before they make that final leap to come onboard with you.

To make their final decision of whom to work with, partners rely on:

Coworkers	41%
Technology supplier sales reps	38%
Technology supplier websites	35%
Peers	29%

Solution providers take real action as a result of the content they view in CRN digital media, such as going to a technology supplier's or distributor's website for more information or looking into a new partner program.

Once again, your website or partner portal are the central hub for your marketing efforts and partners should be guided back to it with each call-to-action. Avoid hiding all your partner program details and other informational content behind a registration page. Make some information available on your site without requiring registration, and post white papers, videos and other assets on third-

party sites such as CRN.com to draw both existing and prospective partners back to your website to learn more.

Reinforce your message.

Having set the stage and built the foundation of a relationship with the prospective partner, now is the time to reiterate and further evidence your value so that you stand above the narrowed competition. In the *Decision* phase, your job is to tip the scales in your favor.



The **#3** most influential source in partners' evaluation of new technology suppliers is independent events, such as XChange conferences.

Make the cut and become a viable player in the solution provider's *Decision* phase by becoming part of the ongoing word-of-mouth discourse. First and foremost, of course, is providing a great product and stellar program for your existing partners—there is no better way to establish a great reputation in your industry. You can encourage this persuasive, under-the-radar publicity, however, by seeking out the solution provider community on a regular basis. Make your presence and value known on popular channel websites; post strategic, actionable nuggets of advice on social media—remember, what partners are ultimately looking for is information and answers.

Live and on-demand webcasts are another good vehicle for reinforcing your value and giving solution providers that one last “nudge” that could put your partner program

over the top. The webcast's in-depth, educational and interactive format gives you an opportunity to distinguish yourself from the competition, pin-pointing the specific technical expertise and program features that make your company the best one for the job.

Once again, events are crucial to getting on a partner's list of candidates. Final decisions are often made in face-to-face meetings at live events, so make sure you are there and poised to close the deal.

Research from The Channel Company consistently shows that prospective partners are interested—above all else—in your technology and how it will help customers achieve their goals. Their second priority in evaluating suppliers is how easy you are to work with; third priority is how they can make money with your solution. Prioritize your content during the Partner's Journey accordingly.

The end of the **Partner's Journey** marks the beginning of the **Partner Experience**.

The journey ends once the partner has made their decision—whether to add a new technology from an existing supplier, work with an entirely new supplier, or adopt a new business model. By engaging them along the way with meaty, substantial content and earning their trust, you effectively help the partner reach their destination and lay the foundation for a productive, meaningful relationship with your company.

This sends the solution provider onto the next step in growing their business: their relationship with you as a technology supplier. This next phase, the *Partner Experience*, requires a more direct and customized approach to communication and partner enablement.

Once the Partner Experience begins, your channel sales and marketing teams, as well as your distribution partners, have much more direct access to the channel partners whose attention and interest you were once working so hard to capture. In a sense, you now “have their ear.” This does not mean, however, that you can stop marketing to them—in fact, you will have to work at least as hard to sustain their attention, motivate them to sell, and gain their loyalty.

Tread carefully, however: channel partners are constantly overwhelmed by partner program communications from technology suppliers. Just as with marketing content

during the Partner's Journey, outreach from even the closest, most valued technology suppliers during the Partner Experience will be quickly dismissed or go unread altogether if it does not provide real value. This is one of the primary reasons technology suppliers are reporting record low email open rates and visits to partner portals. As with the marketing tactics you employed during the Partner's Journey, be strategic and sparing in your communications, making sure that each and every email has a clear purpose and provides the partner with useful content.

Solution providers are almost 50% more likely to click on an ad from a supplier with whom they have a relationship than on one from a supplier they do not know.

Even after solution providers sign on as partners, they wake up every morning with a choice to make: should they sell your product or your competitor's? (It is very likely that they have a relationship with both of you.) The onus is on you to motivate them with targeted, relevant content, and to provide active support and partner enablement.

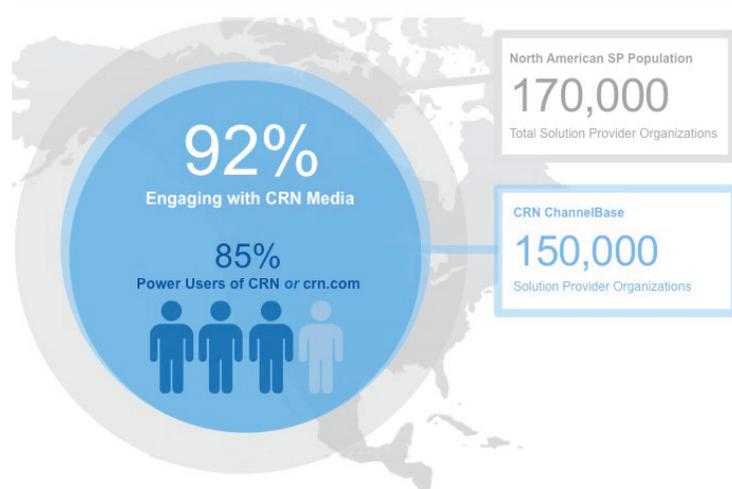
Maintaining this kind of relationship means interacting with a solution provider organization at various levels. When you sign a partnership agreement, you interact primarily with the company's senior executive team. As

important as your relationship with these managers is, you must keep in mind that there are hundreds of “feet-on-the-street” within that same organization who are far less familiar with your company and its products. Winning and maintaining *their* loyalty requires broader reach than any email blast can achieve. One way to approach this is with a well-planned and measurable *Account-based Marketing* program targeted at key solution providers. This kind of focused, customized strategy can align channel marketing with channel sales to drive reach into these multiple layers of the partner organization.

The Channel Company maintains a database of exhaustive partnership data on 150,000 North American solution provider organizations with a total of 1.5 million employees.

By aligning your marketing efforts with the Partner’s Journey and providing the critical intelligence solution providers need to move toward a technology decision, you advance them along their path and gain a competitive

edge. This is not the end of *your* journey, however—once they have joined your partner program, prepare to embark on a new campaign of intensive engagement in order to keep that edge.



To learn more about the *Partner Experience*, look for our next marketing guide, coming soon to:

www.partnersjourney.com

About The Channel Company

The Channel Company’s dominant media outlets, including CRN Magazine and CRN.com, are the first places solution providers go to find out about new technologies and suppliers. Our in-depth coverage of the IT industry, thought leadership, and highly acclaimed lists and rankings have proven to be invaluable resources for discovering new technologies and identifying the right suppliers to help deliver them.

Reach our unparalleled audience of 150,000 solution provider organizations and 1,500,000 individuals through a wide range of branding, lead generation and thought leadership opportunities on CRN.com and ITBOB.com, and through sponsorship of high-profile Channel Company events such as our annual XChange conferences.

From social media to content marketing to live and web-based events, the host of ways in which you can and should be engaging prospective partners on their journey is as complex as the technology decisions solution providers are faced with.

Let The Channel Company help you navigate it.

