Crucial Channel Conversatons

(and when you should be having them)

Channeltivity®

CHANNEL MANAGEMENT MADE EASY.

There are times in every relationship when you need to have a tough discussion. Yes, that conversation. That meeting. When there are real matters at stake. You might be cringing as you recall the last discussion you had like this, but once you work through them aren’t you glad you did? Now really think, are you having those meaningful, critical conversations with the key people involved in your channel?

Crucial conversations aren’t always fun or easy because they are typically about tough issues. According to the book Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High[1], a crucial conversation is “a discussion between two or more people where 1. stakes are high, 2. opinions vary, and 3. emotions run strong.“ These are the conversations we tend to avoid all together because we fear there may be a bad outcome. When it comes to managing a channel program there are times these types of conversations need to occur for the progress and betterment of the channel.

This ebook will outline who you should be having conversations with, which conversations you need to have, and when to have them.

[1]Patterson, Kerry, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler. Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012. Print.

Who Should You Be Having Conversations With?

You might be thinking the "Who" for our conversations is only our partners, but that is only one audience we need to consider. While there are several conversations that need to be held with our partners, there are also internal channel audiences you should consider as well. Here are the 7 key channel audiences you may need to have discussions with:

- Partners – Sales reps, owners, technical, and marketing contacts
- Internal Executives or Senior Management
- Internal Channel Managers and Channel Team
- Channel Leaders
- Sales Leaders
- Marketing
- Yourself

Channel programs have many moving parts and successful programs run best when all cylinders are firing. Make sure your channel engine is well oiled by keeping the lines of communication open externally with your key partner contacts as well as internally with your channel support and executive team. This is accomplished when we step out of our comfort zone and make time for those must have conversations. This burden is not only yours to bear. The conversations should be spread across your entire channel team. Make sure the right people (channel managers, channel marketing, channel sales) are having the conversations that apply to their respective roles.

What conversations should you be having?

With our two audiences identified, we can now determine what conversations we need to have with each group. We have identified 5 conversations you should have with partners, and 4 with your internal teams.

Partner Conversations

Start Partner Conversations at Recruitment

Before you approve a partner, you should probably pick up the phone and have your first crucial conversation. This may not apply to all the partners in your program; for example, referral partners are not as strategic as Resellers or MSPs. Technology has made it easy to just click the "approve" button; stop and dig deeper.

- Research the partner
- Look for a website
- Validate the information they provided
- Analyze their position in the market
- Ask questions
- Determine their goals and focus
- Identify customer alignment
- Look for complimentary and competitive solutions

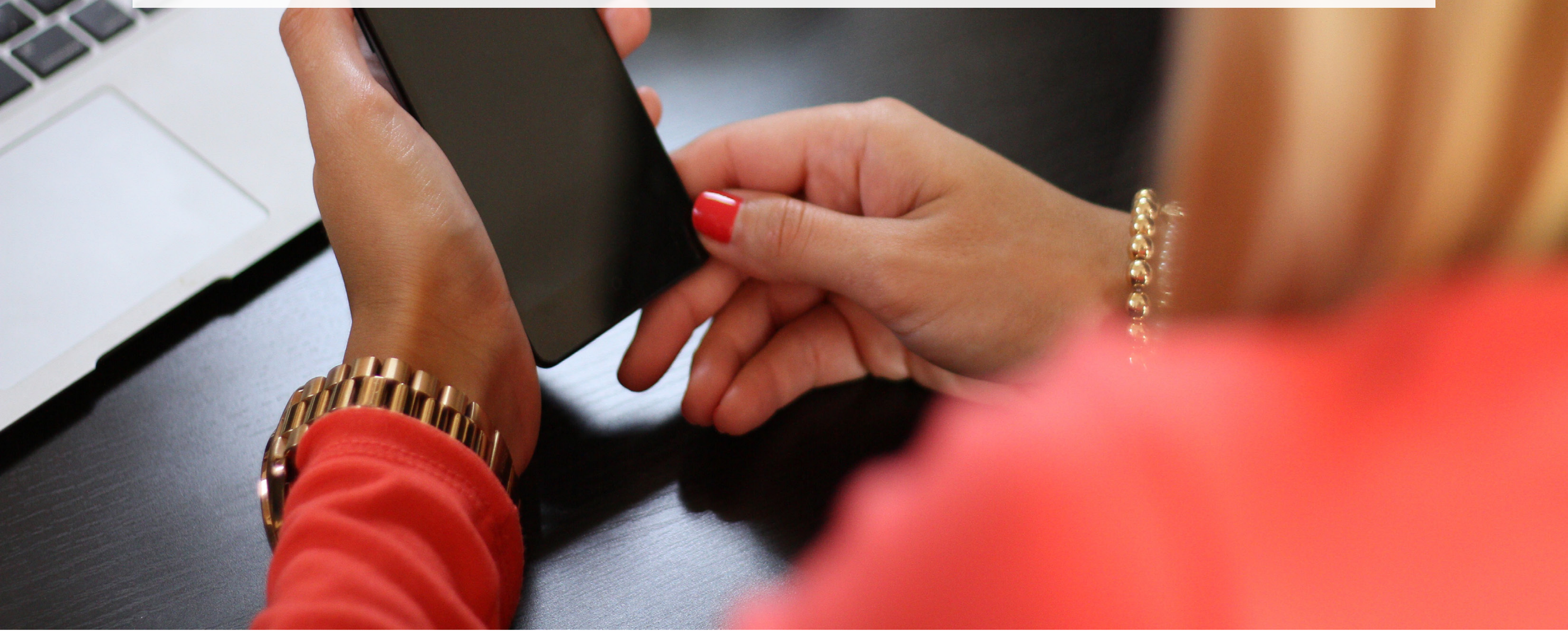
The information you will gather by spending even a few minutes interviewing your partners will help you understand and verify their alignment with your program goals. Add this to your process and you will end up with a strong roster of quality partners.

Partner Expectations

The hardest and most critical conversation to have with partners is often around goals and program requirements. Don't be afraid to ask your new partners questions around their expectations. Ask them what their goals are as they apply to your program and what you can do to help them achieve those goals, and then keep them accountable. Some form of joint business planning should be done with all partners.

It might look different for top partners than it does for smaller or new partners, but take the time to set goals and manage to those goals. If your program has minimum requirements, you need to enforce them. Channel managers should check in with your partners on a regular basis to help them work towards their goals. Work with your partners to identify roadblocks, best practices, and other details that will assist in improving your overall program and your partner's bottom line. If you can leverage your Partner Relationship Management (PRM) solution to manage and track progress, it makes it easier for both you and your partner to keep track of goal achievement.

Also take the opportunity to ask your partners what is working and what is not. Ask them what they think of your program and what you can do better, then act on it.



Opportunities and Leads

Partners join your program to have a financial impact on their bottom line, which should have a positive effect on your bottom line. The automation of things like deal/opportunity registration should give you a clear picture of your partner performance. Analyze the data and identify the partners with which you need to be talking. Your conversations should be with both the partners that are struggling, and those finding success. Identify the successes and replicate them. Find the stumbling blocks and remove them.

Companies that run exclusively through channel need to track partner opportunities and pass leads to partners. PRM solutions make it easier than ever to track opportunities, pass leads and track them through the sales process. Automating the process means your reps will have more time to talk to partners and have the crucial conversation about their leads and opportunities. Ask your partners the "why" questions around their opportunities and leads. Partners know the market and have the information you need to better execute your sales and marketing programs, so ask, listen, and learn.

Customer Retention

Today's channel partner often owns the customer relationship end to end, forcing technology vendors to be dependent upon their partners to maintain and keep the relationship with the customer. In the subscription/consumption based world we live in it is easier now more than ever for customers to change vendors. Ask questions to identify opportunities to help your partners upsell, resell, and support their existing customers. Open a dialogue with your partners when you see customer attrition or retention. Make sure your partners understand your expectations when it comes to customers. If they are dropping the ball, have your channel managers step in. After all, we know it is easier to keep a customer than to bring on a new one and your partners will be critical to achieving this retention.

Customer Retention

Your onboarding process should include key conversations around milestones and success metrics. Starting out your partnerships with the right conversations will align your goals with your partners, but you cannot stop there. You must continue the dialogue throughout the relationship. These conversations should center around the things that matter most to your program. It may be easy to measure what isn't being done, but don't forget to praise your partners when they are following the process and having success.

Internal Conversations

With the partner conversations covered, we can focus on the 4 discussions that need to happen internally. These internal conversations are often the hardest to have, but can have a major impact on the overall channel program.

Internal Sponsorship and Support

One of the keys to a successful channel program is having support throughout the organization, and this starts at the top. Having internal program buy-in will make sure that channel strategies align with your company's overall strategy. Having executive sponsorship will aid in aligning direct and channel sales goals and allotting the necessary resources. While these conversations often occur when starting a channel program, you may need to have them again if a warranted.

Process, Process, Process

In a perfect world, everyone would follow direction and process, but channel isn't perfect. Channel managers often do things for partners instead of having the partners follow the processes you have set in place. This calls for a crucial channel conversation and not an easy one. Often our top performing reps are not exactly coloring within the lines by bending the rules and creating lazy partners. We know what you are up against—we have heard it numerous times, but processes are in place and partners see benefits for following suit.

You didn't put technology and process in place for it not to be used, so it's important to get your channel managers to toe the line. If you find this to be a problem, you will probably have to have the process conversation with your partners as well.

But When Should These Discussions Happen?

Determining when it is time for these conversations isn't always easy. Some conversations need to happen with a regular cadence or at a milestone, while others might be a result of inaction or success on the part of a key channel player.

Examples of when internal conversations might need to occur:

- Program Design
- Process Development & Implementation
- Channel Technology Implementation
- Channel Support and Sponsorship
- Process Adherence
- Technology Support
- Internal Conflict
- Resource Allocation

Channel Focus

One of the most important conversations to hold is the one that needs to happen with ourselves. As channel leaders, we need to stop and take time to determine where we are going and where we have been. This means asking ourselves the hard questions around the focus of the program, what we delivered to our partners, if the things we are doing are the right things, measuring results and admitting when the direction needs to change. Don't forget to ask yourself the questions that need to be answered regarding your program.

Don't Be Afraid to Ask

For some, your channel programs may feel like an afterthought of the company. This might make you gun shy when it comes to asking for the support and resources you need to get things done. Make sure your channel needs are known so that they can be taken into consideration and budgeted. After all, if you don't ask, the answer will always be NO.

Difficult conversations are a part of a healthy channel program. Having meaningful conversations at the right times and with the right people will help us develop stronger relationships and more successful partners.

Growing your Channel Program?
Explore Channeltivity.

Channeltivity is a partner relationship management software platform that helps companies build strong relationships, optimize partner productivity and support new sales.

The Channeltivity platform is used and recommended by many channel programs to deliver effective and engaging partner training.

Channeltivity is easy to use, is fast to set up, and connects to Salesforce.com.

To find out why 20,000+ channel sales professionals around the globe depend on us, and to experience the solution through our hands-on demo, call 877-226-2564 or visit https://www.channeltivity.com

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