

A Guide to Channel Marketing

From the Channel Experts at Zift Solutions

Ziftsolutions

Elevate your B2B success: Dive into our Comprehensive Guide on channel marketing for effective strategies that drive partner revenue.

Executive Summary

Selling business-to-business (B2B) products and services through indirect channels requires a specialized and targeted approach to marketing. Investing time, money and other resources in your company's channel marketing initiatives is vital if you want to drive revenue through a partner organization.

Our Comprehensive Guide to Channel Marketing covers what you need to know to deploy an effective channel marketing strategy to bolster the success of your partner program.

Key Takeaways

- Creating a partner sales organization without investing in channel marketing will hinder your success.
- Channel marketing is executed to-channel, through-channel and for-channel — all with different goals and deployment strategies.
- Channel marketing strategy can augment recruitment, enablement, engagement and demand-generation initiatives.
- A PRM software platform can add structure, organization, collaboration and automation to your partner program to maximize the success of your channel marketing efforts.

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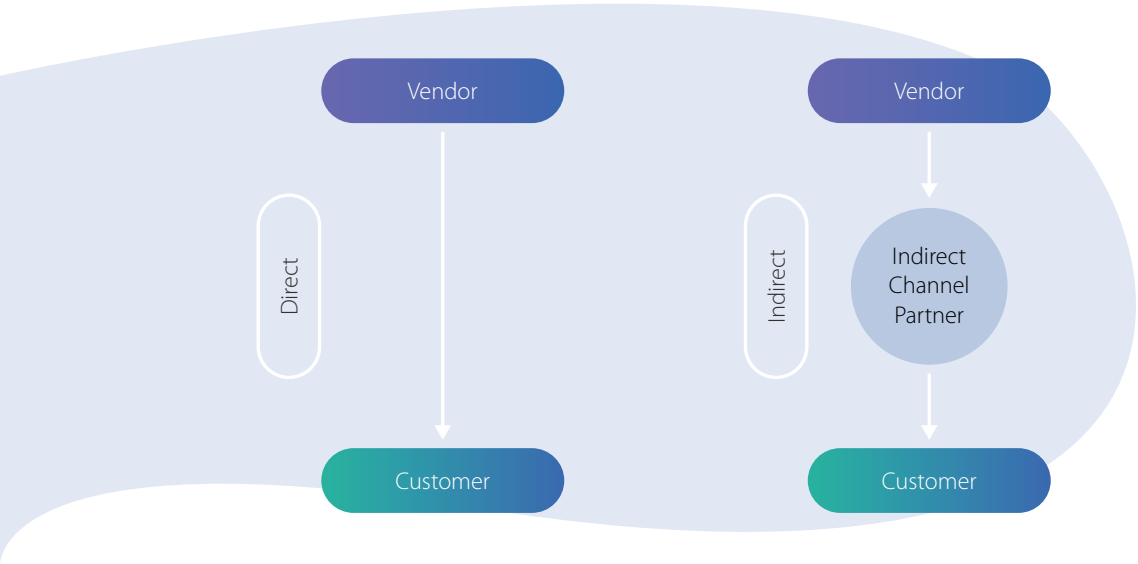
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Part 1:

What is Channel Marketing?

Leveraging indirect sales channels is a common way to market and sell products and services in the business-to-business environment. Unlike direct sales, wherein a supplier markets and sells directly to the business customers, channel sales are indirect, moving through a third party to the business buyer.



Companies in the indirect channel are typically referred to as "partners" and can include many business types. In the technology industry, for example, partners include sales agents, value-added resellers (VARs), managed service providers (MSPs), systems integrators, cloud services brokers, distributors, affiliates and referral partners to name a few.

When a vendor engages an indirect channel partner, marketing and sales efforts are coordinated and amplified in an effort to increase sales, which benefit both parties.

So, why work with an indirect sales channel instead of marketing and selling directly? Companies repeatedly enlist channel partners for several reasons. These include:

- **Trust** – Many vendors engage channel partners to capitalize on the customer relationships they've created and nurtured. Many businesses, particularly small and medium businesses (SMBs), prefer to work with a partner they already know and trust rather than take a chance on an unfamiliar product or service.
- **Reach** – The indirect channel may provide suppliers with access to geographic areas or business demographics they want to reach by virtue of their location, specialization or vertical expertise.
- **Aggregation** – For vendors with products or services that are one component of a more comprehensive solution, the indirect channel provides an opportunity to become part of a bundled or integrated offering.
- **Low Barrier to Entry** – Building an indirect channel requires an investment of time and money in planning, management and support. However, it's less costly than building an internal sales organization or similar size because partners are only paid for performance. Plus, they subsidize their own benefits and office space.
- **Scalability** – Companies can scale an indirect channel up or down as needed with fewer resources than with a direct sales organization.

Realizing these benefits of an indirect sales channel requires specialized and intentional channel marketing not only to recruit partners, but also to engage them and enable them to sell your solutions.

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Part 2:

What Are Types of Channel Marketing?

Channel marketing initiatives can be grouped into three buckets: to-channel marketing, through-channel marketing and for-channel marketing.

1. What is To-Channel Marketing?

To-channel marketing supports the recruitment and engagement of sales partners in a partnership. Partners want to know why they should work with you, the benefits of partnering with your business and how you can help them attract more business. In some instances, to-channel marketing can involve multiple layers, like marketing to both a distributor and its network of resellers.

Companies use to-channel marketing to establish thought leadership, generate interest and stay top-of-mind for channel partners. Partners are drawn to companies with attractive and successful to-channel marketing in part because it's an early indicator of the marketing support the vendor will provide to its partners.

Vendors must use multiple tactics and types of content to reach potential and current channel partners. Some examples of to-channel marketing are:

- An exhibit at a trade show to recruit new partners
- An email campaign to partners about an upcoming training class
- A webinar series about the opportunity to drive revenue from a new suite of products or services



52%
OF MARKETERS
use 3 to 4
marketing channels

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2. What is Through-Channel Marketing?

Through-channel marketing, sometimes referred to as partner-led marketing, is when your company markets products and services to customers through your sales channels. Through-channel marketing encompasses a range of programs, materials and campaigns that partners can pass on to prospective and current customers. Physical and digital assets typically are set up to be branded or co-branded by the partner.

Some examples of through-channel marketing are:

- A product sales sheet customized with the partner's logo and contact information
- A solution sales presentation with room for slides promoting the partner's value proposition
- An email campaign that can be branded by the partners before distribution

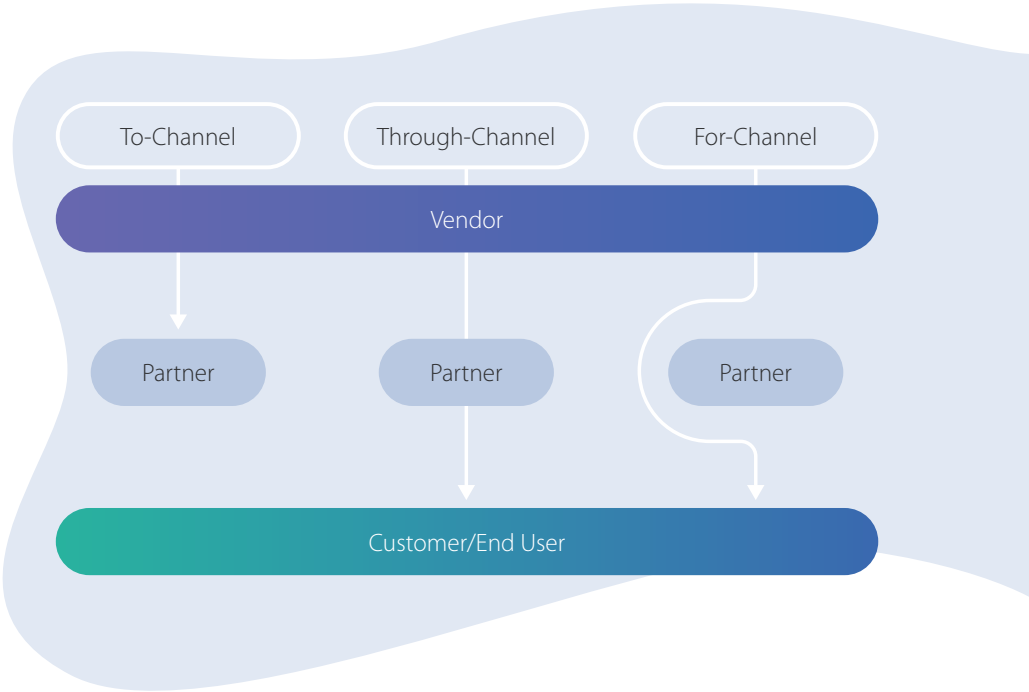
Through-channel marketing also can include tools that a partner can use to enhance its operation. Some examples include sales-enablement systems that ease marketing or management activities.

Sales partners gravitate toward vendors that provide effective through-channel marketing support because it can help them drive revenue. After all, there's no better way to build partner loyalty than to help partners grow their businesses.

3. What is For-Channel Marketing?

For-channel marketing is when a supplier markets directly to the customer for the benefit of partners. Some examples of for-channel marketing are:

- A partner locator tool on the vendor's website that drives leads to the partner.
- Hosting a special (and often big budget) event that partners can invite their customers to attend, such as an exclusive symposium or an entertainment experience.
- A competitive marketing program where the supplier is trying to steal market share from a competitor by targeting a list of prospects and connecting them with a partner who can facilitate a try-and-buy offering. The partner plays the role of a trusted unbiased advisor to the customer and the vendor drives the competitive message.



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Part 3:

Why Should Partner Programs Invest in Channel Marketing?

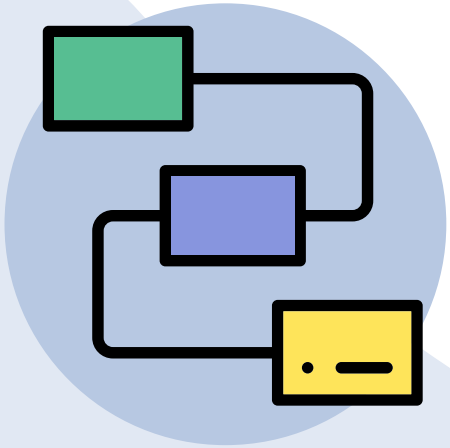
If your company elects to build an indirect channel and drive revenue through partners, you need targeted, intentional channel marketing initiatives to boost your efforts. The "build it and they will come" approach doesn't work for starting or growing a channel program. Not only do you have to "sell" them on your solution and your company, but you also have to turn them into advocates. In a way, partners are essentially "super" customers. Once sold, however, they are a force multiplier in introducing you to new customers and driving revenue.

Here are four key reasons for investing in your channel marketing strategy:

70%

OF OVER 10,000 BUYERS

reported that they purchased their offering from an indirect route to market or channel partner



1. Recruitment

The priority of any channel marketing strategy is recruitment. Channel marketing aimed at prospective partners — and the indirect community in general — will shape your reputation and build brand awareness.

Recruitment-specific channel marketing strategies should, of course, focus on what's in it for the partner. How can you support them? What kind of compensation should they expect? What tools or systems do you use or provide that make their jobs easier?

Additionally, recruitment-focused channel marketing should be targeted. Just as not all customer leads are great leads, sometimes, partners aren't the right fit either…and that's OK. Define who your ideal partners are and go get them!

Examples of recruitment-focused channel marketing include:

- Exhibiting at channel events to secure partner leads
- Emailing event leads about your revenue opportunity and program benefits
- Advertising in channel-focused online or print publications

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2. Enablement

If you want to bring home the bacon with an indirect channel, enablement is the bread and butter of your success. When you enable partners, they grow their business; when they grow their business, they grow yours.

Enabling channel partners comes in many forms — tactics that can help them close business can be classified in this category. Tools like training, partner portals, designated channel managers and content can strengthen your relationship with partners while directly supporting their sales goals.

Some examples of enablement-focused channel marketing include:

- Sales, product or technical training
- Branded customer-facing collateral to support their sales motions
- Access to information, support and management tools via a partner portal

3. Engagement

Keeping partners engaged is vital to a successful channel program. Partners are easily distracted by other vendors, their customers' problems and running their own businesses. Channel marketing can help to keep your partnership, products and services top of mind

Channel marketing focused on partner engagement should reinforce the shared commitment and benefits of partnership. Examples include providing partner with:

- Rewards like gift cards for desired behaviors such as attending an educational webinar
- Sales contests with monetary or experiential prizes and bragging rights for winners
- Badges or other exclusive perks like priority support for completing certifications
- Recognizing partner sales performance with annual awards or medal level designations

ZIFT CUSTOMERS SEE AN AVERAGE

47%

Increase in partner engagement



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4. Lead and Demand Generation

Key to any channel marketing strategy is a focus on both lead generation and demand generation.

Lead Generation Versus Demand Generation

The difference between lead generation and demand generation is simple. Lead generation marketing is based on campaigns to collect information about potential customers and turn them into leads. Demand generation is based on marketing campaigns to create a demand or interest in your product or service.

Lead Generation Tactics

Gated content and request for demo campaigns

- eBook or white paper downloads
- Calculators or tests
- Infographics
- Webinars
- Pay-per-click (PPC) advertising

Demand Generation Tactics

Brand awareness and thought leadership campaigns

- Press releases
- Media interviews
- Media and publication advertising
- Articles and bylines in media publications
- Podcast interviews

Both routes to acquiring new partners is key to keeping your sales pipeline full. Plus, your program will want to consider creating lead and demand generation programs to **attract end customers too** which you can easily pass off as sales opportunities to qualified partners.



ZIFT CUSTOMERS SEE AN AVERAGE

200%

Increase in touches with customers and prospects

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Part 4:

How Do Partner Programs Create High-Quality Channel Marketing Programs?

Setting up a channel marketing strategy to successfully motivate partners is one of the most important things a vendor can do to ensure the success of its partner program. You not only need great tools and materials, but you need structure, leadership and follow-through. Here are eight crucial steps to follow when building a channel partner marketing program:

Step 1: Lead Channel Marketing Programs with Purpose

When building or updating your partner marketing program, remember that successful channel partners lead with their core value proposition, and you should do the same. Show them how you will solve their problems in servicing their customers, just like you would if marketing directly to your end users.

Step 2: Map Your Channel Marketing Communications

Channel marketing must target a range of decision-makers in different layers of your distribution channel. Sometimes, you'll be able to market to partners directly; sometimes, you might also have to target a higher decision-maker serving as a gatekeeper (like in a distributor/reseller setup, for example). In any case, your channel partners will likely not be a homogenous group — make sure you plan your channel marketing communications to address each type of partner you have, along with the various specializations and pain points they might typically experience.

Step 3: Allocate Your Channel Marketing Spend

There's no magic formula to determine the perfect amount to spend on channel marketing. Many variables enter into the budgeting discussion, including geography, the contribution of the market segment to overall revenue, historical partner engagement, etc. The key is to incentivize the outcomes you want and then focus on enabling those outcomes through channel marketing tactics.

Step 4: Develop Your Channel Marketing Assets

What good is putting intention behind your channel marketing efforts if the material you provide isn't up to snuff? Focus on delivering exceptional content (in various forms) that really moves the needle and helps convert. Furthermore, make sure to pair your materials and tools with the appropriate parts of the customer journey or you might trip up the buying process.

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Step 5: Deploy Your Channel Marketing Assets (and Keep it Simple)

When it's time to deploy the channel marketing assets you've created, you must have a plan beyond sticking them in an asset library. Ensure your strategy includes a plan for walking partners through what you're providing. Help them understand how these assets can help them convert leads and drive revenue.



71%

OF SENIOR MARKETERS IN 2023

said they struggle to achieve orchestrating customer journeys across multiple digital and nondigital channels as their top priority

Step 6: Test, Refine, Repeat Your Channel Marketing Programs

To maximize ROI, ongoing refinement of your channel marketing program is tantamount. Select a few KPIs for marketing-qualified leads (MQLs) and sales-qualified leads (SQLs) in your program and correlate them to particular campaigns or stages in the pipeline. Do a little digging to determine what content, materials and tools are repeatedly driving business for partners — and then try to follow (or unfollow) your own example.

Step 7: Don't Be Afraid to Experiment with Channel Marketing

Just like technology, marketing must continually innovate to be successful. Testing and measuring marketing campaigns reveals which tactics are working, but it also pinpoints areas of opportunity to kick campaigns up a notch. The best marketers are constantly evolving and experimenting with their craft — and you should too. Don't be afraid to try something new.

Step 8: Get Feedback from Partners on What's Working and What's Not

In addition to collecting quantitative data about your tactical success, seek qualitative feedback from partners on what's working and what isn't. They can help you refine your materials based on what's resonating with customers on the front line or help you identify gaps in your strategy.

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Part 5:

How Can Partner Relationship Management (PRM) Software Platforms Support Channel Marketing?

Building a channel marketing strategy — and doing it well — comprises several interconnected facets of sales, lead-gen, asset management, contact management and relationship management. From onboarding to training, deploying, nurturing and incentivizing, partner relationships can be rewarding but also complex. Many organizations turn to partner relationship management (PRM) software platforms to facilitate proper management and execution of partner marketing efforts across a large volume of partners.

The most common marketing capabilities of PRM software platforms include the following:

- Storing shared resources in a content management system (CMS)
- Distributing provider-sourced and partner-sourced leads
- Tracking allocation and use of marketing development funds (MDF)
- Tracking and attributing promotions for select partners, partner types and product lines
- Enabling through-channel marketing (TCMA)
- Housing a library of partner sales and marketing materials
- Training and certification on how to sell, order, provision and procure provider services akin to a Learning Management System (LMS)
- Enabling partner lead scoring



ZIFT CUSTOMERS SEE AN AVERAGE

82%

Partner community growth within 4 months of launch

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Part 6:

Why Should Your Partner Program Use a PRM Platform?

Partner programs should consider using a PRM software platform to support their partner program for these key reasons:

1. A PRM Platform is a Single Source of Truth

A high-quality PRM is a foundation on which vendors can build their programs. Providers can use the PRM as the one-stop shop for partners to engage and do business, including:

- Deal registration
- Account management
- Training
- Collateral
- Demand-gen campaigns
- MDF
- Centralizing KPIs, partner data and administrative functions on a dashboard
- Enabling deal registration for partners to claim leads
- Processing and fulfilling orders
- Analyzing financial performance, such as detailed pricing and sales data
- Integrating with customer relationship management (CRM) software and popular third-party applications

PRM software streamlines and strengthens partner program business processes to deliver mutual sales growth for providers and their indirect selling partners by:

- Organizing and orchestrating data
- Storing and sharing assets
- Tracking indirect sales transactions
- Qualifying indirect sales partners for program incentives and promotions
- Facilitating ordering and provisioning of provider solutions to partner-sourced end customers

The best PRM software offers utility and convenience vital to partner engagement. Suppliers strive to be easy to do business with, so it's imperative that they aggregate systems, tools and platforms into a single location, so partners don't need to remember multiple URLs and logins.

The impact of the PRM extends beyond the partner program and represents your entire company to partners. The PRM effectively provides a baseline understanding to partners of how your program, products and company work. In the same way your website is the face of your business to end customers, your PRM is the face of your program to partners.

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Not having a PRM is a competitive disadvantage in today's marketplace. If you've not invested in a PRM, you risk looking "small," especially if market-leading competitors have had them for several years. Appearing "small" and under-resourced brings up a host of uncomfortable questions from partners about your capacity to serve customers, the size of your staff, your geographical reach, the reality of your 24/7/365 support commitment and how you're reliably tracking partner deals if no partner management system is in place.

2. A PRM Platform is the Path to Partner Program Scalability

Scaling a partner program in a post-Covid economic environment requires online and digitally focused methods for partners to engage with your program; PRM software makes scalability a reality.

With the rise of remote work and flexible work schedules, partners will require tools, like a self-service PRM, that fit their plans and priorities. As partners get busier and sign with more suppliers, they need the freedom to self-serve requests instantly. Partners want to access training, create marketing campaigns or co-branded collateral, and even see and manage their pipeline and booking reports at their own pace and schedule.

Competing in a digital-first selling environment is a crucial driver of PRM software use for partners. Marketing and demand-gen tools are in high demand and partners are turning to suppliers' PRMs to execute campaigns.

Scalability is critical for partner programs, especially for partners selling volume-based services. Most partner programs aim to scale and recruit many partners to keep the pipeline full. There are some exceptions depending on vendor business models and target accounts, but generally, it's a numbers game, especially since not all partners will be productive. You can't scale at a reasonable pace to service hundreds or potentially thousands of partners without a PRM software platform to automate program processes for you.

3. PRM Software Protects Your Partner Program from Staff Turnover

The channel is rife with constant personnel turnover, especially with channel account managers switching companies every 18 months. While you want to replace these front-line positions as quickly as possible, short-term vacancies won't make or break your program if you have a high-quality PRM platform. PRMs enable partners to get core sales process components, like quoting, without needing to engage a supplier employee.



Revenue from existing customers represents more than

75%

OF THE TOTAL ANNUAL REVENUE STREAM

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4. PRM Software is Customizable to Fit Your Partner Program Model

Partner programs have various business models for all types of partners, some of which include:

- **Affiliate Partners** – Affiliate partners have cultivated access to an audience uniquely invested in a specific topic and follow them to understand and keep up to date with that subject. Alliance partners typically will earn commissions.
- **Referral Partners** – Referral partners typically send a prospective customer to a vendor and receive a one-time commission for each closed deal.
- **Agent Partners** – Agent partners receive recurring commissions for sold deals. They typically perform all sales and marketing functions while the vendor performs the deployment and provides the service to the end customer.
- **Distributors** – Distributors and TSBs aggregate partners for vendors and vendors for partners. This removes administrative headaches for vendors in managing with partners, and partners typically get higher compensation and greater protection than they would on their own.
- **Value Added Resellers (VARs)** – VARs, or solutions providers, get a vendor product at wholesale, add a profit margin and sell it to end customers with their value-added services or solutions over the top.
- **Service Delivery Partners** – A service delivery partner enhances the value of a vendor solution by providing presales consulting, installation and management of services to customize them to end customers' unique needs.
- **Technology Alliance Partners** – Technology alliance partners offer complementary technology to the provider's solution. This partnership combines two (or more) products or services as a solution for the end customer.
- **Fulfillment Partners** – Fulfillment partners help providers manage administrative and contractual needs of selling products at scale. These partners primarily manage order fulfillment of a high volume of transactions at a low rate.
- **Cloud Service Providers** – Cloud service providers offer an element of cloud computing (IaaS, SaaS or PaaS) through hosting a vendor solution in the cloud to improve speed, security, flexibility and other forms of optimization.
- **Managed Service Providers (MSPs)** – Managed service providers will proactively remotely manage end customer IT infrastructure, typically under a monthly or annual subscription model. MSPs frequently function as a form of outsourced IT and would layer a vendor solution into the tech stack they offer the end customer.
- **White-label Resellers** – Also called wholesale partners or private-label resellers, white-label resellers will take a wholesale provider solution and sell it to their customers as their own solution under their brand. White-label resellers typically encompass a partner profile of traditional resellers, VARs and MSPs — so they can fit into more than one partner type.
- **Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs)** – OEMs embed provider products into their own solutions and sell them to end customers under their own brand, just like white-label partners.
- **Global Systems Integrators (GSIs)** – GSIs build computing systems by combining vendors' hardware, software, networking, and storage products and solutions.
- **Strategic Partners** – Strategic partners will fit the role of multiple partner types listed above, but these will typically be partners that deliver the most revenue and provide the most direction and input to vendor strategies.

Quality PRMs can conform to several different partner program models. Some models, like wholesale programs, can't function without a PRM system. In this

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example, a white-label partner needs to be able to order services at will and then immediately communicate timelines for deployment to an end customer as if it's their service. Programs only achieve fast turnarounds at scale like that through the automation technology that PRM platforms provide.

5. Your CRM Software Can't Take the Place of a PRM Platform

Suppliers may wonder why their company's partner program can't simply use their CRM to track deals and email to recruit and manage partners. The problem is that a CRM isn't purpose-built for partners and is not on par with a PRM platform's capabilities.

Proper PRM solutions will provide new partner recruitment, onboarding, enablement, communication, sales and marketing support, business management, incentives, demand generation, deal registration, content library and the data necessary to showcase which partners are leveraging the tools so you can adjust to ensure partners take the right actions at the correct times.

Your CRM allows your salespeople to manage their funnel, commissions and deals. PRM is for partners to manage their funnel and access marketing materials. They're two completely different audiences with different aims.

ZIFT CUSTOMERS SEE AN AVERAGE

34%

Reduction in time to revenue from partners



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6. A PRM Platform Provides Indirect Sales Pipeline Visibility and More

How do you determine whether your partner program is successful? There are many factors, but sales and pipeline are at the top of the list. However, partner programs face a high hurdle of tracking deals, proposals, prospects, leads and each stage of a sales funnel from hundreds or thousands of partners. Tasking channel managers to manually monitor and track these metrics isn't efficient.

PRM software platforms are the key to providing your program with the information you need for proper sales and pipeline forecasting. PRMs are equipped with analytics dashboards and report generation functionality that makes it easy to gauge the success of your partner program. The PRM software delivers sales pipeline visibility across your partner base.

Plus, the PRM tracks more than just the sales pipeline. Entire program initiatives and resources, including marketing materials and campaigns, can be tracked inside the PRM. These sales enablement resources can take months and tens of thousands of dollars to develop. The PRM can give you the visibility you need to see how your partners use them and determine whether there's ROI on your efforts.

Below is an example of a dashboard showing analytics from ZiftONE:



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7. What Are the Benefits of Using a PRM?



Rapid Growth for Partners in Revenue Channels



Increased Marketing Productivity



Channel Activity Oversight with Tracking of All Metrics



Real-Time Channel Partner Feedback



Automation of Partner Recruitment, Onboarding, Training and Enablement



Automated Lead Routing

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Part 7:

Why Choose Zift Solutions as Your PRM Software Platform Provider?

Channel partner programs of all sizes and types turn to Zift Solutions as their PRM software platform provider.

1. Why Choose Zift Solutions?



Vendor Experience

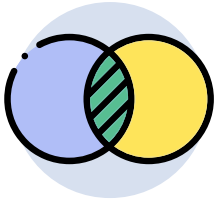
Gain Pipeline Visibility

Establish Marketing Attribution & ROI

Manage Deal Lifecycles

Unify Channel Data

Generate Insightful Reports



Partner Experience

Reach & Retain New Customers

Access One Program Location

Leverage Co-Branded Content

Deploy Powerful Partner Playbooks

Stay Ahead with Training & Continuous Learning



Buyer Experience

Work with True Industry Experts

Get Personalized Content and Solution Recommendations

Enjoy a Seamless Buying Relationship

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2. G2 Names Zift Solutions Best Through-Channel Marketing Software

Zift is honored to be ranked as the number one provider of Through-Channel Marketing by G2, the largest software marketplace with unbiased, validated buyer reviews. Within the Partner Management category, Zift has been recognized as a Leader in Small-Business, a Leader in Mid-Market, and has once again received 20+ user reviews with an average 4.0-star rating.

With ZiftONE, you can align your channel marketing, sales and operations like never before.

3. ZiftONE™ — One Platform for One Pipeline

For buyers, nothing screams "amateur!" louder than a disjointed, cumbersome experience. ZiftONE helps channel leaders manage data, marketing and reputations through a "one pipeline, one platform" mantra. So operations, enablement, marketing and sales are working from a single integrated source that helps them maximize partner efficiency and minimize buyer frustration.



ZiftONE Partner Management

Happier Partners Close More Deals

Through customized, access-anywhere, highly intuitive admin dashboards, ZiftONE makes it easy — enjoyable, even — for your partners to stay engaged with your brands.



ZiftONE Channel Sales

Better Pipeline Visibility to Fuel Stronger Sales

Give your PAMs/CAMs the data they need to focus partners on high-value activities, keep them armed with the right information, and hold them accountable for their performance.



ZiftONE Channel Marketing

The Power to Generate Demand — 24/7/365

ZiftONE puts you in simple command of multi-touch digital marketing campaigns designed to generate leads — and support pipeline growth — all day, every day.



ZiftONE Partner Enablement

A Little Know-How Can Go a Long Way

With ZiftONE, grow your partners and improve partner relationships with training, searchable collateral, a better lead and deal registration experience, onboarding, and success plans.

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About

Zift Solutions

Founded in 2006, Zift Solutions is the only Partner Relationship Management (PRM) and Through-Channel Marketing Automation (TCMA) tool built as one to work as one. The company's ZiftONE platform manages the flow from onboarding to enablement, lead generation to marketing, all the way through sales. Backed by the most experienced team in the industry, Zift was named the only leader in both Channel Marketing Automation and Partner Relationship Management by Forrester Research and a market leader in Partner Management Software and Through-Channel Marketing Software by G2. For more information, visit www.ziftsolutions.com.

Ready to Take Your Partner Program and Your Channel Marketing to the Next Level?

Contact a Zift Solutions Specialist Today!
marketing@ziftsolutions.com
ziftsolutions.com/get-a-demo

"Zift Solutions provides a platform that is easy to learn and user-friendly. The content is well organized and readily available for creating campaigns and workflows."

– Alie V.

"Effortlessly create and streamline marketing campaigns with Zift Solutions."

– Savka B.

Ziftsolutions®