

12 Essential Tips for Socializing the Channel



1. Reframe Your Notion of Social Marketing
2. Establish Clear and Measurable Objectives
3. Clarify Your Social Positioning
4. Clarify Your Market Roles
5. Engage Your Partners
6. Align Your Partners
7. Train Your Partners
8. Fuel Your Partners
9. Integrate with Partner Management Systems
10. Integrate with Lead Generation
11. Localize for Global Markets
12. Drive Partner Participation

As social media marketing matures, B2B marketers are finding their way past the trendiness and hype to develop new ways to build profitable relationships. For large companies with global partner and strategic alliance networks, social media offers unique advantages that go beyond reputation monitoring and messaging. In fact, the available gains to be realized from socializing the partner channel vastly outweigh those of marketing communications—and are certainly more measurable—once channel marketers discover the real opportunity and how to pursue it.

To be sure, partner marketing is a complex and costly challenge. Companies have to compete aggressively for partner attention, which creates an arms race over who can provide the highest value in Market Development Funds (MDF) and programs. Partner marketing teams are often overworked and understaffed, so MDF programs must be easy to execute, highly actionable, and produce measurable results. Far too often, this environment drives a continuing cycle of short-term lead-churning campaigns that are more like candy than real nutrition, both for the partner and the business. Many partner marketing executives feel their MDF funds are a black hole of waste, but they see few alternatives for gaining partner allegiance.

The rise of social media offers an opportunity to do something different. Because partners are driven to improve their own revenue performance by mastering new marketing techniques, they are attracted to MDF alternatives that go beyond churning leads and help them develop new capabilities. Companies that can

offer compelling and effective social media programs can not only gain partner attention and engagement, the medium for delivering these new programs helps forge closer partner ties, while providing new performance metrics that help identify programs and partners that really deliver results.

In this whitepaper, we define a clear set of objectives and metrics with which to socialize your partner channel. By "socialization" we mean both the use of social media to engage your own partners, and the use social media tools and techniques to enable your partners to generate leads and revenue themselves. Our approach is based on many years of experience working with B2B businesses in both traditional and social media marketing, and while the objectives are not a recipe for easy, over-night success, they are accessible and proven techniques for any business already managing a global partner network.

For a deeper exploration of the points discussed in this white paper, visit: www.socialrep.com/blog/tag/social-channel-2/
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STARTING OUT

1

Reframe Your Notion of Social Marketing

The biggest mistake channel marketers make in socializing the channel is focusing on canned campaigns for partners to broadcast to their own social networks. Sure, they're quick and easy solutions being offered by a lot of vendors, but they're almost always nothing more than an attempt to turn up the volume and blast social media. They do little to foster genuine engagement, either with your partners or with their customers and prospects, and they rarely teach your partners anything of lasting value to improve their marketing performance.

Social marketing is about identifying, joining and advancing market conversations relevant to your business, within which you and your partners can add genuine value, by speaking up at the right time and in the right places to help customers and prospects solve problems.

Your job is not to turn every social update into a pitch—the market sees right through that approach. Your job is to help partners identify and join conversations that are relevant both to your value proposition, and the value-adding services of your partners. Your job is to help partners learn how to participate consistently in those conversations, with authenticity, by listening and providing useful information that is useful to prospects and customers, wherever they are in the purchase cycle.

The first step is to research where relevant conversations about product selection and problem solving are happening for your customers. It may be Facebook or Twitter, but validate before committing—these networks are often more of a distraction for B2B leads. Forums and Q&A sites are often more vibrant hubs for problem solving, and blogs are often a critical part of the purchase influence chain. As the channel host, you need to map the social media landscape for your market, and help your partners understand where they best fit in.

2

Establish Clear and Measurable Objectives

Businesses embrace social for a variety of reasons, most of which lack clear and measurable objectives. Some businesses are just reacting to demand from partners to embrace social marketing. Some are looking for alternatives to traditional lead-gen techniques with falling click-through and open rates. Some are genuinely drawn to social media as way to drive partner engagement, but they see it more as a messaging and PR activity to stay relevant and up to date.

The obvious, critical objective for the channel is to generate, process and convert more leads into sales through partners, and that expectation shouldn't change with social media. After all, nothing is more measurable than revenue. The question is, how can social media marketing lead to measurable bottom line results?

In our experience helping companies develop social marketing programs for the channel, **the best way to deliver bottom-line results is to turn your partner community into a social communications network that amplifies your message,** delivers compelling content that attracts customers, distributes relevant offers that bring qualified leads into the pipeline, and reduces the cycles needed to find and close new customers.

As you can see, a single broad objective isn't enough. You need to break it down into component objectives and metrics of your socialization initiative to develop a foundation you can build on. Those component objectives need to be clear and measurable themselves, and lead clearly toward revenue.

Here are the foundational objectives we advocate to our clients:

1. Measure your partner's influence and performance in social media. This isn't NSA eavesdropping. It's just using simple social monitoring tools to track public social media updates. This will help you see which of your partners are sharing, what they're sharing and where. You can see how well they're converting conversations into a community of their own followers. And most important, once you get the rest of your core objectives in place, you'll be able to see how effectively they're leveraging engagement to funnel new leads into the sales pipeline to close. This kind of social media monitoring can provide new avenues of visibility into partner activity so you can more effectively allocate MDF funds based on performance.

2. Provide an evergreen source of fresh and customizable content for your partners to fuel their social sharing. Social media requires a constant stream of relevant updates to stay engaged, and your partners don't have time to source all the content necessary to keep it running themselves. That's your job, and if you do it right, partners will be singing from your songbook like a well-rehearsed choir. Do it wrong, and your partners will sound like automated robots shilling shamelessly for clicks. This objective can be measured by tracking the volume and relevance of what your partners share in social media.

3. Challenge your partners to get engaged—not just with pre-packaged and easily gamed activities that drive meaningless statistics such as "likes"—but with training programs that help partners elevate their game with targeted and meaningful conversations with the market. Again, this can be measured by tracking volume and relevance of partner social media updates, in this case focusing on defined campaigns with prescribed topics and time frames.



“ Your job is to help partners join conversations that are relevant to your value proposition, and their value-adding services.”

4. Encourage your partners to compete. Gamification is a proven way to drive activity and adoption of new marketing techniques. But be careful with the programs you select. Gamification is a hot trend, with lots of vendors pitching programs, but not all are alike. Simplistic games that only reward activity can drive partners to participate in a social marketing campaign, but often when the games end, so does the participation. You need to build games that progress, so that initial rewards for activity to drive participation graduate to rewards for meaningful improvements in market engagement, lead qualification and closing. More on gamification later.

3

Clarify Your Social Positioning

Successful social marketing invariably hinges on an age-old fundamental—a clear and consistent message across all business touch points. In social communications, positioning is no longer confined to what's printed on your website or brochures, and it's no longer static. Everything you and your partners say in blog postings, comments or forums can become part of the positioning fabric, along with everything your company does, from how it promotes its products to how it stands behind them when things go wrong.

One of the biggest positioning challenges in social communications is discipline and consistency. There are often so many topics of discussion, so many burgeoning trends and distractions, it's easy to get drawn in to all kinds of conversations that have little or no relevance to your position. **Effective positioning in social media requires the discipline of sticking to a narrow range of topics that add clarity and depth to the value you provide to your market.** We strongly encourage the development of a Topic Tree, which identifies a hierarchy of topics and subtopics that most closely relate to the value you bring to your market. This will also simplify the process of identifying where the most relevant conversations are happening for you and your partners to join, and curating the content necessary to fuel partner engagement.

While discipline is necessary, it shouldn't require a whip. It's a good thing when you have a partner or team member that is active and gregarious in a way that helps build rapport, but strays now and then into authentic banter with others in the marketplace. But when engagement appears to be random, or driven constantly by the trend of the moment, topical discipline is needed to keep your purpose and position clear.

4

Clarify Your Market Roles

Before social media, the marketing paradigm was entirely based on broadcast media, a world in which businesses would engineer a compelling positioning message and flood the market with advertising. The market rarely spoke back in any way that shaped the company's image, other than through controlled surveys or focus groups. With the rise of social media, a company's position and value proposition is more like a public debate with customers, carried out through product reviews, forum discussions, and endless chatter on Facebook and Twitter.

In the new world of online engagement, a well engineered position is important but not nearly sufficient to shape a company's position. Positioning is no longer an outfit a company wears to market, but more like a lifestyle that has to be publicly lived to be believed. One of the exercises we recommend to move beyond mere positioning is for companies to work out their role within their community of customers. It's not just the value proposition that matters anymore, it's the value proposition of your participation in the marketplace.

It may sound trite, but a helpful focusing exercise is to image the super hero power that would best define the value you bring to your market. For some companies that power is speed through which they can accelerate customers. For others it's the strength to support the weight of customer growth. But don't stop at the obvious powers, really think through your core competencies and how they best help your customers. At SocialRep, seeing the future is our superpower. We leverage our intelligence platform to see the future so our customers can make smarter decisions.

Once you crystallize your role and the value it brings to your market community, you can bring this same exercise to your partners through social media training programs. Finding a voice and a focus for the discussions you and your partners engage in, and eventually lead, becomes a lot easier when you elevate your positioning from a 2-dimensional message to a 3-dimensional role.

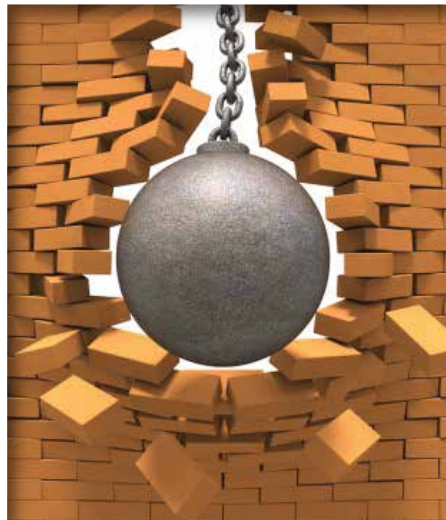
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Engage Your Partners

While most channel marketers are just pursuing social media campaign trends, smart companies are discovering that social media can be a remarkably effective tool for motivating and managing a more active network of global partners. Since large partner networks are notoriously difficult to manage, companies typically prioritize programs based on partner size and volume of sales. You want to develop partnerships that produce results. But large and productive partners are courted by all the competitors in your market, and just because they're happy to take your MDF funds doesn't mean they're going to put their heart and soul into pushing your products.

The ability to more closely measure the activity and influence of partners in social media (Who's driving content? Who's gaining followers? Who's driving reshares and click-throughs?) means marketers now have the ability to spot promising partners more quickly and easily, and to push more resources and opportunities to these partners to help grow their capabilities. Rewarding performance helps attract more resourceful and competitive partners, and also helps build loyalty among partners who are able to produce results.

Gamification is growing in popularity to help accelerate engagement, and it can definitely be an effective tool for getting partners to try a new program. But make sure you plan carefully to ensure the game is tuned to encourage the behaviors you want. Simplistic gaming programs often drive basic behaviors—like sharing content, or getting votes on a post—that only produce activity metrics that evaporate once the game is over.



“ Understand what hurdles you need to clear from your partners path to help them succeed. ”

Better gaming approaches leverage a partner's shared interest in producing marketing and sales results, rewarding outcomes instead of only activities—for example, the volume and quality of qualified leads, click-through and conversion rates, and sales revenue.

Social media can also be used to enhance traditional ways of working with partners in driving channel objectives. Advisory boards can be replicated on LinkedIn or Google+.

Certification programs can be socialized to drive deeper relationships with partner teams. Special groups can be created online to motivate partners—including special interest groups for growth partners, for partners with special capabilities, and for regional partners.

The most important aspect of engagement is not about driving your partners forward through engineered programs or platforms. It's about connecting with partners in a way that allows you to see and hear what their challenges and needs are directly, so you can understand what obstacles you need to clear from their path to help them succeed.

6

Align Your Partners

One of the biggest challenges in socializing the channel is dealing with internal competition. Social is an open and collaborative medium. But if you've ever gotten a group of partners together in a room, you know it can be a quiet and uncomfortable place. Partners are naturally wary of their competition, and are very

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reticent to openly share information about their marketing activities and plans. But there is a way to balance the atmosphere of competition and cooperation.

The key in socializing any group is to focus first on shared interests and objectives. For a channel marketer, the shared interest of all partners, as well as all customers, centers on the core of your value proposition—if it doesn't, you don't have a market. Ostensibly your customers have a significant problem that your product solves, with the value-adding help of your partners' services.

It's in every partner's best interest for the market to hear a clear and consistent message about the core problem customers face and the fundamental solution requirements. When customers hear conflicting accounts on core problems and solutions, it only confuses the purchase decision-making process and slows down sales for everyone. Alignment is about communicating clearly to partners that when representing your products, 80% of the time everyone should be singing from the same song book. What are the core customer challenges to be solved? What are the fundamental requirements for an effective solution? How is your product different from the alternatives? Once the foundation is laid to align with customer needs, the remaining 20% of the time partners can differentiate their value-added services.

When partners meet, either in training or through social media programs you sustain, the focus on shared interests, shared challenges and shared objectives should always be front and center. We've seen remarkable peer support between otherwise competitive partners in this kind of environment. We've seen partners share ideas on how to frame the core problem for customers. We've seen partners encourage each other with performance goals and objectives. The competition is still there, but there's an understanding that a foundation of shared interest helps grow the market. It should be noted that this approach certainly works better with smaller partners and up-and-comers, but some larger partners have the right attitude for participation as well.

7

Train Your Partners

One of the attractions of out-of-box MDF campaigns is their simplicity and ease of execution. But this is also what makes them a commodity to most partners. Sure partner sales teams want qualified leads, but partner marketing teams want help improving their ability to generate leads. Like all companies these days, partner marketing teams are being asked to do more with less, and while out-of-the-box campaigns make it easy on them, they rarely help the partner truly elevate their game, and the programs tend to look the same as those of every other partner and every other competitor.

Providing the training necessary to help your partners really understand and execute social media programs effectively doesn't have to be cost-prohibitive. If you have a partner conference it's easy to attach training tracks to the schedule. Half-day seminars are a great way for regional managers to connect with partners. And online training through webinars, or even more informal hang-outs, are an easy way to deliver effective training without travel or event logistics.

The keys to effective training for social media are focus, context and relevance. Just as we discussed the importance of focusing narrowly on the topics at the core of your value proposition to drive consistent positioning, you should focus training sessions on where partners will get the most impact for their efforts. If customers are discussing their problems and challenges on Spice-Works, don't spend a lot of time talking about Facebook and Pinterest. Develop context by showing clear examples of effective engagement that are relevant and accessible to your partners. Also, don't stop at the surface of social media marketing—off-the-shelf campaigns for Twitter or Facebook—but dig down into the supporting tools that help marketers manage accounts, content and metrics. Your training objective isn't just to make sure your partner can push the buttons on your next MDF campaign, but to help them understand how to build and manage a sustainable social marketing effort themselves.

Beyond the initial training required to get partners up-to-speed with social marketing, ongoing training routines can be used that are more self-managed by your partners. Similar to sports training routines, these programs build on the basic skills partners develop, and their growing comfort with social media strategies. They provide the structure and defined objectives to keep partners growing, without the level of time and resources required when getting partners started.

8

Fuel Your Partners

Once you make it through the first few rounds of social media marketing, an overwhelming reality hits home. Social media is a hungry beast. It takes time to post, it takes time to figure out what to say to be relevant and engaging, and that burden just seems to multiply as you move beyond the initial effort and try to settle into a routine. That burden will be felt by every partner, and everyone on your channel marketing team.

The solution is to fuel your partners with a constant stream of relevant content that makes it easy for them to sustain their own social media efforts. There are plenty of tools and strategies for accomplishing this, but you need to think carefully through your approach. Some companies will provide a set of canned posts for their partners to share, like a “Tweet of the Day” for everyone to distribute. Not only are these programs

unattractive to most partners—you're literally putting words in their mouth—they lack the authenticity that drives engagement. It doesn't take long for customers to see through the smoke screen of packaged content, especially when your partners aren't prepared to engage effectively beyond pre-packaged reshares.

Other tools are proliferating to provide curated content to partners, such as articles and tweets on certain topics. This is a step in the right direction, as it allows your partners to select what they want to share and add their own voice. But you need tools that allow you to carefully shape your own tightly defined topics and still deliver a critical mass of quality content relevant to your partners. It doesn't do you any good if you're selling B2B technologies and your “technology” stream of content is pushing tech stories focused on consumer products, which is a common problem with curation tools.

If you can't provision a solution that delivers relevant, quality content supporting 10–20 targeted posts per topic, per day,

you're likely to find many of your partners frustrated and tuning out. You need to make sure they have the fuel to keep running full speed.



“ Some companies provide a set of canned posts for their partners. These programs lack the authenticity that drives engagement.”

TECHNOLOGY

9

Integrate with Partner Management Systems

Whatever system you use to manage partner relationships and activities, you should also use as the platform to extend into social media. While there are systems emerging that are dedicated to social media management for partners, you want a solution that simplifies things for partners with a single point of access. This can best be accomplished using APIs to integrate functionality into an existing system, without having to replicate authentication and profile management.

Additionally, integration provides opportunities to incorporate other aspects of your partner management programs with your social media programs. This is particularly true for campaign assets that partners might want to share through social media, as well as unified metrics for measuring partner activities across programs and mediums.

10

Integrate with Lead Generation

Since the driving objective for partner networks is to produce and convert qualified leads into customers, lead generation should be an important part of your social media program. This doesn't mean blasting a non-stop stream of offers over Twitter, although many companies will try that. What it means is building on the stream of content that partners share to build their following, and seeding relevant offers at timely intervals to meet the needs and interests of their prospects.

All of the training, alignment and content fueling to this point is about helping partners develop a reputation among their prospects of providing relevant and important information central to the needs of the market. It takes time to build a quality following, but this is how it's done. Effective social marketers are respected as value-adding members of market dialog. Most build this reputation by curating information to share in their updates—content that informs and educates their prospects and peers. As your reputation grows so does your following, and your license to push relevant offers into your stream of content. For most B2B social marketers, this is an 80/20 or 90/10 rule—**for every offer you promote, you should be pushing 8–10 objective links and insights that help your followers stay abreast of important information**, whether that's emerging trends, new product announcements, product reviews, or other information relevant to the community.

You can integrate offers and landing pages into the stream of content you're curating for partners, providing them with an easy way to drop the right offer into the stream of content they're curating. This means that lead generating activities can be easily ported to social marketing, with integration of campaign offers, landing pages, lead scoring and tracking. For companies early in the game, this represents one of the first opportunities to directly benchmark the effectiveness of social marketing against traditional lead generation activities. It also provides a far more accountable option for driving and measuring partner performance.

11 Localize for Global Markets

Just as global partners require localized marketing materials, they need local content and sometimes local application features to build an effective social presence. The differences among local markets include more than just language. We frequently find that topics vary widely in interest among different regions, as well as the popularity of different social networks and different types of social engagement. The good news is that, as a marketer, you don't need to micro-manage localized social marketing—that's what you train your partners to do. You just need to provide a variety of targeted local content and offers to fuel engagement.

One of the biggest challenges of localizing social media is access to good local content. For this, you need a platform that can effectively collect, filter and classify content mapped to your topics in each language you want to localize. Localizing content curation almost invariably requires the help of a native speaker that knows the nomenclature for your space, because many technical and popular terms don't have 1-to-1 translations. Additionally, different regions have local social networks that are more popular than the global heavyweights. So you need to make sure the technology you use to curate and localize content has the ability to localize the sharing capabilities available to partners. In China, it's not just a matter of popularity, but a legal requirement to block certain networks for sharing.

Your regional marketing managers will certainly be your guide to helping tune your localized efforts, so make sure they understand the objectives and approach of your socialization effort—your goal is not to simply localize social MDF campaigns, but to enable local marketers to perform at a higher level by engaging more effectively.

12 Drive Partner Participation

If all of this sounds overwhelming just to put a good social media program in place for global partners, don't worry. It's complicated, but it's not as hard as it sounds. All of the components are generally well known and there are plenty of available components and options to tailor a solution that's right for your company and your network. The key is to take an agile approach, in which you start with manageable initiatives, fail quickly and cheaply, learn from your mistakes and build on your successes.

One of the secrets we've noticed for building momentum is using simple techniques to drive participation. As powerful as social media is, we frequently see that integration with other mediums and approaches helps drive adoption and growth. For example, emails to partners reminding them of social media assets and capabilities always drives a spike in usage. Games that reward partners for participation also

drive use, but as already noted, participation is not the same as adoption, so you need to develop games that go beyond rewarding activities alone, and escalate to rewarding outcomes. Partner blogs that highlight effective social marketing techniques, online groups and hang-outs that keep the dialog with partners going on a week-to-week basis, and even meet-ups or breakout sessions at conferences, all go along way to build participation and momentum.



“Your goal is to enable local marketers to perform at a higher level by engaging more effectively.”

CONCLUSION

Social media is rapidly reshaping many forms of online marketing. While the technology is still evolving, and generating plenty of flavor-of-the-moment trends, there is a deeper drive behind social media that offers valuable opportunities for partner marketing.

Rather than treating social media as just the latest fodder for MDF programs to blast out marketing messages, smart marketers will embrace the opportunity to socialize their partner community. Socialization focuses on engaging partners and driving the development of their social marketing skills with training, content and targeted applications. Partners learn how to engage leads through social media for themselves, rather than just churning leads with another canned campaign, and channel managers gain better insights into partner performance.

Using social media technology to enhance the development of meaningful partner relationships provides a competitive advantage by improving market insights, access and acceptance both within and through your global partner community.

SocialRep Platform

The SocialRep platform is a web-based application that collects and filters the most relevant social content, and syndicates collected content to business partners helping them focus their social media activities. With SocialRep, business partners are empowered as intelligent brand agents to amplify topics that support a strategic position—and always have something relevant and timely to share to enhance their professional social media profile.



- Attract, engage and retain motivated partners
- Align partners around core messaging themes
- Enable social selling and lead generation
- Measure partner activity and influence
- Localize content in 15 languages

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SocialRep automates the process of finding highly targeted content, classifying and filtering the content for quality, and pushing the content to partners to select and share on their own social media profiles. SocialRep integrates with CRM and PRM systems to enable lead generation and MDF campaign integration, and provides comprehensive metrics and analytics to track partner performance. SocialRep enables businesses to dramatically reduce the time and cost of social content development, while empowering partners to be effective and authentic voices for targeted and differentiated campaigns.

ABOUT SOCIALREP

SocialRep produces software and services that provide global businesses with actionable market intelligence sourced from social media and web data. SocialRep helps businesses collect, analyze and understand market dialog to inform critical business decisions, accelerate market engagement and maximize customer satisfaction.

Based in San Francisco and Tokyo since 2006, SocialRep, Inc. has provided social intelligence solutions to Global 2000 businesses in technology, healthcare, financial services, automotive and consumer product industries. SocialRep's platform and proprietary methodologies offer a complete solution for businesses to rapidly transform traditional corporate communications into strategic, revenue-driving market engagement.

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