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WORKING EFFECTIVELY WITH AND DELIVERING IMPROVED RESULTS THROUGH YOUR DISTRIBUTION PARTNERS

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Working Effectively with and Delivering Improved Results through your Distribution Partners

Many manufacturers of scientific and life science instruments and consumables sell their product and services through distribution partners. There are many reasons why such businesses choose to use distribution partners; for example, to reach distant markets, to improve coverage and to access target accounts. Channel Partners: whether they be distributors, agents, manufacturers reps or value-added resellers (collectively hereafter referred to as Channel Partners) vary in size of business, focus and expertise.

Traditionally, manufacturers of lab and life science products selling through Channel Partners employ dedicated sales and support staff to manage such relationships, taking care of such important factors as contracts, performance reviews, and appointing (and if absolutely necessary, terminating) distributors.

Increasingly, when working with our customers in delivering sales training, we have observed that, whilst matters of contractual agreements and performance remain the responsibility of dedicated Channel Partner Managers, supporting and working with the partner "in the field" is now becoming the responsibility of more and more territory sales and support people. These salespeople have their own DIRECT sales territory to cover and are now being asked to work with Channel Partners, supporting INDIRECT sales. To do this effectively requires a different set of skills, knowledge, and behaviours!



The following 5 hints and tips are designed to help those territory salespeople who are now additionally working with Channel Partners especially if they haven't received any formal channel management training. The hints and tips are written from the perspective of the manufacturer's salesperson.

1. **Influencing rather than telling!** When you are working with a distribution partner, for example on a sales opportunity, it is important to remember that, whilst you should aim to work together, the distributor salesperson does not report to you. They will take their direction from their own sales leadership. Instead, try to use influencing skills; for example, give suggestions, make recommendations, and, if appropriate, take the opportunity for coaching. Try and empathise with your

partner by putting yourself in their shoes; what would you find most useful if you were doing their job?

2. **Seek to build trust.** When you start to work with distributors, there is often some mutual wariness and, potentially, a lack of trust. This is especially the case if the distributor is selling in the same market as you the direct salesperson! Building trust takes time. Look for areas of “quick wins”; these may initially be small points, but, in time, they will build up mutual trust and respect. Remember small acts will over time help to build mutual trust. One way could be to pass on a sales lead to a Channel Partner when you feel they are best placed to win the sale. Always seek to do what you say and deliver on agreed commitments. And remember, whilst trust can take a long time to build, it can be destroyed in a moment!
3. **Don’t be afraid to say No.** Sometimes, when working with distributors, our Channel Partners may ask for something we just can’t do. A special price, for example, or preferential treatment when the situation or the processes don’t allow for it. In these cases, you shouldn’t be afraid to say “No”. However, if you do have to say no, then, if possible, give the reasons why; in other words, “no, for these reasons”. Sometimes it might be appropriate to say “no, but I can do this”. Some Channel Partners will keep pushing until you do say no and will respect and trust you all the more when you do so for good reason...facts, data, validated information are convincing and ensure a more rational discussion.



4. **Have a plan when making joint sales calls.** When visiting customers together with a distributor salesperson (or, perhaps in the current situation, making a Zoom or Teams joint call), it’s important to have a clear plan beforehand. For example, if the objective of the call is to close a sale, it might be appropriate for the distributor salesperson to handle all commercial aspects, whilst you the manufacturer salesperson deals with technical matters. Experienced buyers will seek to exploit any differences between the distributor and manufacturer salespeople to their advantage! If possible, role play the call with a colleague to try and anticipate any difficult objections or concerns. And remember to see things through the eyes of the customer; will they understand your working relationship and, most importantly, who is their “go to” contact!
5. **Manage the channel partners expectations!** When you are working in support of many Channel Partner salespeople, as well as covering your own direct territory (if you have one), it is important to manage the partners expectations in terms of

support and assistance. Whilst of course you, the manufacturer salesperson, should seek to be helpful and supportive, there is only one of you, and often many partners to support. It's better to negotiate a deadline for support, than accept a timeframe that can't be met. Don't miss a chance to say, "It can't be done by then, but could be done on this date, is that acceptable to you?" And of course, that new deadline MUST be met. Missing the new deadline will greatly erode trust and commitment. And remember, you have an organisation behind you (the business you work for) that is there in support as well. Rather than getting too involved in issues that you aren't in the best place to resolve (for example, service issues, invoice queries or stock availability), instead direct them to the appropriate contact in your own company, that is best placed to resolve the issue in a timely manner.



We end this short article with a challenge!

If you are a Salesperson working with Channel Partners across your territory, consider your mindset and consider what the ideal mindset might look like. Perhaps that mindset might be...my Channel Partners can help me grow my business way beyond what I can do alone.

And in achieving not just improved sales results (now not limited by your individual selling capacity) you also equip yourself with much of the knowledge and many of the skills and behaviours that will make you eligible for a Sales Management role in the future and indeed any commercial management role. Food for thought?