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PHILIP SACK, CA-AM, IS NO MALCOLM GLADWELL, but he has made his two-decade-plus career in the tech world—which has included stops at Canon, Siebel, Sun Microsystems, and Oracle—coaxing alliances into reaching a “tipping point,” the moment when an organization’s sales team and its counterparts in partner organizations believe in each other, work seamlessly together, and eventually bring in more sales than each could have achieved individually.

# Getting Sales Reps to Leverage the Power of an Alliance

*How to Persuade the “Lone Wolf” to Advance the Pack Toward Alliance Success*



By Jon Lavietes

“The tipping point for me is when suddenly or over time the field teams are actively reaching out to partners to engage, to share stories, to discuss opportunities so we actually start to get traction in the field,” said Sack. “It evolves from the initial well-structured alliance engagement, supported by the alliance and executive teams, and has reached an acceleration point, a type of flywheel effect where the joint sales effort begins take off.”

Once up and running, a well-functioning partner selling team can eventually generate several times the revenue, often with less effort. However, it takes lots of time, energy, and alliance manager savvy to reach this tipping point.

Most notably, to get salespeople to work with other companies, you have to overcome sales reps’ inherent independent streak and their proclivity toward autonomy—the antithesis of the collaborative mindset.

“They’re bred to be a lone wolf, to talk in terms of account control and who owns the customer,” said **Tom Halle**, CSAP, senior direc-

tor of global alliances at Savvis. “It’s probably the biggest challenge an alliance manager faces: How do you shift the sales culture at your employer to be more partner-friendly?”

“I think it has a lot to do with how we hire sales reps in this industry and how we compensate them, and we compensate them to be maniacally focused on their quota,” said **Norma Watenpaugh**, CSAP, founding principal of Phoenix Consulting Group.

Even when you have accomplished what Sack calls the first step to achieving collaborative selling success—gaining agreement from executives, sales managers, and other high-level stakeholders on shared goals and vision and then driving commitment to achieving those outcomes—getting those sales representatives to take ownership of partner selling success is still challenging for many reasons.

For one, sales reps may not see eye-to-eye with upper management’s vision, especially in cases where they are already hitting quotas on their own.

“Companies enter into [an alliance] because, although it will create a little friction in the field, they get that there’s some larger strategic objective [they] want as an organization,” said Halle. “If a guy is doing really well and you tell him he has to do it completely differently now, he’s going to look at [management] like ‘you’re crazy.’”

**Gregory Burge**, CSAP, principal of Corporate Partnering Services and former global alliance executive at IBM, illustrates how the aforementioned account control issue often proves to be a formidable barrier in these early stages.

*In any alliance, it’s the first few wins that are the most important, and usually that’s done with a lot of hand-holding.*

“It took me three weeks to see this director, I’m not going to just hand it over to some [partner rep] that I don’t know,” said Burge, mimicking a typical sales rep’s response to selling with a newer partner. “Let the guys in Europe do it. Don’t get in my territory.”

### **Getting Sales Rep Buy-In**

The most important tactic for overcoming the “sales mentality” hurdles is to create positive examples with a few reps who understand the power the right partner can have in generating new leads and cashing in on existing ones. These are usually veteran salespeople who have already experienced the great long-term gains that result from building a solid relationship with a partner.

“There’s an interesting saying, ‘You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink.’ That’s very true, but a horse often will drink when it sees other horses drinking from the same location,” said Sack.

Together, the alliance manager and the alliance-minded rep identify the low-hanging fruit and set about to net a quick win or two.

“In any alliance, it’s the first few wins that are the most important, and usually that’s done with a lot of hand-holding,” said Watenpugh.

Sack agrees.

“[You have to] really focus on assisting [the sales teams] in overcoming hurdles, engaging with them, and driving them to a joint outcome. They’re going to be in effect your poster children.”

It is in this stage that many alliances fail, according to

Sack, in part because time is of the essence. These first few wins are so important, companies even go so far as to offer perks and financial incentives to get them, albeit on rare occasions.

“The quicker you get to a win in selling, the easier it is to promote it, replicate it, and drive more momentum.”

Once that first deal is signed, it is time to simply “promote the living heck out of it internally,” according to Halle.

Formal and informal communications throughout the company announcing “not just that you won, but how you won and why a partner was instrumental” are a must, according to Watenpugh.

“Give all the credit to the sales rep. It was their brilliant salesmanship and arm-in-arm collaboration that brought in this giant deal,” added Halle.

You can use traditional internal marketing tools such as a case study of the two companies’ successful customer win. Or, an alliance manager may just have to resort to less conventional means to ensure that the counterpart organization helps shamelessly self-promote.

“I started sending a case of jelly beans to the rep to assist us in requesting a client testimonial,” said Burge. Turning the focus to the internal sales reps, Burge adds, “Once they’re bought in, they’re your best advocate. They’re doing [the internal promotion] for you.”

### **Governance Measures Help Sustain Momentum**

As the rest of the sales team falls into line, governance measures need to be in place to keep everyone on the same page and resolve issues that come up. Regular cadence review programs between high-level executives and ground troops are essential to review goals and evaluate whether the chosen metrics “are leading or lagging alliance success,” said Sack.

Certain administrative forms also help crystallize procedures. For example, the joint account planning form clarifies your roles and responsibilities and those of the partner’s sales reps at the outset of a sales pitch. Some companies use lead registration forms to illustrate the partner’s contribution, although other companies eschew them because “people game it,” according to Burge. The end goal of both forms is to prevent any party’s “selective memory” from minimizing the partner’s role after a lengthy sales process—sales engagements commonly last several months.

Rules of engagement and the corresponding escalation path are also critical. Halle outlined three basic rules he has his sales teams live by:

1. If your partner brings you a lead, always be loyal to your partner;
2. If collaborating with a partner who did not bring you the lead, show them preference; all other things being equal, go with that partner; and
3. If you only engage your partner for basic intelligence but they are not actively involved in the sales cycle, then quote whatever is right for the customer, but always keep that partner informed.

Sometimes the mere existence of rules of engagement serves a purpose, even if they are not eventually invoked by either side.

“The example I use [comes from] when I was a basketball referee. We had a rule that a coach couldn’t come outside of their coach box. They always did, but the rule was there if we chose to enforce it,” said Burge.

However, rules can only take you so far if they are not accompanied by what Sack calls an “active relationship development plan,” a series of initiatives designed to build trust at all levels throughout all organizations in the alliance.

“Unless you’ve got that trust-building piece of the puzzle between organizations and individuals, it’s very hard for them to defer to formal escalation processes and rules of engagement,” said Sack.

### Anticipating and Handling Conflicts

Alliance managers rarely get an entire sales team to trust that partners can help get them to their quota, and these rogue sales reps are often the source of bumps in the road to successful collaborative selling. For instance, these reps might stop looping in a partner in the middle of a sales engagement.

“That stuff is really damaging to trust,” said Halle.

“That’s the biggest red flag if there ever is one,” said Burge, adding that it can work both ways when reps claim the partner cut them out of the communication loop. “The seed of distrust has already been planted, whether it is true or not.”

“Coopetition” often breeds other sticky situations.

“[If] we conclude that partner A is the right computing platform for that customer deal, I’ll get a phone call from an executive at competitive partner B asking me what the heck my problem is,” said Halle. “We have to say, ‘Look, we’re heterogeneous. We represent the right technology for the customer.’”

Conversely, some sales reps may fail to understand the

concept of a “win-win” deal.

“They think you can force partners to do things that are in your interest that may not be in their interests or those of their customers,” said Halle.

Even well-intentioned reps will butt heads with partners and others within the company over an alliance’s role in the overall sales effort. Rules of engagement and regular meetings between key stakeholders are particularly critical in managing these disputes.

“You can agree to disagree and define a path without derailing the whole entire relationship,” said Sack.

Conflict is not only inevitable but also commonplace, adds Sack. It’s how you manage it, not whether you eliminate it, that helps determine success.

“To some degree, you need to accept [that] conflict management is a day-to-day part [of an alliance manager’s role]. Your goal really is to minimize the effect of that conflict on the people involved, on the alliance itself, and also on you,” he said, likening the alliance manager’s role to a guidance counselor at times. “Listening to conflict all day won’t get you anywhere unless you have a plan how to address the issues and move on.”

### Well-Rounded Skills Get Sales on Board

Many alliance managers have sales in their backgrounds and understand the inner workings of a sales organization’s structure. However, the alliance manager’s multifaceted perspective is what really helps him or her drive value from sales.

“You have to have more than just sales skills because you’re in effect managing a business collaboration. You have to understand the front end: Why are you in this alliance? How are you creating value in it? How do you deliver it and take it to the field?” said Watenpugh.

Sack goes so far as to call collaborative selling efforts start-ups in their own right.

“They suffer similar issues to all other start-up ventures—failures and successes along the way,” he said. “To be good at collaborative selling, you really need a long-term vision of the objectives of the alliance. You need to have faith in this vision during execution.”

Then, just maybe, leveraging your partner will be an easy sell. ■

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