



Who Owns The Customer Relationship?

In this article Leigh Darby, Executive Director at TSANet Europe takes a detailed look at the importance of partners and other third party relationships in customer support. However your product is sold, this will ultimately impact on your customer satisfaction ratings and the perceptions your customers have about a product or service. The article explains in detail how TSANet operates, case studying the work that TSANet Global is undertaking with Symantec.

Example is not the main thing in influencing others. It is the only thing

Albert Schweitzer German philosopher & physician (1875 - 1965)

The IT market has developed and matured over the past 40 years, and likewise the channel and distribution market has also grown up during this time. In the late eighties, early nineties resellers and distributors had the reputation of being nothing more than 'box shifters' and there was very little value-add associated with the services delivered by these companies. Today, this is a totally different ball game; channel partners must provide a seamless customer experience. You only have to look at software giant, Microsoft, for example, to understand how much of its business is handled by partners and therefore how important it is to get the customer relationship right. Even if you don't strictly work with channel partners, your organisation may well be outsourcing or offshoring, effectively working through a third party relationship, which in some shape or form will work its way through to the customer in the end.

In today's fast-paced competitive world, the pressures on the channel are no different to those facing vendors and can be summarised as:

- Maintaining margins
- Scaling support globally, cost effectively and efficiently
- Complying with increasing legislation and mounting regulations
- Reducing customer support escalation to the vendor
- Differentiating vendor products in the channel
- Obtaining the support services needed from vendors (tools, content etc.)

When confronted with all these modern daily business pressures, how can the channel be expected to deliver a first-class service and meet customer demands?

Why do we work with partners?

Channel partners are a vital and logical part of any product delivery strategy - dealers and distributors offer a multiplier effect to allow a product to reach the widest target customers by geography, market sector or industry.

The term that is often used in conjunction with the channel is 'leverage'. We all know what a lever is - something that you use to exert a more powerful influence over another object. In business the lever is a signed channel partner contract for services, in return for product margin and incentives to hit targets.

The aspiration of any vendor who adopts a channel strategy is that the multiplied sales will far outstrip any equivalent direct sales force - and at a fraction of the cost of full-time employees. That is business leverage - financial efficiency as opposed to mechanical efficiency. But the principle is the same.

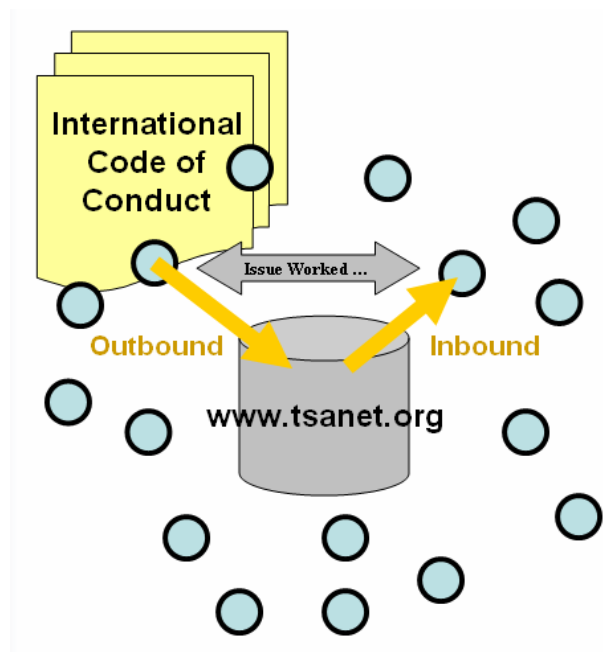
There is a counter-pressure or cost to any design; full-time employees work for only one vendor, whereas typically channel sales and service personnel are working for many. So the question of how *loyal* a channel partner is to your organisation's offering always lurks somewhere in the background - how much influence do you really have over this person or company? Even if sales are flourishing, over the long-term have you won the 'hearts and minds' of the service and support staff?

What channel partners value from a vendor is probably best summed up in two words - simplicity and consistency. And of the two consistency is probably the most vital attribute. Even if the process to sell, market or support is complex, as long as it is the same process every time it will greatly assist in training and being able to set reasonable expectations to the end customer. For example, if the supply of the latest product takes two days in January but two weeks in June, this will not endear a vendor to a dealer or distributor. If it is consistently two weeks, you can plan for it.

In the area of technical support and services, vendors are setting the standard for better multi-vendor customer management. As a logical consequence their partners are also starting to embrace similar approaches.

Simplicity and consistency in technical support

The same can be said of service and support. If there are ad hoc, complex or inconsistent service agreements and/or processes it will be hard to support the customer well and establish confidence with both the vendor brand and the channel service.



The Technical Support Alliance Network (TSANet) has offered vendors a consistent legal and operational framework for nearly 15 years. All Members sign the same International Code of Conduct that describes and ensures that they all strive to work together for the benefit of the mutual customer (*see diagram 1*).

Technical support experts use TSANet as a lookup and directory service to engage others 'outbound' from their support group.

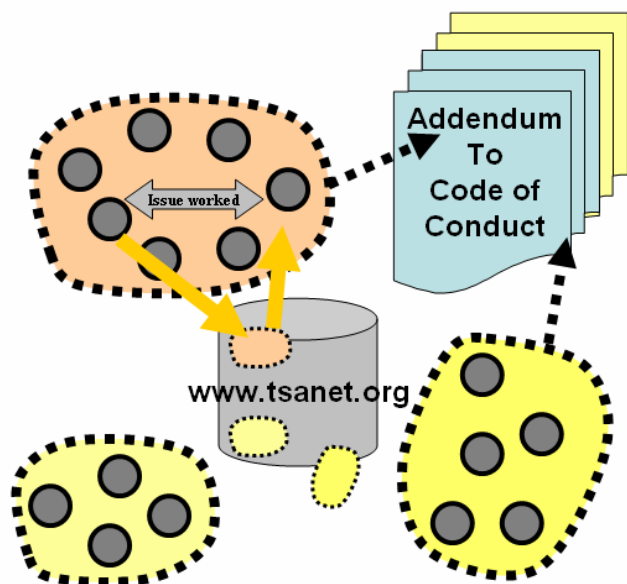
Each member posts contact processes in the secure TSANet database/website so other members can contact them 'inbound'.

Once contact is established, members use the support interactions to identify and resolve the issue or create a workaround to service the mutual customer.

TSANet support model and partner programs

So what has this TSANet support consistency and simplicity approach to do with partners?

Well, the basic model of TSANet can be applied to any business situation where there is a technical support requirement as part of any overall business relationship. At the legal and contract level, this is achieved by developing and signing an Addendum to the TSANet Code of Conduct. It bridges the well-established TSANet 'world' and the particular vendor partner program world.



The channel/partner TSANet Addendum can be a mixture of 'off the shelf' service requirements (response times, escalation process, etc.) and specific channel partner service requirements (product ranges, customer categories, etc.).

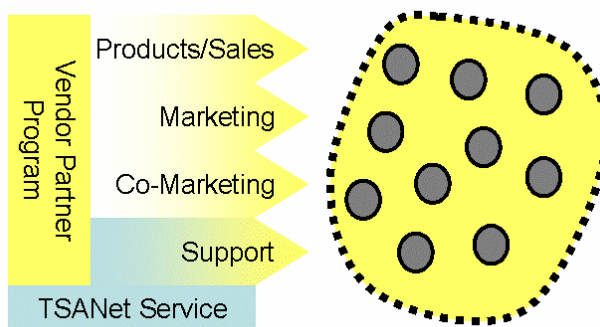
Each partner / vendor signs the customised TSANet Addendum as they join or renew to a program. At the operational level, all information required by the Addendum can be stored in the TSANet online database for secure access when required to engage any other partner as defined in the agreement. (See diagram 2)

This fits in well with the channel partner program approach. These programs are normally sales and marketing led operations

For the reasons described at the beginning of this article, support is nevertheless a vital component of the overall proposition to the partner - but exactly that - a component.

So by using the TSANet infrastructure the vendor can quickly and effectively add a support dimension to their offering without having to create or administer the operation from scratch by themselves (see diagram 3).

An example of this is the Symantec STEP Program.



A case in point

Symantec (the global leader in information security and availability) works with 250 technology partner organisations worldwide. Up until December 2006, Symantec had many bi-lateral contracts in place with each of these companies, which was not only a very expensive process but it was also very time-consuming to implement these multi-vendor relationships. In addition there was no single point for posting, updating and communicating contact and escalation processes. In order to insulate against the risk associated with multi-vendor relationships, Symantec decided to take all of its technology partners through a process of certification to the TSANet model (known as the Symantec Technology Enhanced Program or STEP Program). Today without TSANet membership, Symantec will not certify a partner's products. This ensures that Symantec works together with partners to resolve customer issues, encouraging shared responsibility and accountability for



customer relationships. The STEP Program started in December 2006 and Symantec already has 40 companies certified. By June 2008 it expects all of its partners to have completed this process.

Raj Srinivasan senior STEP Manager, Symantec comments: "We are certifying up to eight companies every month to the TSANet model. With over 250 technology partners (and this number is increasing on a monthly basis), this is quite an undertaking, but we believe an absolute necessity, enabling us to deliver world-class multi-vendor customer support."

Forming a last opinion

In summary, partners will have an impact on your customer satisfaction ratings and it is important that open/unresolved technical support issues are dealt with as quickly and cost-effectively as possible. If the only interaction your customer has is with one of your partners, they will form a lasting opinion of your organisation, through this touch point, whether this is a fair reflection or not. Getting it right is important. As IT becomes more complex and interoperability issues become common place, making sure that your partners are working to a framework and an agreed set of procedures for solving support issues will be critical.