Summary

**Better Together**
Investigating the psychology behind successful channel partner programs

Jan Pelser

Companies spend billions of dollars each year on building and maintaining channel partner relationships, which have become integral to success in the global marketplace. Channel partner programs are instituted to amplify partner relationships and help partners to become more effective sellers. These programs can lead to great results if partners appreciate the programs and act upon this appreciation. However, this is not always the case as some partners may have negative feelings of obligation instead, or may simply expect the support provided in these programs. In addition, disengagement has become a frequent occurrence in these programs, rendering them ineffective in many cases. This dissertation addresses these issues in turn.

In the first manuscript, “B2B Channel Partner Programs: Disentangling Indebtedness from Gratitude,” we refine and expand current perspectives on relational exchanges by disentangling indebtedness from gratitude. We show that these two constructs are distinct states and that gratitude has significant, positive effects on the partner’s commitment to the supplier, as well as their sales effort. Indebtedness, in contrast, has a negative impact on these outcomes. Gratitude furthermore acts as a buffer against the negative effects of indebtedness. We find that program value and perceived benevolent motives for providing the program increase gratitude. Benevolent motives also increase indebtedness, as do self-serving motives. The latter may make the exchange nature of the relationship more salient, leading to an implicit expectation of having to repay the supplier. The motives ascribed to suppliers thus have a strong impact on the outcome of the program, highlighting the importance of careful program positioning and marketing. In addition, we find that partners who feel a sense of entitlement respond differently to the program. Entitlement decreases gratitude and at the same time makes partners more likely to interpret suppliers’ ulterior motives as a sign of an exchange relationship and thus feel indebted. Managers need to be aware of this characteristic in their partners and devise plans to manage entitled “prima donna” salespeople.

In the second manuscript, “When They’ve Lost That Learning Feeling... Balancing Customer and Sales Orientations to Prevent Disengagement in Channel Partner Programs,” we find empirical evidence for the hypothesis that disengagement from training is a phenomenon that occurs over time and represents a serious hazard to program success. Disengagement therefore plays a critical role in these programs as it hinders performance and indicates problems underlying the relationship. To recognize employees disengaging, managers should ideally track engagement over time, for instance, with brief, recurring
engagement surveys. We further find that a bottom-line mentality at the level of the reseller firm exaggerates the negative impact of disengagement on the reseller’s satisfaction with the relationship. Firms should thus work with their partner firms in order to make them less singularly focused on bottom-line outcomes. This can be achieved through trainings, collaboratively developing broader long-term goals, and aligning incentives more carefully. In addition, we find that the reseller salesperson’s customer orientation and selling orientation influence their disengagement from the training. Specifically, a selling orientation promotes disengagement whereas a high customer orientation – even simultaneously – mitigates these effects. Ambidexterity in the form of being able to reconcile these seemingly conflicting orientations therefore reduces or prevents disengagement. This implies that managers should aim to foster customer orientation among the reseller sales force. Even more, they should highlight that the goal should still be to make the sale, but to do so in a way that meets the final customers’ wants and needs.