

Winning channel partner mindshare takes more than a bigger rebate

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Channel programs often assume the surest way to get more attention from partners is to put more money at the end of the sale. That logic made sense when vendors were competing primarily on payout. It's much less useful now that partners are juggling nearly nine vendor programs on average, each asking for training, pipeline development, customer conversations, and other demands.¹

Partners don't necessarily need more motivation. They need a reason to put you ahead of everything else competing for today's attention. That changes the job of a channel program. The goal isn't simply to compensate performance after it happens. The program has to help create preference before the revenue is there to reward.

The hidden cost of paying only for outcomes

Back-end rebates, growth thresholds, and accelerators can be effective tools. The problem comes when they carry most of the program's behavioral weight. Revenue is the final result of dozens of earlier choices: learning a solution, completing enablement, registering an opportunity, building pipeline, bringing the offer into a customer conversation, or investing in a joint sales motion.

IDC has described a broader shift in partner incentives toward recognizing the different ways they create value across the customer lifecycle, including influence, transaction, consumption, and optimization.²

That distinction matters because paying only for the outcome gives you very little leverage over the decisions that produce it. By the time the rebate is earned, the behavior you hoped to influence has already happened.

The result can look healthy on a dashboard while leaving growth untouched: top partners keep producing, low-fit partners remain low-fit, and capable partners in the middle continue splitting their attention among competing vendors.

Current revenue can hide your best growth opportunities

Channel leaders naturally protect the relationships generating the most revenue. They should. But historical production is a poor substitute for future potential when deciding where the next dollar of program investment should go.

Forrester calls revenue a lagging indicator and recommends assessing both current performance and future potential so high-potential partners aren't overlooked simply because they aren't already top producers.³



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That creates a more useful target for channel investment: partners with customer access, selling capability, and room to grow who haven't yet made your brand a consistent priority.

If most of your rewards flow to partners who already choose you, you may be paying for momentum you didn't design. Growth comes from focusing on partners who are most open to behavior change.

What actually earns more partner attention?

Partners are making an economic choice, but the economics are broader than the headline rebate. In Techaisle's 2026 research, 88% of partners rated profitability as critical or very important and 78% said the same about predictability. The same research identified simplicity as a common weakness in vendor programs.¹

So the competitive question is not only, "How much can they earn?" It is whether the partner can quickly understand how to win, trust the path, and see value soon enough to justify shifting attention toward you.

Four design choices make that easier.

1. Make the path to value obvious

Partners should be able to see what matters, what comes next, and how effort turns into value without translating a maze of tiers, exceptions, and fine print. Different partner types can follow different paths; complexity isn't the same thing as sophistication.

When two vendors offer comparable economics, the program that is easier to navigate has an advantage before anyone compares the final payout.

2. Show progress before the finish line

A year-end payout is a weak day-to-day signal. Milestones, status, access, earning progress, and shorter-term opportunities give partners evidence that their effort is moving somewhere worthwhile.

The Incentive Research Foundation's 2025 study of technology companies found that top-performing organizations were more likely to use multiple earning paths and fast-start opportunities, giving participants more ways to engage early rather than waiting for one distant result.⁴

3. Reinforce the behaviors that create revenue

Start with the business outcome and work backward. Which partner actions make that outcome more likely? Depending on the strategy, the answer could include:

- Advancing qualified opportunities
- Completing enablement tied to execution
- Creating focus around priority solutions
- Registering opportunities

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- Building pipeline
- Participating in joint selling motions
- Supporting adoption, expansion, or renewal

The point isn't to invent more activities to reward. It's to identify the few behaviors with a credible link to the business result and reinforce them while they can still affect the outcome.

4. Give partners value that is harder to copy

Cash, margin, and rebates matter because partner economics matter. But a competitor can usually match another rebate point. Recognition, access, status, choice, merchandise, and distinctive experiences create a different kind of value.

In the IRF's 2025 technology study, top-performing organizations put greater emphasis on flexibility, participant preferences, and perceived reward value. Among companies using incentive travel, **55%** of top performers named unique experiences as a top goal, and they placed more emphasis than comparable companies on creating emotional connections.⁴

Those elements won't rescue a weak economic proposition. They can, however, make a strong proposition more memorable and more difficult to reduce to a spreadsheet comparison.

Design for economic gravity

Channel leaders don't need to abandon rebates. They need to stop asking rebates to do a job they were never designed to do on their own.

A stronger program makes the right partner behaviors easier to choose: the opportunity is clear, progress is visible, important actions are reinforced, and the overall value is difficult for competitors to duplicate. That's how a channel program begins to create economic gravity around the brand.

The practical test is simple. Look at the partners you most want to grow and ask whether the program gives them a reason to change what they do this week, not only a reason to collect a payment months from now.

If it doesn't, a larger rebate may make the program more expensive without making the brand more important. The better investment is a program that earns priority before it pays for performance.

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Sources

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