

Don't Fear Asking For Vendor Integrations

When growing your business means asking vendor partners to work together, don't be shy — just do it.

BY GENNIFER BIGGS

Every managed services provider (MSP) knows that when a customer has a particular need, solving that problem is key to winning or keeping business, even if it means stretching the limits of the services you usually provide. The same holds true for vendors. When an opportunity comes along that sheds light on what channel partners need, a vendor must be willing to accept that challenge. That is especially important today as MSPs deal with the convergence of technology in the IT industry, says Ginger Clay, director of marketing for Tigerpaw Software. As an IT management and automation software vendor, Tigerpaw is accustomed to working with other vendors, but typically those efforts revolve around the tools their channel partners need to monitor and manage a variety of technology solutions in an end user's environment. But sometimes a channel partner needs integration between the tools it uses inside its own business. "Our partners need vendors to work together to create a solution that is bigger than the sum of its parts," says Clay. "Vendors must listen to their channel partners so they can target the right kind of integration partners to achieve a seamless, all-connected business automation success story."

This question arose for Michael Tederman and Hallie Talley, who run Help System Services, when they realized the document management system (Cabinet NG [CNG]) they used in-house wasn't integrating with the Tigerpaw IT automation (customer relationship management [CRM]) tool they had in place. "Because the two applications weren't working together, we were faced with manually entering information in two databases, which took extra steps and cost us time and effort," says Tederman. The MSP realized that since each of these products had the capacity to integrate with other applications, integrating with each other shouldn't be that much of a stretch. So, the owners introduced the two vendors in order to get what they needed. "What's compelling about Tederman and Talley's approach is that they didn't just want to connect a document management system to a CRM program," explains Clay. "They wanted their vendor partners to talk and build something new for the channel. It was very smart on their part to demand, and it was very important that we, as vendors, listened."

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Clay says it's important for MSPs to have an open dialog

with their vendors and provide feedback that will improve efficiencies, especially as technologies converge — both inside IT businesses and the customers they service. "Those requests can have a positive impact on multiple channel partners and, potentially, end users," says Clay. Additionally, she points out that vendors should want to help channel partners grow their businesses, and that can mean evolving products as technology advances. Tederman agrees. "If you have vendors that aren't willing to listen and work with you, it's time to look elsewhere," he says. "Their focus needs to be on helping make our business grow, not on making a sale. Both these vendors showed interest in adapting to our needs. That attitude is what attracted us to these vendors and then made us comfortable bringing them together."

Most vendors encourage channel partners to become part of the development process, relying on online community forums. Others convene formal events with selected part-



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ners to discuss product roadmaps. In this case, Tigerpaw used its Client Advisory Board, which is composed of select users, to assist in the software design process and testing before the product even reached beta. "From a vendor perspective, our channel partners should do what they do best, and our job is to develop quality software tools to

help them achieve their goals. It's that simple," adds Clay.

The key to success — for vendors and their channel partners — is a willingness to participate in the process. Look at Help System Services — as a result of its efforts, it can now take advantage of an integration that enables the sharing of documents between its chosen business automation software and its preferred document management and workflow software.

"Now, when we create a client in the Tigerpaw database, CNG automatically creates a file for that same client in its database," says Tederman. "We no longer have to manually enter that information." Moving between the two repositories is as simple as clicking an icon integrated into the CRM tool. That allows an MSP viewing a client's history in the CRM to instantly connect to the CNG database and view every document connected to that particular client — invoices, proposals, service agreements, etc. "It just makes our process a whole lot more efficient," says Tederman. "And it helps us better serve our customers." ●