Rethinking channel sales for growth

Are your channel partners holding you back – or powering you forward?

August 2025

Whitepaper

kvadrant consulting

About Kvadrant Consulting

In B2B, the way customers are buying is changing. From being mostly in-person to including a blend of digital and physical touch points and more stakeholders.

This shift has massive ramifications for the way companies should structure and run their sales & marketing functions.

At Kvadrant Consulting, we help companies navigate this complexity, make the right choices and configure their sales & marketing engine to generate profitable organic growth.

Being deeply specialised and senior-driven, we help companies within domains such as commercial strategy, value propositions, organizational design, product launches, sales & marketing operating model design, lead generation engines, capability building, sales enablement, and advanced analytics.

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Charlotte is a Sr. Director and consultant with demonstrated experience in helping global B2B companies develop and activate integrated go-to-market programs rooted in a deep understanding of market dynamics and key stakeholder touch points.

Co-author of *The Campfire Launch.*

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Preface

The hidden majority: Why partner sales is the commercial backbone of modern B2B

Take a closer look at how B2B companies actually generate revenue today, and you'll uncover a quietly dominant force: partner sales.

While direct sales tends to steal the limelight — with high-profile hires, flashy CRM dashboards, and target-smashing war stories — the real volume, in many cases, comes from the channel.

Whether you're selling forklifts, windows, firewalls, or pharma, partner-based selling isn't a side channel — it's often the main one.

> *In many industries, **30–70% of total revenue** comes through channel partners.*

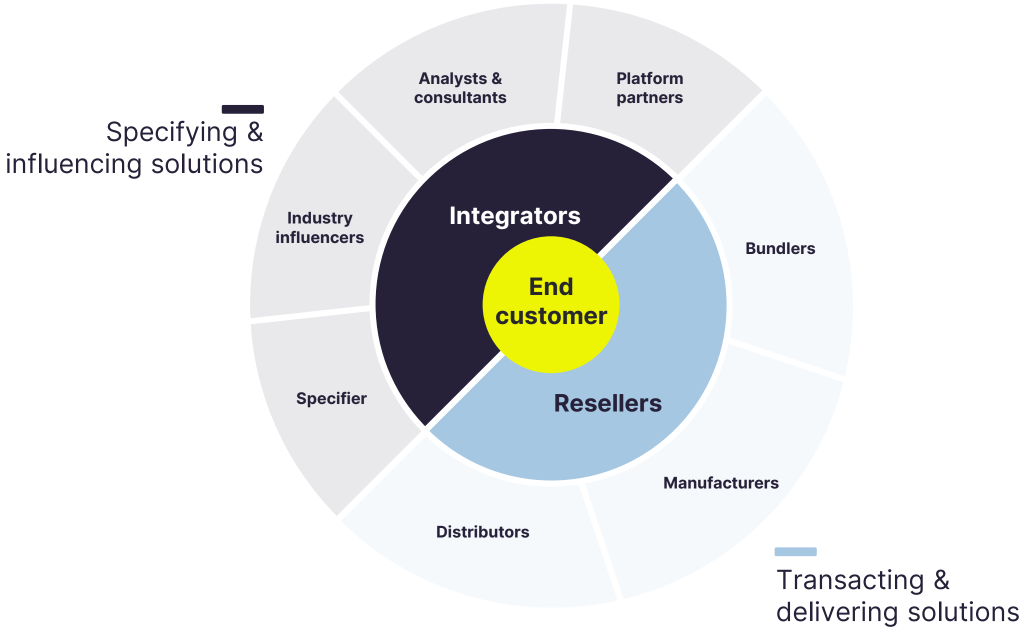
And in markets that are fragmented, technically complex, or service-heavy? It's even higher.

Distributors, resellers, referral partners, and system integrators are not sideshows. **They are the backbone of commercial delivery.**

While we often talk about the **5–10 decision-makers** involved on the customer side of a B2B deal, what's less appreciated is the number of **different kinds of partners** that touch the same opportunity. Rarely does a sale move straight from supplier to end customer.

Instead, it passes through a web of actors — analysts and consultants who influence the specification, integrators and platform partners who stitch solutions together, manufacturers and bundlers who package offerings, and resellers or distributors who transact and deliver **[Figure 1].**

Figure 1: Types of ecosystem partners influencing the sale



In practice, that means a typical sale involves not only a buying committee but also **three or more distinct types of partners**. These players aren't peripheral. They are essential channels through which solutions are validated, purchased, and implemented. Overlooking their role is like looking at only half the sales equation. In reality, it's the ecosystem that sells.

> *Overlooking their role is like looking at only half the sales equation.* ***In reality, it's the ecosystem that sells.***

And yet, despite their scale and strategic significance, partner ecosystems are often overlooked when it comes to commercial investment, strategic clarity, and performance rigor. They're treated as static infrastructure rather than dynamic engines for growth.

Relationships are maintained — but rarely managed.
Performance is assumed — but seldom measured.

In other words, we're putting huge bets on the partner channel without always managing it like a business-critical sales function. **And that's where the cracks start to show.**

1. The uncomfortable truth about the state of channel sales

Many B2B companies still lean heavily on channel partners to drive growth — and for good reason. When well-designed, partner models can significantly extend commercial reach, accelerate entry into new markets, and deliver scalable service across regions and segments. But design is only the beginning.

What we see, time and again, is that most channel programs are underperforming. Not dramatically. But consistently. They are often too broad in scope, too generous in benefits, and too disconnected from the commercial outcomes they were meant to support.

Case insight

At Kvadrant Consulting, we worked with a global hardware provider to deliver a comprehensive analysis of their partner network—spanning over 12,000 channel partners across EMEA. On paper, the scale was impressive.

In practice, it revealed a different story: most partners were inactive, lacked meaningful engagement, and had little clarity around their role or expected contribution.

This isn't an isolated case. In our experience, underperformance rarely stems from a single point of failure. It's usually the result of multiple elements pulling in different directions: The partner program itself may not be clearly defined. Segmentation may exist as a label, but not as a tool for decision-making. Internal teams may lack the mandate, structure, or support to engage partners in a focused and differentiated way.

And in many cases, the strategy underpinning it all hasn't been properly revisited in years.

Put simply, what's visible externally — the reward schemes, the tier structures, the partner communications — is only part of the equation.

Building a channel that truly delivers requires equal attention to what sits beneath the surface: strategic clarity, internal alignment, coaching routines, and the ability to hold both positive and difficult partner conversations when needed.

Because more partners ≠ growth.

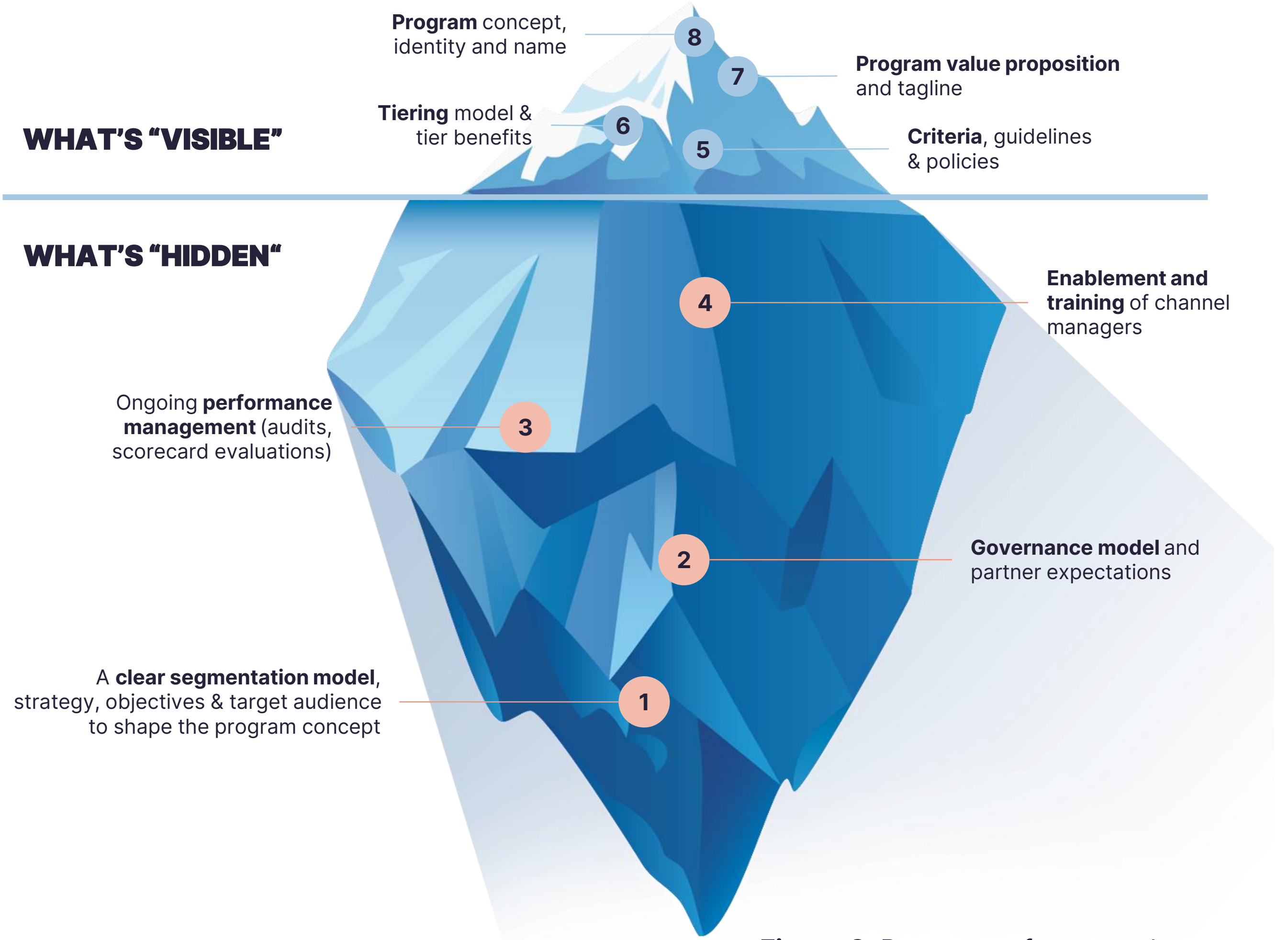


Figure 2: Partner performance levers

2. Why more partners doesn't equal more growth

Historically, many companies have treated partner recruitment like a numbers game. The thinking was simple: more partners equals more reach, which equals more revenue. But in today's commercial reality, that logic no longer holds.

The real problem isn't the number of partners — it's the lack of focus. Without clear segmentation and differentiated management, resources are spread too thin. Sales teams or channel managers end up firefighting across dozens of partner accounts, often unsure which ones deserve their time and which ones don't.

We've seen this play out in multiple sectors. Partner incentives get diluted. Support becomes generic. And everyone — from internal sales to the partners themselves — is left confused about what success looks like.

Case insight

In a recent engagement, a client business unit unlocked significant untapped potential in its existing partner base — not by adding more partners, but by refining its approach. By clearly defining its channel strategy, introducing a performance-based segmentation model, and equipping internal teams to activate it, the unit shifted from passive support to active performance management.

Within a year, the business unit delivered a 28% year-on-year increase in partner-driven sales, becoming the company's top performing BU. Growth was broad-based across markets and directly linked to the new partner program — proving that sharper focus and active performance management drive better results than simply expanding the partner base.

3. The three gaps that quietly undermine most channel strategies

Underperforming partner programs rarely suffer from a lack of effort. Most suffer from misalignment — between intention and execution, between strategy and behaviour.

In our experience, three interlinked gaps show up most frequently:

1. Strategic ambiguity
2. Segmentation without consequence
3. Enablement deficit

Typical challenges limiting channel partner performance

Organization / function not structured around driving channel growth
(no clear roles & responsibilities or tools to drive activities)

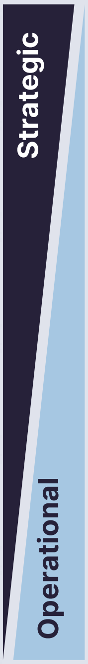
Misalignment between direct sales and channel partners
(leading to conflicts or missed opportunities)

Over-reliance on a few key partners
(creating risk if performance drops or relationships weaken)

Channel partner managers not knowing who to visit when
(where the return will be greatest)

No clear guidelines or management of benefits and incentives
(too many discounts or benefits given)

Lack of structured partner onboarding and enablement
(resulting in slow ramp-up and inconsistent performance)



Gap #1

Strategic ambiguity

In many organisations, there's no clear consensus on what the partner model is actually meant to deliver. Is it a growth lever for new categories? A low-cost coverage play in mature regions? A tool to strengthen strategic alliances? Leadership teams often hold conflicting assumptions — and those assumptions rarely make it into a unified strategy.

This ambiguity cascades down into program design. Incentives reflect old product priorities. New initiatives fizzle out before they reach the field. Regions reinvent the wheel. And partner managers are left trying to align with a strategy that was never clearly articulated in the first place.

Symptoms of this gap

- Each region designs its own program from scratch
- New strategic initiatives (e.g., entering a new product category) fail to scale through the channel
- Partner-facing teams are left guessing what “success” actually looks like
- Incentive structures are misaligned with current growth priorities

The fix: A unified channel strategy that answers two core questions — where to play (markets, partner types, solution areas) and how to win (value proposition, operating model, enablement). Without this, any program risks becoming a patchwork of best guesses.

Gap #2

Segmentation without consequence

Most of us are members of — or at least familiar with — frequent flyer programmes. Gold, Silver, Platinum. Each tier promises priority, perks, and exclusivity. But when everyone boards at the same time and queues in the same line, the status starts to feel a bit hollow.

The same dynamic plays out in many partner programmes. Segmentation exists on paper — strategic vs transactional, tiered categories, different labels — but in practice, it changes very little. Tiers are often assigned based on past sales, not future value. Support and incentives remain broadly distributed. And "strategic" partners receive no more time or guidance than the rest.

In other words: everyone has a title, but no one gets treated differently.

Symptoms of this gap

- "Top-tier" partners receive the same attention as low-performing ones
- Incentives are applied uniformly, regardless of segment or behaviour
- Segmentation is based solely on past sales, not future value or fit
- Sales teams have no guidance on how to differentiate engagement

The fix: True segmentation should shape where you focus, how you invest, and what you expect in return. It should reflect both performance and potential — and translate into meaningful differences in how partners are engaged and supported. Segmentation should serve as a practical tool for decision-making, not just a label.

Gap #3

Enablement deficit

Even the best-designed channel model will fall flat if the people delivering it aren't set up for success. And this is where many programs stumble.

Channel managers are asked to drive growth, manage portfolios, and execute new models — often without the right training, tools, or metrics. In the absence of support, they fall back on what they know: maintaining relationships and using discounts as a substitute for real engagement.

The result? Inconsistent partner experiences, weak performance conversations, and internal teams struggling to connect strategy to action.

Symptoms of this gap

- Channel managers rely on discounting to drive sales
- Performance issues are avoided instead of addressed
- Partner onboarding and training is ad hoc or inconsistent
- Field teams lack playbooks or tools to guide partner engagement

The fix: Equip internal teams with clear roles, training, tools, and routines to bring the partner model to life. High-performing programs don't just rely on strategy — they invest in the people delivering it.

The takeaway: Channel partner challenges span strategy, segmentation, and execution — and they compound each other

What holds back channel performance isn't one isolated issue. It's the accumulation of gaps; in strategic clarity, in commercial focus, and in day-to-day execution.

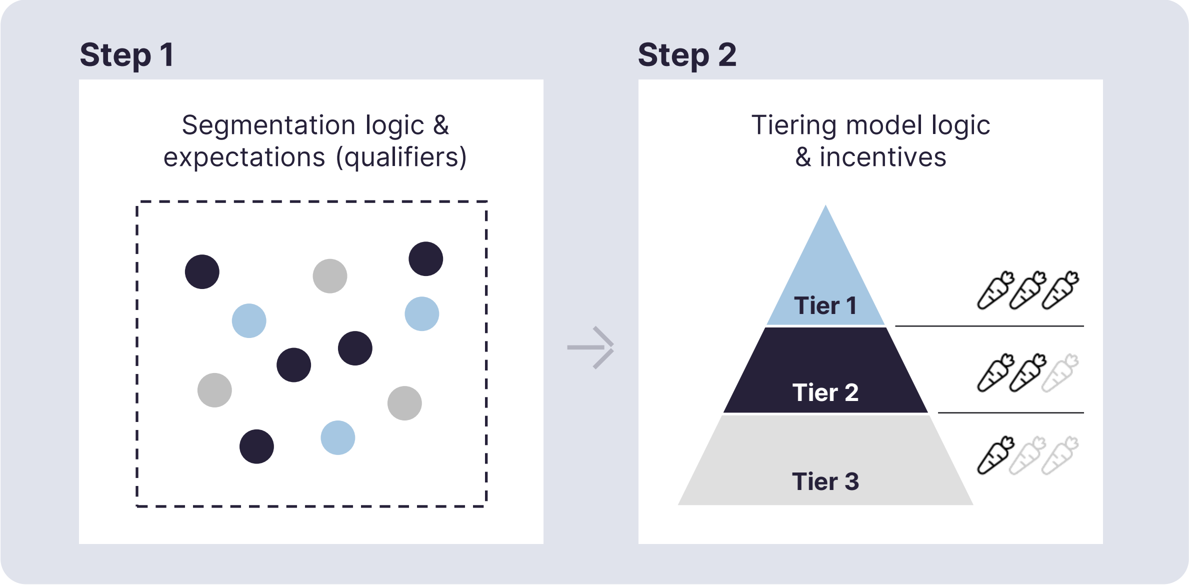
> Some challenges are deeply **strategic**: lacking a clear model for what the channel is meant to deliver.
>
> Others are more **tactical**: too many partners treated the same, or no guidance on how to prioritise time and attention.
>
> And some are simply **operational**: weak onboarding, inconsistent enablement, or a discount structure no one's enforcing.

But here's the real issue: these challenges most often don't sit neatly in silos. They stack. When the strategy is unclear, segmentation becomes symbolic. When segmentation fails, partner managers operate on instinct, not intent. And without enablement, even the most well-designed program remains theoretical.

4. From blueprint to execution: How to build a channel that actually delivers

So, what does good look like? In our work across B2B, we've found that high-performing partner programs share three core elements. They're not revolutionary — but they are consistently overlooked.

01 **First, the design layer.**
This is where you define who your most valuable partners are, what you expect from them, and what they get in return. That means having a compelling partner value proposition, clear commercial logic for segmentation, and tangible benefits that link to performance, not just participation.



02 **Second, the enablement layer**.
It's not enough to have a model on paper. Your internal teams need to be able to bring it to life. That means training, tools, and playbooks that help them prioritise, engage, and coach partners effectively. It also means making the 'why' of the model clear, so everyone from marketing to sales understands how to use it.

03 **Third, the operating model.**
This is about rhythm and governance. Shared KPIs. Cadences for reviewing performance. Strategic planning cycles. And clear links between global leadership and local execution. Without this, even the best strategy will drift into irrelevance.

When all three layers are in place, partner programs shift from a passive portfolio to an active commercial engine.

5. Final thoughts: Rethinking channel sales for growth

Across B2B sectors, structural change is underway. Traditional growth engines are slowing. New revenue is coming from service-based models, digital solutions, and buyer segments that don't behave like the old ones. In this context, the partner channel is no longer a supporting act — it's a strategic lever. But only if it's managed as one.

The partner model can help companies adapt faster, scale smarter, and access markets that direct sales teams can't reach. But it can just as easily become a drag — a fragmented, under-managed network that consumes effort without delivering outcomes.

Which of those realities you end up with depends on the moves you make now.

The organisations pulling ahead aren't necessarily investing more — they're investing better. They're sharpening focus, redesigning their segmentation, and giving internal teams the tools to lead. The result? Higher partner activation, faster time to market, and better control of cost and margin.

Channel partnerships aren't easy. They require structure, patience, and discipline. But when they work, they unlock forms of growth that simply can't be replicated through direct sales alone.

It's no longer enough to support your partners and hope for results. You need to lead them — with a clear strategy, a focused operating model, and the confidence to make tough choices.

Don't default to scale. Design for performance. And make your channel work as hard for you as you do for it.

Any further questions?

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