

Who Will Your Target Customer Call First?

The design of channel strategies often start in the wrong place. They begin with coverage models, partner tiers, discount structures, and margin debates.

Those things matter, but they are not the first question. The first question is simple and more fundamental.

Who will your target market call first? Not...

- Who should they call?
- Who has the strongest brand?
- Who offers the most complete portfolio?

The key question is:

- Who will they call when something happens?



The gap between the target market and your channel window is where you lose sales that you could win – if you can reach them

In indirect markets, access is behavioral. Channels become trusted partners, to end-customers and to vendors. When a production line stops, a key part is needed, or a compliance deadline looms, customers do not run a formal evaluation. They call someone they already trust.

That first call defines your real starting position.

A provider of inspection equipment discovered this clearly. End customers consistently called distributors who offered training and equipment servicing alongside supply. They bypassed distributors focused purely on product availability. Over time, customers developed trust in partners who supported them operationally and that trust determined who received the first call.

A leading marine lighting manufacturer saw a similar pattern. Emergency purchases flowed to local marine chandlers. Routine supply contracts went to local marine service companies. Large project opportunities were raised directly with the vendor sales force or large infrastructure construction companies. Different needs triggered different first calls.

Similarly, a manufacturer of a portfolio of HVAC/R products recognized that some of its manufacturer reps actively pursued large new construction projects, offered packages of equipment, and helped specify the packages early in the project. In contrast, another set of manufacturer reps offered components and accessories and saw opportunities later in the project process. Consequently, the manufacturer engaged a mix of manufacturer reps to ensure adequate market coverage.

Only after understanding this behavior, should companies design coverage models, structure discount tiers, and optimize margins. If a company's existing channels are not on the customer's instinctive call list, a bigger discount or different channel incentive will not fix or improve a gap in a channel partner window.

First establish first-call relevance. Then build the rest of the channel around it.

If you believe that channel windows are important to your organization and are impacting the growth it seeks, then FL&A can help. Feel free to contact Stephen Martin at smartin@franklynn.com for further discussion.