Rob Napolitano, VP Strategic Alliances & Partnerships, Engage

Robert ("Rob") Napolitano joins Engage with more than 17 years of IT experience and recent executive business development and alliance positions at Nortel Networks and Compaq Computer Corporation, respectively. Prior to joining Engage, Rob was Vice President of Strategy and Business Development for Clarify, an enterprise CRM software division of Nortel Networks, where he was responsible for generating $125 million in annual partner revenue and for establishing alliance strategy and business direction for Clarify's CRM applications. In this role, Rob developed strategic partnerships and solutions initiatives to support sales, product development and go-to-market opportunities. Prior to Nortel, Rob directed strategic IT hardware, software and service provider alliances for Compaq. His previous experience includes providing general legal counsel and managing contracts and acquisitions for Digital Equipment Corporation. Rob earned a JD from the Suffolk University School of Law, an MBA from Suffolk University's Sawyer School of Management and a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from Boston College. He is an active member of the Massachusetts and American Bar Associations.

1. What were the reasons for Engage to develop a Partnership Program? What challenges did this present the company?

RN: Engage developed a partner program to extend its go to market reach, expand/enhance its product portfolio, and maximize its leverage with platform vendors. Our challenges as a small company is resource and funding limitations as well as the need to establish a strong enough value proposition to entice industry leading companies to partner with us. To date, we have been hugely successful.

2. What was your strategy for meeting this challenge?

RN: My strategy was/is is multi-fold: from an SI perspective, we have elected to use our core strengths and customer success in retail to recruit retail specific partners (i.e. KSA, Accenture Retail, etc); from a value chain perspective, we are positioning ourselves as the glue that helps execute the demand chain. This, effectively enables us to tie ERP with web content management and print/pre-press partners. We are also doing the heavy lifting for the partners to simplify the integration requirements (i.e. building adaptors, API’s, etc); finally, from a platform perspective, we have begun to capitalize on the value of our h/w and s/w platforms to drive incremental sales leads and marketing activities.

3. How did you decide to define your success? What were your specific Success Objectives?

    a. Internally (Success of overall Alliance Programs):

RN: Success internally is measured subjectively (management's visibility into the various activities) as well as objectively (principally based on the number of leads/sales opportunities partners bring us into as well as executed partner agreements (OEM, license, service, VAR and referral)

    b. Externally (Success of the Partnerships):

RN: We are using industry analysts to help test our strategy and partner success; we are also focused heavily on sales engagements, tradeshow interest and partner feedback to measure our success.

4. How was internal divisional support important and how did you garner it? How did you manage these internal dependencies?

RN: We developed an alliance filter process that involves folks from the various functions within Engage to garner interest and participation from them. We run all major prospects through the process. This enables us to define requirements upfront as well as qualify a partner. Given our limited bandwidth, we need to partner "intelligently." We have also presented our strategy to the respective managers from each function to gain approval of our activities.

5. How did you define an attractive prospective Partner? How were you able to determine the opportunity for success with each?

RN: We are focusing on industry leading companies as well as boutique and/or point solution vendors that help us address a specific need. We have also enlisted the support of industry analysts (Gartner, AMR and Forrester) to help validate our strategy as well as provide suggestions/recommendations.

6. What tools or systems do you use to help you execute on your strategy?

RN: We are working closely with Alliance Sciences to develop business plan templates, partner qualifications and engagement rules; we have also looked at "best practices" from a number of leading s/w companies to help develop our strategy. We also launched a new partner website recently with the help of Alliances Sciences.

7. How have your programs been successful?

RN: Outside of leads and sales engagements, it is difficult to measure success so early in the process. We have, however, received approval from our Executive Leadership Team and further have received positive feedback from industry analysts and prospective external investment banks/venture firms.

8. How are you able to show the value of your Alliances to other stakeholder departments or management?

RN: Value is measured in license cost reductions, feature enhancements from partners, offload of development work to external parties, qualification of SI to take on new service engagements, positive press and industry feedback and new deals.

9. What's your Alliance lifecycle – are you done working when the contracts are "done"?

RN: The lifecycle is perpetual. We own the partnership from inception… The contract is simply a vehicle to conduct business.

10. What advice would you give to our readers regarding creating, implementing or managing effective Alliances?

RN: My advice is to establish an achievable plan of attack based on resources, time, needs and opportunity. Once established, focus on execution. Alliances must become an integral part of the planning and daily operation. Additionally, alliance deals must net tangible results; the days of "Barney" relationships are well behind us. Lastly, develop a success criteria/matrix for the alliance managers and your partners.