

Ready. Set. Enroll!

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Tactics to help drive early participation in channel incentive programs

A company can assemble an impressive channel sales incentive that is easy to understand and highly rewarding for participants, yet the program doesn't gain the immediate traction (measured as program enrollments/registrations) as expected. Why?

There is no single answer...and no simple answer. The answer is: "It depends." Many different factors can impact how quickly a new incentive initiative gets off the ground, including the following:

- Level of channel leadership support
- Additional demands on the audience
- Access to the audience
- Incentive and general business message clutter
- Quantity and quality of communications used, including call-to-action messaging
- Owners/managers acting as "gatekeepers"
- Rules structure(s) used and eligible participant perceptions regarding their own opportunities to earn
- Hesitancy to provide sensitive personal information (e.g., Federal Tax ID, Social Security number) during enrollment

A BI WORLDWIDE (BIW) client recently launched a program to sales personnel at an independent sporting goods retailer. Unfortunately, program results fell short of expectations. From BIW's perspective, the incentive sponsor (our client) seemed to do everything right. They worked with retail leadership to gain retail leader support, they used a creative print brochure to drive engagement and move recipients to enroll, they created a launch overview document that store managers could use to introduce the program to eligible retail reps and they even included incentive earning opportunities for store managers. These manager earning opportunities typically result in high engagement among management personnel that then carries over to reps on the sales floor.

So what went wrong?

Many store managers, who were charged with launching the program within their stores, failed to fully use the launch tools provided and distribute program launch materials to eligible retail reps. The lack of overall store manager engagement is evidenced by the numbers, where only 38 of 139 store managers (27%) enrolled in the program. Visits to a handful of local stores during the first few weeks of the program revealed that retail reps at these select stores had not received the program information. When told about the incentive opportunity, these reps expressed a strong desire to participate in the program; BIW then took steps to get these people enrolled.

What can you do if your program is falling flat like this one? While there's not one definitive way to drive enrollment activity early, there are proven tactics that can help.

- **Get channel partner leader support for launch:** Though no one should be forced to enroll in an incentive program, it never hurts when a channel partner leader expresses the importance of a program and encourages timely sign-ups among eligible participants.



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- **Engage pertinent managers:** Engaging managers with direct responsibility for rep performance can be a critical piece for driving rep enrollment and incentive participation. Contests for managers measuring rep enrollments (percentage of a manager's direct reports enrolled) can drive rep enrollment activity. Additionally, tying manager earnings directly to the earnings of their direct reports – via an override, for example – can help ensure managers are providing the support and coaching their reps need to be successful.
- **Follow the KISS principle:** People are busy. Channel reps are pulled in many different directions. And as an independent audience, it's tough (if not impossible) to make your priorities their priorities. When it comes to incentive programs, it's always best if reps can readily understand what you're asking of them and what's in it for them if they participate. Keep the rules easy to understand and keep the qualifying language, the "small print," to a minimum. And don't forget to showcase the rewards available to them when they engage, sell and earn.
- **Offer a nominal enrollment reward:** Consider offering a nominal reward for eligible participants that enroll by a certain date or for a set number of reps who sign up first. Such an offer will create a buzz among eligible participants and adds a time-sensitive component to spur action. Points-based rewards are a great tool for this, as they are easy to communicate, simple to administer and allow for the power of accumulation as reps seek to earn additional points from the program in the future.
- **Trust but verify partner communications:** Get samples of communications initiated by channel partners to ensure that details being communicated are comprehensive and accurate. It's easy for a partner to tell a program sponsor, "Things are taken care of." Hopefully they are but maybe they aren't. Request copies of communication pieces, preferably prior to distribution, so any minor errors or omissions can be corrected before going out.
- **Use communications that break through the clutter:** While any legitimate incentive program must stand on its own merit, the importance of using engaging communications to pique interest and drive enrollments cannot be understated. Use a blend of print and electronic communications to help maximize reach and impact. And don't limit yourself to sending only one communication – multiple touch points keep your program top of mind and are effective at driving action.
- **Go direct, whenever possible:** Don't rely solely on an intermediary (e.g., store managers) to pass along critical program information. You can still require eligible participants to enroll/register/opt-in versus using automatic enrollment; you're simply not relying on an intermediary to perform. It's most effective to have channel partners "raise their hands" to enroll in a program, as doing so shows some level of engagement and commitment from the get-go.

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- **Anticipate and avoid weak links:** In the program described above, the retailer was hesitant to provide eligible participant names and email addresses, which would have assured the sponsor's ability to communicate directly with participants. Instead, we needed to rely on store managers to pass along program launch materials to eligible reps. This sole reliance on store managers created a weak point in the process.
- **Include a simple referral component:** Especially for channel programs, where there can be a degree of skepticism among independent reps regarding a new initiative, the impact of peer referrals can help drive upfront engagement and new enrollments. People are simply more likely to get on the bandwagon if their peers have joined. To maximize impact, provide the referrer with a nominal reward amount when those they refer actually sign up.
- **Consider using an outbound calling campaign:** More and more, program sponsors are tapping into call center resources for outbound enrollment pushes. For little or no extra cost, call center personnel can script and facilitate an outbound campaign targeting eligible incentive participants. In our experience, we've seen enrollment rates increase 5-10 times after an outbound calling campaign is deployed.

You only have one chance to get your next channel sales incentive off to a strong start. Driving immediate engagement and program enrollments is a critical step in the process.

To learn more about how BI WORLDWIDE can help, visit: BIWORLDWIDE.com or email info@BIWORLDWIDE.com.

