

SPECIAL REPORT

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VENDOR MOVES

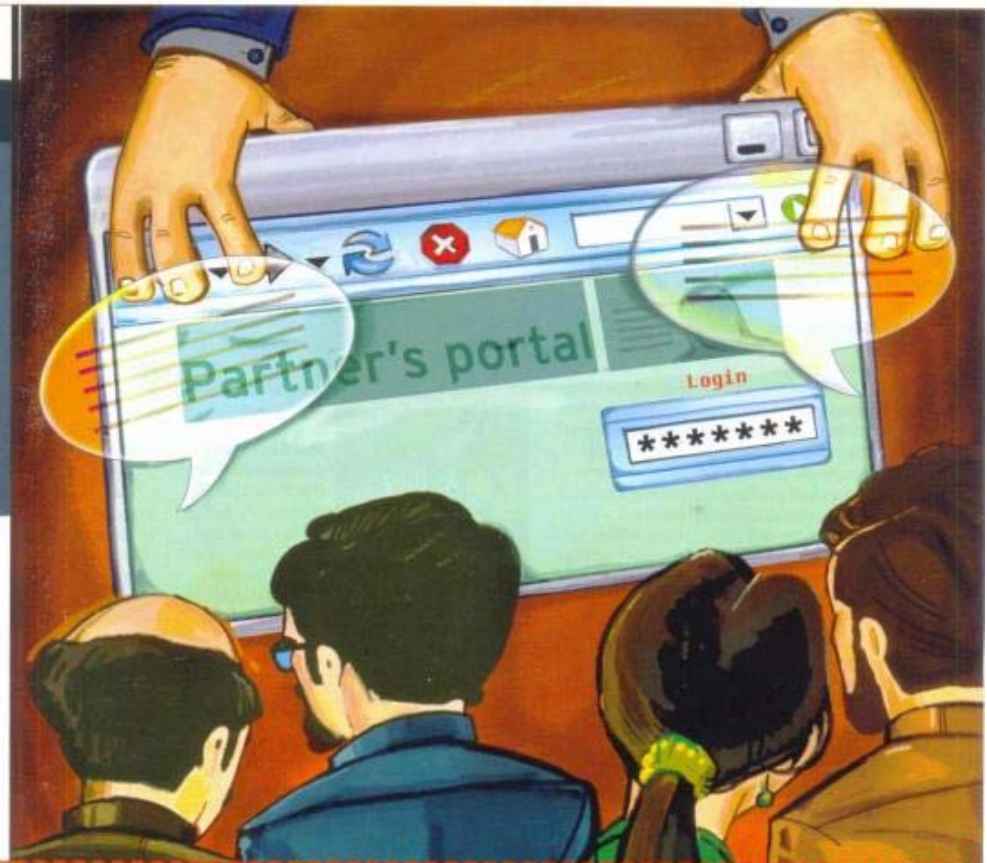
- HP has recently revamped its partner portal, which has gone on to a new, better global platform. The vendor is getting the process ready by next month.
- Sun Microsystems is looking at customization of its partner portal for its partners in India.
- Dax Networks, which introduced, Dax Drona, its partner portal just a year ago, is enthusiastic about making changes to the portal.
- Riverbed is planning to make its portal more interactive through RSS feeds.

Not oft spoken about, partner portals have graduated from being mere add-ons to being an essential part of the partner business strategy for any vendor.

ONE ARE the days when a partner portal just existed as a neglected extension of the partner program. Going by recent developments, it stands as one of the biggest pillars of the changing equation between a company and its partner fraternity. Vendors and their channel partners are increasingly collaborating through the portal and revamp exercises have become the norm. Here is an insight into how some channel-oriented vendors, both emerging and established, are using their channel partner portals to good effect, the unique elements of each and where the future of these dedicated websites is heading.

Cisco: Blending Technology and Collaboration

Cisco seeks to use all the technology tools it has at its disposal through its premium partner portal, Partner View.



SITE FOR DIALOGUE

By Shantheri Mallaya
Illustration: M M Shanith

Touted as a new interactive information site, Partner View promises to change the way it communicates and supports its channel partner community. According to Bejoy Antony, Regional Manager, Channels Cisco India "Partner View serves as a personalized, focused, organized, and centralized site where channels partners can quickly gain access to important news, information, and business tools." Some of the features of Partner View include Bug Watcher, My Forums and Topics, Products Watcher, Technologies Watcher, Service Requests, Security Advisories and Alerts, Technical Support News. Additionally, it also automates important programs and processes like opportunity registration, obtaining marketing funds, demo, NFR requests and contract renewals.

To extend the range, recently Cisco has also rolled out at a global level, Partner Talent Network and Partner Exchange Portal aimed at making talent acquisition and collaboration easier for partners. The new Cisco talent portals promise to be a "sophisticated" blend of web 2.0 technologies. The vendor also plans to include partner space, wherein a virtual booth is set up and this can be accessed by partners in need of complimentary skill-sets. Additionally Cisco has also incorporated a powerful search engine that will allow partners to connect with each other in any part of the world. As an add-on facility to the Partner Talent Network, the partners can also use the services of IT networking recruitment firms at Cisco-negotiated reduced rates. The company has connected Cisco Networking Academy Alumni Association, Partner Talent Network, and Cisco's job channel to allow for easy navigation for candidates looking for job options. Cisco leverages its own video technology over the internet for specific training directly to partners. This includes pushing content on business acumen and sales mastery through Cisco TV and Telepresence.

In addition to this Cisco has the Customized Partner Intelligence (CPI), an e-newsletter which is available to all registered or certified channel partners that complete the annual subscription process. The newsletter is free of charge and specially designed to highlight its most important partner offerings based on a personalized preference profile that each channel partner creates, besides including datasheets, whitepapers, news, etc. Antony emphasized, "Cisco will continue to leverage its present and futuristic set of technologies for the requirement of partners."

More Insights

Microsoft has an entire portal dedicated to the extensive partner network. The Partner Learning Center (PLC) is one of the online tools incorporated into the Microsoft Partner Program Portal (MSPP). The PLC offers training access to all members of the Microsoft Partner Program across Gold, Certified and Registered member levels. The PLC hosts a repository of training courses, both online and offline. Given its easy accessibility and the richness of content the program is extensively used in India.

SAP's Partner Portal, monitored by the Super Administrator of a company, offers the entire package of training, sales, marketing and industry updates to its partners. Signing up for an SAP Passport enables access to the portal without having to enter user id and password multiple times.

IBM's global portal, PartnerWorld, is on par with the industry standard of partner support. Also, MyIBM and new.ibm.com are sites that help partners to create their own personalized pages and links with areas of interest.

Riverbed: Enroute to the Two-Way Mechanism

"Partner Portals are an essential component of the partner business strategy at Riverbed," says Vivek Singh, Country Manager, Riverbed India. The Riverbed Partner portal provides a spectrum of information and services to business partners which streamline operations keep the partner informed and enable scalability and reach for the company.

Riverbed Partner Portal contains all sales, technical and marketing collateral, and is interconnected to a host of internal business processes which, according to the company, enable the partner to conduct business more efficiently and quickly. The portal allows a partner in generating quotes, checking order and delivery status, generating personalized print advertising, direct mailers, EDM's, request and status of joint marketing funds as well as numerous other processes.

Says Singh, "The Partner Portal is a very intuitive and user friendly web-based application which is accessible from any point on the Internet. All applications, including video training and customer references, are designed to minimize data transfers and keep throughput as fast as possible. There are a number of search features which speed up access to desired information as well as translated materials to support various regions within Asia."

Further, Riverbed has three categories of business partners which are established during contract time and are a result of coverage and revenue commitment. Each category has levels of access and capabilities which are commensurate with the joint business needs of both Riverbed and the partner. Feedback, emphasized Singh, is a critical element of ongoing improvement and success and is encouraged and available online and actively

As the Citrix partner base increases, it is imperative that the portal evolves with the business.

Souma Das, Area Vice President, Citrix India



sought after on a periodic basis. Additionally, there are quarterly sales training sessions to all partners where usage, new features and direct feedback are obtained.

On the innovation front, Riverbed seeks to link its internal sales, marketing and support applications, which will facilitate even quicker and more comprehensive access to information and enhance self sufficiency. Most partner portals are essentially "one way" mechanisms to improve business productivity and streamline operations. Riverbed seeks to define and implement a "two way" portal which as an example would link both organizations' sales force, information and databases, customer lead generation applications and financial information. This would greatly increase business opportunities, technical support and enhance customer satisfaction, according to Singh.

Citrix: Managing Channel Growth and Conflict

For Citrix, partner portals are an important communication tool that helps keep partners up to date on all the latest product information. According to Souma Das, Area Vice President, Citrix India, it is a one-stop resource for partners to support their sales, marketing and technical needs, and helps them be self-sufficient. "This is an important byproduct of a partner portal as it frees up resources to focus on their job which is ultimately to help the channel sell and grow their business," he adds.

The Citrix portal, which is called MyCitrix enables partners to register sales leads, request technical support, receive updates on sales and technical

Portal Talk: Giant Strides by U S Service Providers

Wholesale Carrier Services	Launched the PartnerNet quoting, contracting and provisioning tool. The portal has four modules: TeleQuote, Contract Manager, OrderView and Revenue Manager, providing Web-based, licensed access to WCS's 80 carriers and 130 services via one consolidated contract and billing platform.
AireSpring	Recently updated its AGENT S.T.A.R. online portal system with the ability to track order status and the provisioning process.
TNCI	The TNCI Agent Access online portal added Workflow last year, designed to let agents and subagents track orders by customer and product throughout the TNCI system.
Bandwidth.com	Bandwidth.com's portal offers a pricing engine for several backbone providers, installation tracking, online realtime CDRs and other information. But, it also makes an effort to keep the agents in touch with the human face of the company.
New Edge Networks	The revamped portal has a drag-and-drop toolbar and allows users to drop any page into it for easy and customized access to the information they need.

SOURCE: PRIMEPLUS

training and maintenance programs, as well as download sales and marketing tools to help them sell a Citrix solution. Content is driven from the company corporate head office, which is then filtered through the regional teams for redevelopment based on Citrix's go-to-market strategies. Observes Das, "We find that this works best, for example in certain more mature markets such as Australia or New Zealand we will emphasize certain products over others, as opposed to say a hot growth market such as India or China. We've also got to contend with the different language localization that has to occur for a site to be truly local."

Citrix has also linked tools such as lead registration into Salesforce.com and Vantive to ensure the visibility of the sales pipeline. The portal also enables the company to track and monitor these items so that there is a clear grip over where the business heads. Another key area-channel conflict is ably managed by the company through Advisor Rewards, a program which allows partners to be able to register deals which helps them to preserve their margin by having partners value sell. This prevents other partners from cutting price at the last minute to win the deal. Partners are able to register leads and forecast their pipeline all in the one tool which helps them manage their deals, and at the same time allows us to manage our forecasts.

Das stated, "We run surveys to get a feel for what's working and what isn't

and then plan the changes accordingly. As Citrix starts to grow its number of solutions, there's this reality that our original partner base will change. We're starting to see a greater mix of partners beyond the VARs we've traditionally had which means our partner portal is going to have to evolve with the business."

Keen on introducing new features, Citrix is looking at introducing RSS Feeds to help increase the communication and visibility of content updates to MyCitrix and hopes to move to more community style partner portals with the introduction of blogs, on-demand support, and peer-to-peer partner support in the future.

Websense: Forum for Learning

Security vendor, Websense has about 80 active partners across India. Jyoti Prakash, Channel Manager-SAARC, Websense remarks, "It is a challenge to engage with them efficiently on a one to one basis. It would be highly productive and helpful to have an effective portal to provide the partners with all the information required, like the data sheet of all the product lines, collaterals, the comparison sheets, third party analyst reports etc that can be shared with the partners."

Interestingly, Websense also has defined a separate learning section on its portal known as the Websense University, which is an exhaustive repository of all relevant information, schedules, product updates, etc. Access



“A Portal is essentially a mission-critical application to evangelize and conduct business.

Sudhir Nayar, Director Partner Sales, Sun Microsystems India

to the portal is based on the levels of partnership- Silver, Gold or Platinum. Added Prakash, "Every fortnightly we do review meetings with most of the partners we have. In these review meetings, we discuss the deal registration that they have done and collect their inputs." Citrix also takes inputs on what kind of session partners have attended, additional modules they would like to have added on the portal so as to download it, what training or redesigning they would require.

"These inputs are collected and sent to our corporate.", said Prakash.

Online training apart, the company has now started online certification on Websense Hosted Security through its partner portal, and is keeping the door open on many more innovations in the future to maximize portal utilization.

EMC: Creating Indispensability

For EMC, having a partner portal is no longer a matter of choice than a matter of necessity. The storage vendor believes that its Velocity Partner Program can be run efficiently through its key portals "Power Link", "Channel Express" and "Channel Incentive Micro Site"

Power Link provides online access to a range of tools and resources to help answer partner's questions. It connects directly with EMC's worldwide community of experts, engineers and support professionals, enabling partners to avoid problems and resolve issues quickly. Channel Express is an online configuration, price, quote and order system. This application is part of an EMC initiative to provide partners with a set of tools and services to simplify the experience of doing business with EMC. "This tool, developed in conjunction with partners, also ensures that end-user customers are getting the right solution/product for their business needs, in the most efficient manner and at the most competitive price," says Sonik Porwal, Director-Channel & Strategic Alliances, EMC India & SAARC.

This vendor sees discussion

boards, blogs and podcasts being used to communicate to partners as a way to the future.

HP: Transcending to the Single Window Concept

For a huge conglomerate like HP, the partner portal is a secure website designed specifically for channel partners, in simple terms it's a centralized HP resource. Says Girish Talwar, Partner Portal Manager, HP India, "The portal provides everything a partner would need to know for selling, marketing and supporting HP products and services. The portal gives the power to be proactive, productive and most importantly profitable; using it couldn't be simpler or safer."

The HP Partner Portal is reportedly a one-stop access to HP resources and services, the latest HP news and sales tools and management information one that cannot be found anywhere else. Partners can find resources such as product catalogues, up-sell guides and training programs that help them stay abreast with the latest technology and offer it to their customers.

The HP Partner Portal gives reseller partners the ability to view their employees' registration and access rights via the Partner Portal Administrator (PPA). A PPA is selected from the partner company to manage employees' access to the portal, also to intimate him on which of his employees have access to the site and what tools they can transact on. Thus, the partner can be sure that the HP information tailored to his company stays exclusively to his current employees and confidential.

Some of the key features of the portal are configuration tools for PC's, notebooks, news and events, promotions, product catalogue, pricing, programs, education & certification and Reporting. So what is new that should keep partners interested? Talwar replied, "Well, The partner portal has just moved to a new global platform, its better in performance and more user friendly, within three months of

What do Partners Think?

Girish Madhavan, CEO, Quadrel Systems, Chennai

Partner portals have now become a vital part of the business strategy. They can be very effective, but I notice that there is a need to sensitize the workforce on how to maximize its use. This is because other than the top 10-15 people in Quadrel, not too many others are making a move to access the portal. I find that there are value-adds in a partner portal. The case studies made available to us become our pitching point to our prospective and existing customers. Portals like the HP Partner Portal, which we use often, throw up a weekly performance card and give us a clear idea of our quarterly targets, and where we stand. Lately portals are also very creatively and attractively designed. We also get quick information on things that non-members do not have access to.

Ajit K Jha, CEO, Zephyr Info Solutions, New Delhi

A portal is one way of making the partners participate in a community forum. It gives us an opportunity to play a greater role in the business strategy, and interact with the vendor on a more involved basis. Vendors have become very aggressive in introducing new tools and features on their portals. Zephyr employees access portals such as IBM and EMC on an hourly basis and get their queries answered promptly. Initially there was some hesitation as to whether the vendors would reply back, but things seem to be working fine. Portals are also centers of learning, training and certification. However, I still feel that certain commercial aspects of business can be emphasized on such as the best price; vendors give an indicative price and bundling opportunities, and this is a standard practice of almost all OEMs. So, it is time certain enhancements and differentiators are made in this direction.

upgrading it we are already working on the next version that will be updated by July 2008.”

HP envisages that its portal would act as a “single window” for its partners in the days to come.

Sun Microsystems: Niche Evangelism

A partner portal is a given for a company like Sun, opined Sudhir Nayar, Director Partner Sales, Sun Microsystems India. Understandably so, what with over 20,000 partners across the globe, the vendor’s partner portal, Mysun, tightly controls content and professes to be a “one-stop-shop” for its partners. The portal is accessed by partners through the ‘manager of resources’, who is an employee of the partner, who monitors the traffic of the portal from his company.

Apart from certification and news updates, Sun has also started introduced its Loyalty Program online and linked it to Mysun. Through this, a program that was hitherto offline enables partners to participate and redeem points online. Another development is the status of the online examinations that a partner takes; he can now view the immediate status of these certifications online.

Recently, as a part of its regular quarterly exercise, the vendor has undertaken a comprehensive revamp of its internal IT tools and has integrated its portal into it. Further, the company is creating web tools to step up interaction –shared space for chatting, blogs, posting of partner experiences etc. Nayar said, “We are not into social networking. A portal is a mission critical application through which we are evangelizing and conducting business. If a partner wants to raise a question, he has the right to do so.”

What is the priority for Mysun in the next six months? Vinita Srivalsan, National Manager-Partner Enablement, Sun India, answered, “Customizing more content for partners in India.”

The company has a full fledged team working towards driving localized content.

Way Ahead

As the portal is becoming the hotbed of action in the channel business space, more money and time would be invested in making it as attractive and as effective for partners. But, at the end of day, what would drive the success of a portal would be the genuine earnestness of the vendor in making the platform easier for his partner. ▀

