THE VALUE IN WORKING WITH A VALUE-ADD PARTNER

Today’s ever-changing technologies require a deep bench of expertise, leading many IT teams to rely on value-added resellers to ensure success.

No one has to tell a CIO that these are challenging times. Cloud computing, ubiquitous mobility, data center optimization and other game-changing and disruptive technologies are pushing many IT chiefs to rethink and transform their organizational roadmaps.

The IT department then faces the daunting task of orchestrating the review and implementation of multiple innovations simultaneously. For some IT managers, this dynamic environment convinces them that there are more reasons than ever to work closely with already trusted resources — their solution partners.

Typically, the value-added reseller or VAR is defined as an organization that adds customization, features or services to a vendor’s existing product line. The entity then resells an integrated product or turn-key solution – hence the term value-add. In today’s marketplace, with its sticky budgets and reduced staffs, added value is the thing IT decision-makers are looking for.

Where to Turn for Help

“Disruptive technologies make IT managers ask who is best to turn to for help, and that often means someone with an unbiased opinion who doesn’t represent a particular manufacturer,” says Robert Faletra, chief technology officer at UBM Channel, a provider of channel-focused research, consulting, events and media for the technology industry. “That’s why value-added resellers and system integrators tend to see an uptick in these types of environments.”

In addition to VARs and systems integrators, these technology specialists may be known by many other names, such as value-added partners, direct-market resellers (DMRs) or, as often as not, “the channel.” Each has a slightly different approach to serving IT decision-makers.

Still, what they all have in common is a combination of expertise and a big-picture view of available technologies, along with insights into who are today’s top original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) and knowledge about how technology pieces from multiple vendors best fit together into a cohesive whole.

“Increasingly, internal IT organizations are looking to the channel to do all the integration required for today’s solutions,” Faletra says. “This is especially important for CIOs who are evolving to become partners with line-of-operations managers and the C-level suite to help solve bigger problems.”

Solution providers may deliver this expertise in a variety of ways. Many design and build one-off solutions that address a unique operational challenge or opportunity for an individual client. Others use an existing solution as a
foundation and then tailor it to fulfill a need common among organizations within a particular industry. Another approach is to provide managed services, a model where customers pay subscription fees for IT services fully maintained and delivered by the partner.

The latest industry research shows that IT buyers understand the value of these services. A recent study by the research, report and market analysis firm NPD Group found that sales through U.S. distributors and commercial resellers in 2012 totaled approximately $58.5 billion.

“It’s a great time for CIOs because they have many options for acquiring technology, including from VARs and DMRs,” says Ian Hamilton, senior vice president of commercial technology at NPD. “CIOs can evaluate their various options to create the right solutions for their companies.”

Expert Advice

The services of an experienced solution provider can benefit IT managers in six important ways:

1. Help identify the best solution available to meet a particular operational requirement. Hamilton says that NPD’s surveys of CIOs show a keen interest in working with partners that can offer expertise in a particular type of solution or vertical market. In short, VARs offer specialization. And likely much more than most entities have in-house.

2. Pull together the optimal mix of components from multiple vendors. “The job of the channel is to solve a customer’s problem, not push any one manufacturer’s solution,” Faletra points out. “They’re out in the market looking at best practices to provide an unbiased approach for customers.”

3. Provide the expertise and integration “glue” to assure all the pieces integrate together effectively. “If you need to source a solution from multiple vendors and get all of the pieces to work together seamlessly, a solution provider has the experience to make that happen,” Faletra adds.

4. Deliver ongoing maintenance and support to keep the solution running as planned and be a single point of contact if problems arise. By acting as a central source, value-added partners mitigate finger pointing among vendors that can delay the resolution of issues.

5. Keep customers abreast of the latest technology innovations and their potential benefits. In today’s quickly changing IT market, CIOs can’t be expected to develop in-depth knowledge about every complex area. Solution providers offer access to an array of experts covering numerous technical areas and product offerings. These on-call experts then serve as an extension of the internal IT team.

6. Volume buying power with OEMs can result in deals that customers might not be able to negotiate on their own. Solution providers offer economies of scale allowing customers to take advantage of vendor discounts and incentives in making economical hardware and software purchases.

Information Power

The latest technologies are doing more than reshaping offices and data centers. They’re making it easier than ever for IT decision-makers to access in-depth information when specifying solutions.

Savvy solution providers are using these communication tools to support their customers. This means IT buyers can begin their research long before they actually engage with technical representatives at VARs.

CDW Offerings

CDW makes detailed technology information readily available at its main website, CDW.com. A wide selection of online tools help buyers research products, compare solutions and consult case studies and guides detailing implementation best practices.

“There’s so much that CIOs must understand today,” says Arleen Goldberg, CDW’s senior manager of e-commerce publishing and communications. “They need a reliable

Almost three-quarters of the $58.5 billion in sales by U.S. distributors and commercial resellers in 2012 came from five technology categories: computers and servers, consumables, networking equipment, software and storage products.
and knowledgeable resource that can help them in these efforts.”

The Solutions and Services section, CDW.com/solutions, is one example of the important information available on the CDW website. “The benefits are two–fold: IT buyers can leverage the expertise on the site to do research about the solutions that CDW offers across an array of important areas, including data center optimization, mobility and networking,” Goldberg says. “Second, they can work with a solution architect and account manager to craft the best solution using CDW and the top solutions providers that CDW partners with.”

In addition, a content area devoted to data center solutions provides details about data backup processes that ensure information security and restoration. A client virtualization section discusses how this strategy can enable high availability and disaster recovery. An extensive section on converged architectures explains how a single, optimized solution can make data centers more resilient.

Because cloud computing is so important to IT strategies today, the CDW site devotes significant coverage to clearly defining clouds so IT managers can accurately assess the computing model’s potential. For example, CDW has well–established partnerships with top cloud providers, and CDW’s cloud specialists work with customers to conduct vendor evaluations and proof of concepts, along with providing deployment and migration services for cloud solutions.

The site details how software as a service (SaaS) can reduce costly infrastructure expenses associated with traditional on–premises applications. Visitors also will learn how organizations are utilizing highly mobile SaaS applications to increase collaboration and productivity, and are benefitting from the predictable costs and licensing of the SaaS subscription model.

Other cloud solutions covered on the site include infrastructure as a service (IaaS) and platform as a service (PaaS).

Similar content explores power and cooling, server virtualization, and storage management and virtualization. Other topics include mobile security, compliance, digital signage, technology solutions using Apple products and contact center solutions.

**Cool Tools**

CIOs also have access to a variety of interactive tools in the CDW Account Center, where they can learn about the breadth of available resources. This includes CDW Hardware Asset Management, a tool that maintains an accurate, up–to–date inventory of purchases to help IT managers with budgeting, to avoid duplicate purchases, to plan for refreshes and upgrades, and to standardize the products the organization uses. Related Software Management tools help IT managers find, download, activate and manage software licenses.

Similarly, IT buyers can tap into product finder tools, such as CDW’s Server Advisor, which walks visitors through a short series of questions and then offers specific recommendations based on the input.

The CDW Demo Labs, CDW.com/demolabs, provide another vital resource. They address the steady onslaught of changes in key technology areas, such as cloud computing, data–center convergence, client computing and mobility. Solutions based on these technologies frequently require integration with other platforms, which makes it difficult for organizations to test new hardware and software solutions in their own IT environments.

CDW’s Technology Experience Center (TEC) offers firsthand experience with solutions being considered prior to investing any funds. IT managers can visit the TEC in person or virtually to see how integrated solutions work in a real environment, run side–by–side comparisons of alternative solutions and explore how the latest innovations can help achieve the organization’s goals.

**Service on Demand**

Other services explained on the site include CDW’s range of managed services, including managed print services. In addition, CDW’s configuration services load software on new PCs, tweak systems to conform to network standards and when necessary repackage defective equipment to return to the technology provider. This means IT managers receive fully configured and bug–free technology solutions that are ready to plug into their production environments.

To help customers improve asset

Robert Faletra, CTO, UBM Channel
management once devices arrive onsite, CDW also provides asset tagging. The tags are applied at the configuration center before CDW ships the products. These tags provide an avenue for downloading product information for inclusion in asset management systems and for monitoring purchases for integration with other technologies in use.

CDW also performs eProcurement integration, which enables organizations to create internal product catalogs of approved technologies that employees access when they need to acquire new hardware and software.

To help IT managers stay abreast of the latest best practices, the CDW Media Library publishes a wide range of webinars, white papers, articles, case studies and technology spotlights devoted to today’s most important technologies. There’s even a mobile app that allows for perusing CDW products and making purchases via the Apple iPhone, iPad and iPod Touch, as well as Android devices.

Find the Right Fit
Solution providers have a lot to offer. But how can CIOs and technology decision-makers find the best partner for their IT needs?

Experts advise organizations to consider a number of factors. First, look for solution providers that not only have expertise in core technologies but who have experience or can partner with appropriate firms for specific types of implementations, such as cloud computing or unified communications, for example.

“Multivendor strategies are very important. Organizations clearly need this for today’s solutions,” Hamilton says. “But make sure the partner isn’t just ‘all things to all people.’ It should also offer capabilities to deal with multiple vendors across different platforms, software, services and hardware.”

Finally, organizations with facilities in multiple regions of the country should look for solution partners with comprehensive services. That means being able to handle national accounts through a central headquarters that serves as a single point of contact, as well as staffing technical and sales representatives in individual regions of the country who can provide local service and develop ongoing relationships with clients.

A CLEAR VALUE PROPOSITION
Value-added resellers, direct-marketing resellers and systems integrators offer a clear value proposition for organizations looking for tailored IT solutions that can deliver a clear return on investment.

But are there risks to working with solution providers? The widespread acceptance of value-added partners shows that most IT departments today see rewards rather than risks when it comes to working with this key industry segment.

An early and now discounted criticism of the industry was that solution providers are essentially “middlemen” that add to the costs of hardware and software without providing a valuable service. Industry observers say this view is now discounted by knowledgeable IT industry insiders.

“I just don’t see that attitude out there,” says Robert Faletra, chief technology officer at UBM Channel, a provider of tech industry research, consulting and events. “Look at it this way: If you have a number of different vendors all involved with the solution, whose fault is it if something’s not working? More often, we’re seeing internal IT organizations looking to the channel to do all the integration.”

As noted, VARs can add value in a large number of ways. Therefore, it just makes sense for an organization to leverage highly trained, specialized talent. As a result, they will spend more effectively and operate more efficiently.

DISCOVER HOW CDW OFFERS UNBIASED, VENDOR–NEUTRAL AND VALUE–ADDED PRODUCTS AND SERVICES TO MEET YOUR SPECIFIC I.T. NEEDS.