



## **Building Better IT Vendor Relationships**

*Partnerships Can be Profitable For Both Buyers and Sellers*

By Rick Ludolph, President, Productive Solutions LLC

We regularly hear tech vendors speak about 'partnering' with customers to achieve great things. This was certainly the case at our recent Fashion-IT seminar series at Technology Solutions Miami where numerous fashion industry leaders praised IT vendors for playing pivotal roles in the success of their strategic business initiatives. While it is clear that many companies are developing strong working relationships with solution providers, sometimes the result is more of a love-hate relationship than a real partnership. Customer surveys consistently reveal that buyers lack trust and satisfaction with their IT vendors. But tech buyers must also shoulder some of the responsibility for less than desired results.

Before addressing why this happens, we should first identify the importance of strong IT vendor relationships. While old-school buyers seemed to view vendor partnering simply as code for demanding lower prices and better terms, today's savvy business leaders recognize that they need trustworthy and effective partners to help them run their businesses. Just as we have seen the shift to more collaborative garment sourcing relationships, smart fashion companies know that getting the most out of technology is essential to success – especially in these tough times. Building tighter relationships with vendors that shoot straight and pay attention to your needs will help you maximize the savings and improvements from your investments.

What then prevents us from forming stronger relationships? Tech vendors, as a whole, can disappoint their clients with annoying and irresponsible business practices. In a recent Information Week Analytics survey of 345 IT professionals, respondents ranked the following practices as those that vendors most need to stop: 1) "promising capabilities that aren't there", 2) "misrepresenting integration issues", and 3) "low-balling deployment time and complexity". They further advised vendors to start: 1) "being up front about how their products meet my requirements", 2) "take time to understand my requirements", and 3) "get someone on the phone that knows what they are talking about". As for the qualities most desired in technology vendors: 1) capable tech support, 2) product reliability, and 3) knowledgeable professional services teams and honest pre-sales engagements.

But tech buyers also carry a big chunk of the responsibility for a successful partnership. This starts with bringing the right people to sales presentations and asking more relevant and in-depth questions before purchasing. Many IT projects are handicapped by the failure of the buyers to effectively understand and communicate their own requirements. And, sadly, many decision makers simply opt for products that they have used at other companies or heard about from their peers. Indeed, the biggest challenge for buyers may be to allocate the proper resources to effectively evaluate and implement new solutions.

Even with all of these challenges, it is possible and worth the effort to develop strong working relationships. Vendors need to actively listen to customers' needs and be candid about the fit of their technology. This approach can help build the trust required to form a true partnership. Buyers need to do their homework when investigating products and take the time necessary to properly plan and implement new technology. This may well mean augmenting internal teams with short-term outside expertise that can help ask the right questions and identify needs in order to avoid selection of a poor fitting product or vendor.

The best results are achieved when the vendor listens and is straightforward with customers that conduct a competent buying and implementation process. Of course, buyers and sellers will always clash over time, money, and technology. But strong, highly productive vendor relationships are possible – and profitable for both parties.

**Productive Solutions, LLC is a boutique consulting services firm specializing in the fashion industry's concept-to-delivery processes and enabling technologies. It brings a uniquely focused and personalized approach to an international client base of retailers, brands, manufacturers and vendors. Contact Rick Ludolph at [r.ludolph@productivesol.com](mailto:r.ludolph@productivesol.com) or visit [www.productivesol.com](http://www.productivesol.com).**