THE ACE FRAMEWORK

STACKING THE DECK

Partner Marketing in the Age of AI

Preview and Introduction

Paul Cunningham

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The ACE Framework

Three lenses, one engine, four aces

Why this book exists

The argument for investing in B2B technology partner ecosystems no longer needs to be made. Channel partners delivered 73% of worldwide IT spending in 2024, a market worth nearly $5 trillion. Microsoft generates 95% of its commercial revenue through its partner network; Cisco routes 90% of its total bookings through reseller partners. Companies with mature partner programmes grow at twice the rate of those without structured channel strategies. The structural case for the indirect channel is proven.

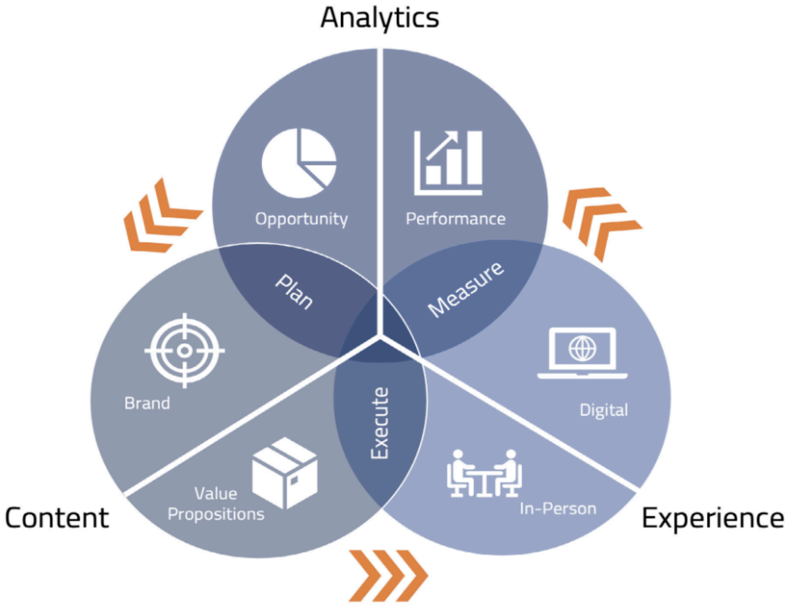
A different, more uncomfortable question has taken its place: not whether to build a partner ecosystem, but how to build one that works. Because the evidence suggests many do not. Research from Omdia, surveying 25,000 channel partners globally in early 2026, found that 81% expect to grow below the industry rate of 10.2% and 30% are bracing for double-digit revenue declines. The gap between the structural importance of the channel and the commercial performance of most channel programmes is not a market problem. It is a design and execution problem.

The root cause is almost always the same: vendors treat their partner ecosystem as a monolithic group rather than a precision-segmented portfolio. They create uniform incentives, standardised content, and one-size-fits-all enablement, then wonder why most partners fail to generate meaningful revenue. Research from AchieveUnite confirms what practitioners have long suspected: programmes with clearly differentiated partner tiers, role-specific enablement pathways, and personalised engagement consistently outperform generic frameworks by a factor of three to four in partner engagement rates. The shift from managing partners to engineering partner ecosystems is the defining capability gap between high-performing and average channel organisations.

This book is designed to close that gap. It provides a systematic framework, ACE, for building and executing partner marketing that compounds results over time. More specifically, it provides a model for how marketing leaders with different strengths and orientations can collaborate to achieve goals that none could reach alone.

The ACE framework

FIGURE 0.1



The framework organises partner marketing around three interconnected lenses that together support a continuous cycle of planning, execution, and improvement.

Analytics is the foundation: understanding opportunity and measuring performance. It covers market analysis, customer research, competitive intelligence, and measurement. Analytics answers two questions: Where should we play? How are we doing?

Content builds identity and articulates value. It encompasses brand strategy, positioning, messaging, and value proposition development. Content answers: Who are we? Why should customers choose us?

Experience delivers engagement across touchpoints, in-person moments that build relationship depth, and digital surfaces that create scale and reach. Experience answers: How do we reach and engage our audiences?

At the centre sits the **Execution Engine**: Plan, Execute, Measure. This continuous cycle is where strategy is transformed into results, and from there, into improved strategy. Without it, the three lenses remain aspirations.

> ***The framework flows anticlockwise: from Analytics (understanding the market) through Content (establishing identity and value) to Experience (delivering engagement) and back to Analytics through the Execution Engine's measurement loop. Each pillar informs the next; none functions in isolation.***

The four ACE marketing leadership archetypes

FIGURE 0.2

The four ACE leadership archetypes

Not job titles but orientations — how leaders think, what they prioritise, and where they create the most value. Always in suit order.

	Brand ♥	Community ♣	Technology ♠	Value Proposition ♦
DOMAIN	Identity & expression	Relationships & ecosystems	Systems & intelligence	Differentiation & proof
CORE QUESTION	Who are we?	Who is with us?	What do we know?	Why us?
PRIMARY VALUE	Distinctiveness	Connection	Efficiency	Clarity

Effective partner marketing requires multiple perspectives working in concert. No single leader typically commands the full range of skills the task demands. Marketing excellence emerges from the collaboration of four distinct archetypes, each bringing essential and complementary strengths, while also carrying characteristic blind spots that the others help to fill in.

These archetypes, represented by the four Aces of a card deck, are not job titles but orientations. They describe how marketing leaders naturally think, what they instinctively prioritise, and where they create the most value. The four suits give the framework its name; but hopefully, they make its central insight portable and memorable.

♥ The Brand Leader

The guardian of identity. Drawn to questions of meaning, distinctiveness, and emotional resonance, the Brand Leader believes brands win by being remembered, and brands are remembered because they stand for something distinct. They own brand strategy, visual identity, creative direction, and brand governance. Their gift is coherence; their characteristic risk is pursuing aesthetic perfection at the expense of execution speed, and sometimes resistance to measurement that makes brand investment difficult to justify.

♣ The Community Leader

The architect of ecosystems. Drawn to relationships, networks, and the amplification that communities of aligned interests create, the Community Leader understands that very few organisations succeed alone. Partners extend reach, communities create advocacy, and ecosystems multiply impact. They own partner programmes, community strategy, events, and ecosystem development. Their gift is relational intelligence; their risk is prioritising partner convenience over brand consistency and commercial discipline.

♠ The Technology Leader

The builder of platforms. Drawn to infrastructure, data, and the operational machinery that enables scalable marketing execution, the Technology Leader believes sustainable success requires repeatable, scalable processes rather than individual heroics. They own marketing technology, analytics, and marketing operations. Their gift is the infrastructure that allows quality to compound; their risk is over-systematising at the expense of the human dimension that partner relationships require.

♦ The Value Proposition Leader

The articulator of value. Drawn to the fundamental question of why customers should choose one offering over another, the Value Proposition Leader believes most companies fail not because they fail to create value, but because they fail to communicate it clearly. They own messaging strategy, competitive positioning, and sales enablement. Their gift is commercial precision; their risk is pursuing rational clarity at the expense of emotional resonance.

Identifying your primary archetype

What kind of Partner Marketeer are you? Most leaders embody one primary archetype while demonstrating secondary characteristics of one or two others. Understanding your primary archetype helps you leverage your natural strengths, anticipate your blind spots, and collaborate more effectively with those who see the world differently.

♥ You may be a Brand Leader if you:

- naturally notice design and creative quality before anything else
- think in stories and emotional connection, not features or figures
- are frustrated by brand inconsistency and generic visual execution
- value distinctiveness over efficiency
- care deeply about how things look and feel across every touchpoint

♣ You may be a Community Leader if you:

- naturally build relationships and networks wherever you find yourself
- think in terms of partnerships, leverage, and ecosystem dynamics
- are energised by events, gatherings, and facilitated conversation
- value long-term relationships over short-term transactions

- care deeply about partner and customer success as ends in themselves

♠ You may be a Technology Leader if you:

- naturally see systems and processes where others see activities
- think in terms of data, measurement, and operational models
- are frustrated by inefficiency, inconsistency, and unmeasured effort
- value scalability and repeatability over customisation
- care deeply about operational excellence and continuous improvement

♦ You may be a Value Proposition Leader if you:

- naturally focus on why customers should care, not just what you offer
- think in terms of differentiation, competitive positioning, and proof
- are frustrated by vague claims, weak messaging, and unsubstantiated assertions
- value clarity over creativity when the two are in tension
- care deeply about sales effectiveness and commercial credibility

Most leaders sit closest to one archetype *and* draw on a secondary orientation when pressure requires it. Knowing which is your primary, and which emerges under pressure, is among the most practically useful forms of professional self-knowledge available to a marketing leader.

Are ACEs always high?

Throughout this book, the four archetypes are described as marketing 'leaders'. It is worth being precise about what that word means, and what it does not.

It does not mean authority. It does not mean seniority, job title, team size, years of experience, or position in an org chart. The Brand Leader is not the person with 'Brand' in their job title. The Technology Leader is not necessarily the most senior technologist in the room. The Community Leader may be two years into their career, managing a single partner programme in a single market. The Value Proposition Leader may be a product marketer who has never held a management role and does not want one.

Leadership, as the word is used here, describes something more useful: the orientation from which someone naturally approaches a challenge, the instinct they reach for first, the dimension of a problem they see most clearly. This is not a function of how long someone has been doing the job. It is a function of how they are wired. The most junior person in a partner marketing team can lead from the Community archetype, building relationships, reading the ecosystem, designing the experience that brings people together, in ways that a senior CMO with a different orientation may never quite manage, regardless of title.

The ACE Framework is designed to be as useful to someone starting out in partner marketing as to a veteran channel CMO. The newcomer's archetype is not a consolation prize until they accumulate enough experience to become a 'real' leader. It is their primary contribution to the team right now, and the team is weaker without it. The CMO who has been running partner programmes for twenty years is not exempt from the framework's disciplines; if anything, long tenure in a single archetype orientation is the condition most likely to produce the blind spots the framework is trying to correct.

> ***The ACE Framework is not a hierarchy of seniority. It is a map of complementary perspectives. Every archetype is necessary. None is sufficient alone.***

In most card games, the ace holds a peculiar position: it can be played as the highest card in the deck or the lowest, depending on the game, the hand, and the moment. It is both one and fourteen. In some variants, a hand built around low aces beats a hand built around high ones. The value of the card is not fixed, it is contextual, determined by what surrounds it.

The four ACE archetypes work the same way. The Brand Leader who leads with identity and emotional precision is indispensable in a brand-building context and potentially counterproductive in a rapid-execution sprint where the team needs operational discipline first. The Technology Leader who excels at building measurement infrastructure may be the most valuable person in the room during a programme redesign but the least valuable during an executive event that succeeds or fails on engagement. Played in isolation, any archetype reaches the limit of its own perspective. Played in the right combination, they make a winning hand.

That combination is the point of the framework. Not to identify which archetype is superior, but to ensure all four are present in the room, in whatever form, whatever seniority, whatever corner of the organisation they happen to occupy. The hand that wins is not the one with the highest single card. It is the one dealt with the full range of values working together.

Reading your context: market stage, company stage, and partnership maturity

FIGURE 0.3

The context diagnostic — three variables

No single variable determines your starting point. Read all three together to know which archetype capability is most urgently required first.

01

Market stage

Where is your category in its development? Category creation, growth, competitive maturity, or disruption.

02

Company & channel stage

How far along the journey from direct sales to a compounding partner ecosystem? Pre-channel to established.

03

Partnership model maturity

How intentionally designed is the programme? Age is not maturity — structure and intentionality are.

The ACE Framework is universal. Its four pillars apply whether you are a startup with three channel partners or a global technology vendor with four thousand. The archetypes describe orientations that exist in every marketing organisation regardless of size, sector, or strategy.

The framework does not apply equally in every context. The archetype you need most urgently, the pillar most likely to be your weakest point, and the tensions most likely to consume your team's energy, all shift depending on where you are. A partner programme that is three months old faces structurally different problems from one that is ten years old. A technology vendor trying to create a new market category is in a different position from one defending market share in a mature one. The frameworks in this book are the same; the diagnosis that determines where to begin is yours to make.

Three variables shape that diagnosis. Understanding where you sit on each of them- market stage, company and channel stage, and partnership model maturity- allows you to read the chapters ahead as a practitioner rather than as a student. Not just to think 'this is interesting' but 'this is where I am, and this is what I need to act on first.'

Market stage: where is your category in its development?

FIGURE 0.4

Market stage → archetype priority

The stage of your category is the single most powerful variable in determining which capabilities are most urgently required.

Market stage	The partner marketing challenge	Priority
Category creation	Persuade partners the category is real. Make the economic case before recruitment begins.	♦ Value Proposition ♥ Brand
Growth & expansion	Build the ecosystem at speed — visibly more attractive than competitors', without sacrificing quality.	♣ Community ♠ Technology
Competitive maturity	Deepen the partners you already have — brand and value-proposition precision matter more at feature parity.	♦ Value Proposition ♥ Brand
Disruption & transition	Redesign the architecture for a market reshaped by AI or new competitors. Yesterday's model produces diminishing returns.	♠ Technology ♦ Value Proposition

The stage of your market category is perhaps the most powerful single variable in determining which archetype capabilities are most urgently required. A technology category in its infancy needs completely different partner marketing investment from one in which three vendors have divided the market between them and the primary competition is for share rather than category ownership.

Company and channel stage: where are you in building your channel?

Market stage describes the environment. Company and channel stage describes your position within it, specifically, how far you are along the journey from a business that sells directly to one that generates compounding commercial returns from a well-designed partner ecosystem.

These are not always aligned. A company can be a mature business in a growth market and still have an incipient channel. A startup can enter a mature market with a more sophisticated partner programme than incumbents with decades of channel history. The variable is not company age or size, it is the intentionality and maturity of the channel motion specifically.

FIGURE 0.5

Company & channel stage, the four stages of building a channel

Market stage describes the environment; channel stage describes your position within it. Age is not maturity, what matters is the intentionality of the channel motion, which moves the archetype priority up the ladder.

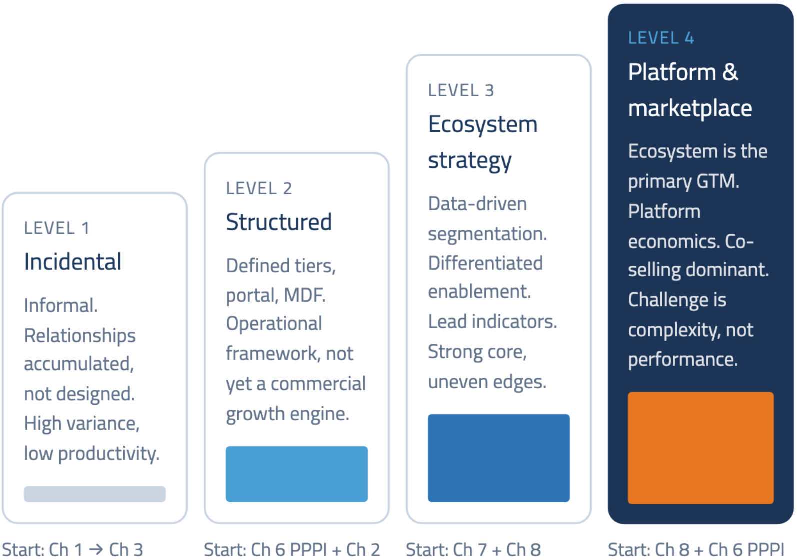
STAGE 1 · DIRECT ONLY **Pre-channel** No formal programme	No partner value proposition exists yet; brand, messaging and commercial model are built for direct sales. Rebuild these foundations for a partner audience before designing a programme. Priority ♦ Value Proposition · ♥ Brand
STAGE 2 · 1–3 YEARS **Early channel** First cohort transacting	Programme launched, but tiers, onboarding and governance are not yet consistent. Make the first cohort productive before scaling, systems built for thirty partners will not survive three hundred. Priority ♠ Technology · ♣ Community
STAGE 3 · 3–10 YEARS **Scaling channel** Channel revenue meaningful	The task is operating at scale without relationship quality deteriorating as headcount grows. Systematise so quality is structural, not personal; community architecture replaces individual account management. Priority ♣ Community · ♠ Technology
STAGE 4 · 10+ YEARS **Established channel** Significant revenue engine	A major revenue engine with its own momentum. Interrogate whether what was built still fits today's market, long-established programmes accumulate assumptions that stop being examined. Start with the PPPI diagnostic (Chapter 6). Priority All four archetypes, led by the lowest-scoring PPPI lead-measure dimension.

Partnership model maturity: how sophisticated is your programme design?

FIGURE 0.6

Partnership model maturity — four levels

Many long-established programmes score lower than younger ones built with intentionality. The ladder tells you where to start in the book.



The third variable is distinct from how long you have been running a partner programme. It describes how intentionally designed that programme is, whether it is built around a deliberate understanding of partner economics, partner types, and the specific behaviours you need the programme to drive, or whether it has accumulated organically over time without that architecture.

Many organisations with long-established programmes score lower on maturity than younger programmes built with more intentionality from the outset. Age is not maturity. Structure and intentionality are.

The intersection: reading your three variables together

No single variable determines your starting point. A technology vendor in a growth market with an incipient channel and Level 1 partnership maturity has a completely different diagnostic from one in a mature market with an established channel and Level 3 maturity, even if both have similar revenues, headcounts, and partner programme budgets.

The table below maps the most common combinations of market stage and partnership maturity to an initial archetype priority. It is a starting heuristic, not a prescription. The PPPI diagnostic in Chapter 6 provides the rigorous measurement that replaces this shorthand once the programme is established enough to score.

FIGURE 0.7

The intersection matrix — where to begin

Market stage × partnership maturity maps to an initial archetype priority. A starting heuristic, not a prescription — the PPPI replaces it once the programme can be scored. Suits show the lead archetype to start with.

	Level 1 Incidental	Level 2 Structured	Level 3 Ecosystem	Level 4 Platform
Category creation	♦♥ Explain, then credibilise	♣ Recruit & invest deeply	♠ Scale enablement	rare Architecture question
Growth & expansion	♠♣ Infra before velocity	♦♣ Differentiate & bond	♥♣♠♦ All four; excellence compounds	♠ Co-sell & marketplace
Competitive maturity	♦ Attrition risk — urgent	♥♦ Brand + precision	♠ PPPI-led investment	♠ Defend platform stickiness
Disruption & transition	♦♥ Structural risk — with urgency	♠ See change before revenue	♣ Community is durable asset	? Right side of the shift?

NOTE: A word of caution on this matrix. It identifies the archetype most likely to be your highest-leverage starting point, not the only archetype you need, and not the archetype you will stay focused on. Every chapter in this book is relevant to every combination of context. The matrix tells you where to begin, not where to stop.

> ***The four archetypes are not a curriculum to be studied in sequence. They are a set of lenses to apply simultaneously, with the context diagnostic telling you which lens needs to be in focus first. The goal is not to master one before moving to the next. It is to understand your current situation well enough to know where the return on investment is highest right now.***

A brief self-assessment

Before reading further, it is worth spending five minutes placing yourself in the three-variable framework above. The following questions are not exhaustive, but they will surface the most consequential diagnostic signals.

FIGURE 0.8

A brief self-assessment, placing yourself on the three variables

Five minutes, before reading on. These questions are not exhaustive, but they surface the most consequential diagnostic signals, and the answers will not always be comfortable. That is the point.

Variable	Questions
VARIABLE 1 **Market stage**	1. Does a prospect know they have the problem you solve before they speak to you, or is education part of every sales conversation? 2. Are you competing primarily for category share, or for category definition? 3. Has a dominant vendor already taken the tier-one position, or is it still available?
VARIABLE 2 **Company & channel stage**	1. When did you launch your first formal partner programme, and have its foundations been deliberately redesigned since, or have they accumulated incrementally? 2. Is your channel revenue growing faster or slower than your direct revenue? 3. If your two most experienced channel managers left tomorrow, how much operational knowledge would walk out with them?
VARIABLE 3 **Partnership model maturity**	1. Can you name, with data, the twenty partners with the highest future potential, as distinct from the twenty who have historically generated the most revenue? 2. Does your programme measure any leading indicator of partner commercial performance, or only lagging ones? 3. Would your top ten partners say your programme is genuinely differentiated from competitors', and what is your evidence?

The answers to these questions will not always be comfortable. That is the point. The ACE Framework is designed for practitioners who have already moved past the assumption that effort and good intentions are sufficient, and who want the analytical and operational tools to build a partner programme that compounds its advantages over time. The context diagnostic is the first step in that direction.

How to use this book

FIGURE 0.9

How the book is structured

Four parts follow the ACE cycle; two further chapters extend it into partner sales and AI.

Part I Analytics	**Ch 1 · Opportunity Analysis** Where to compete, sizing the market in the AI era, and reading the competitive landscape.
Part II Content	**Ch 2 · Brand Foundation · Ch 3 · Value Propositions** Building the strategic identity, then articulating what matters to partners and customers.
Part III Experience	**Ch 4 · In-Person · Ch 5 · Digital** Events that build relationships; digital touchpoints that create scale and survive AI-mediated discovery.
Part IV Execution Engine	**Ch 6 · Bringing Strategy to Life** Programme design, the Partner Programme Performance Index, and the governance model that sustains results.
Part V Extending the Framework	**Ch 7 · Partner Sales Relationships · Ch 8 · AI & the Partner Ecosystem** The Ultimate Sales Machine applied to partners; how AI reshapes the structure, economics, and execution of partner-led growth.

The book is structured to follow the ACE cycle. Each of the four parts corresponds to one pillar of the framework; two additional chapters extend it into areas that sit alongside the core cycle but are essential to complete practice.

Each chapter follows a consistent structure: the problem as each archetype perceives it; the core frameworks and practical tools for that domain; the natural tensions between archetypes that, when managed well, produce better outcomes than any single perspective could; and practical action items by archetype. You may read sequentially or navigate directly to the domains most relevant to your immediate priorities. Starting with Part I is recommended: the analytical foundation shapes the quality of every decision that follows.

A comprehensive reference and resource section provides access to the academics, analysts, and practitioners who have influenced the development and use of this framework.

THE ACE FRAMEWORK

Channel partners deliver over 70% of worldwide IT spending, a market worth in excess of $5 trillion. But most partner marketing programmes still run on the same three levers: better content, another event, one more portal. None of it works as well as it should, because none of it is the real problem.

Stacking the Deck argues that partner marketing succeeds or fails on four archetypes acting in concert: the Brand Leader, the Community Leader, the Technology Leader and the Value Proposition Leader: the Four Aces of the ACE Framework.

Drawing on his experience as a leader in leading global IT distribution businesses and as a strategist, advisor and mentor for partner-focused B2B tech companies, Paul Cunningham shows how to diagnose the archetypes your organisation needs, close the execution gap with the Partner Programme Performance Index, and align people and programmes with the growing role and impact of AI.

This is not a transformation-journey book. It is a working manual, offering frameworks, diagnostics, and a methodology for building partner sales relationships that grow revenue, for the marketing leader who is looking beyond easy advice and failed assumptions.

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