

The Virtues of One Vendor Partner

Davenport Group juggles fewer relationships and avoids conflict by partnering with a single best-of-breed vendor for many of the IT solutions it offers. **By Sonia St. Charles** • Photography by Peter Beck

AS THE CEO of a fast-growing IT channel business, it is my job to ensure we're providing customers with best-in-class solutions that not only meet their data center needs, but also fulfill their business requirements. To that end, I have to pay close attention to the vendors with whom I work and their technology solutions. There are a few different ways to approach vendor relationships, and no single strategy will work for every channel business. But finding the right vendor partner can mean the difference between channel success and struggle.

CATCH A RISING STAR

While many channel organizations prefer to partner with as many vendors as possible for each IT solution they offer—be it servers, storage, networking, virtualization, or something else—there are many advantages to seeking out that one best-of-breed vendor that has the same goals, ambitions, and mission as your own organization. Having a single vendor partner for one or more of the technologies you sell will enable you to create and maintain a more closely aligned relationship with that partner. You juggle fewer relationships and avoid potential unnecessary conflict with a single vendor partner, but you must choose that partner wisely.

If you plan to align yourself with a single vendor partner for a particular solution, you must ensure that the company has a robust business growth strategy, a strong channel program, and a clearly defined mission that's aligned with your own. Of course, the vendor must also have a differentiated product roadmap, a capable management team, and technology you believe in.

For example, when we looked for a mid-range storage provider with whom to partner, we chose a storage virtualization vendor that was the first to offer an integrated, complete

solution for automated tiered storage. Choosing a single vendor partner can be a gamble, but the risks associated with it are reduced if you believe in the company's vision.

AGILITY IS THE KEY

Channel veterans know how difficult it can be to work with some IT vendors. Vendors sometimes compete with you for sales, or make it difficult to reach executives for advice and assistance. Sometimes the better partner is the more agile one—the company that can adapt to changing VAR, end-user, and market needs and can dedicate its focus to helping its channel partners achieve success.

Best-of-breed, next-generation vendors are also more nimble than legacy stalwarts or those that integrate the vertical IT stack. They aren't hampered by the inevitably slow process of customizing installations based on business operations—bureaucratic characteristics inherent with the old guard.

Standardizing on one vendor solution isn't without its downsides, however. Being so closely aligned with a single organization makes flaws easier to see and harder to ignore. The vendor partner also has a lot of visibility into your organization. But such tight integration doesn't have to be a bad thing; the tight-knit nature of the relationship enables both of you to understand and focus on mutual goals without misunderstandings or confusion.

EVERYONE WINS

Of course, the ultimate goal is to provide a solution that works for your customers while giving you the opportunity to create revenue and grow as an organization. When you find that one vendor partner with the right mix of ambition, technology, agility, and management skill, everyone wins—you, your customer, and your vendor partner.

Profile: Sonia St. Charles
CEO, Davenport Group

Location: St. Paul, Minn.

Established: 2001

Number of employees: 7

Web site: www.davenportgroup.com

Company focus: Davenport Group specializes in creating customized strategies to help clients manage their rapidly growing business data, from beginning to end. Following a three-step process—infrastructure analysis, solution design, and implementation and cut-over—we guide companies in responding to their users' changing environments. We work with a number of best-of-breed IT solutions vendors, including Compellent, Dell, Pano Logic, Riverbed, and Syncsort.

Favorite part of my job: My favorite part of my job is pleasing our clients and solving their problems. I love hearing from clients that they love working with us, and how amazed they are by our level of customer service.

Least favorite: As a small business owner, I do whatever needs to be done—from setting strategy to cleaning the kitchen! But my least favorite part is doing routine, repetitive tasks. I am best at solving problems.

Three things people would be surprised to know about me: I once climbed Mt. Fuji wearing shorts, Keds tennis shoes, and a windbreaker; I did a circus act as a bareback stunt-rider (very similar to running your own business); and I met my husband via an online dating Web site.



Choosing a single vendor partner can be a gamble, but the risks associated with it are lessened if you believe in the company's vision."

**SONIA ST. CHARLES, CEO
DAVENPORT GROUP**