

Commodity— or Collaborator?

Rethinking How You Work with a Hardware Integration Partner

You've built a killer software solution for a crucial need. The hard development work is done—all that's left is to get a systems integrator to package it and then celebrate when the sales roll in and your customers experience the benefits. But will they? A great product that does what it's designed to is certainly the right start, but have you covered everything that customers expect when they don't just use your product, but interact with your brand? Aspects like:

- Quality in both function and appearance
- Cost-effectiveness, with a good ROI
- Great support, any time and any place
- Responsive fulfillment and accelerated deployment to quickly start reaping that ROI



It's important to note that only one of these items is the product itself. The rest are deliverables that cannot be manufactured or assembled. They may be intangible, but they are far from inconsequential when it comes to the success of your product—and company. And they require more knowledge and effort to execute than many realize.

Branded Product vs. Brand Experience

You sell a product for profit—but you build a brand for enduring success. For software developers, that brand is built in part through the customer's experience of using your IP. Creating a consistently deployable system, however, requires you to rely on the work of a systems integration partner—and it is your name on this partner's work. Such a partner is then carrying the task not just of integration, but of representing your brand. And like trust, a company's reputation takes a long time to build, but only one bad experience to destroy.

**Your brand is not a commodity,
so your box—and the systems
integrator behind it—shouldn't
be either.**

Too often, conversations with integrators stop after product specifications and price. The hardware integrator is treated as a vendor providing a product, instead of a go-to-market partner who can help by anticipating factors that otherwise would not have been entirely thought through—or even been noticed—simply because software is the core business and focus, not systems. If you give up a significant opportunity to create the best brand experience possible for your customers, you are making it harder to build enduring success. Worse, you could actively damage your brand.

Consider these scenarios:

- ▶ **Your sales team finally closed a deal with a big overseas customer—the one they've been working to lure away from a competitor for nearly two years.** You are using a white box integration vendor, and everyone was thrilled because you got a great bargain on decent hardware. The solution has been tested, assembled and is out the door on time. Everything is going great—until it isn't. The first phone call is from your systems integrator, informing you that your product is being held up in customs. A second call rings in; it's your new customer wanting to know where the product is. After a stomach-churning delay and a frantic conference with the integrator, it turns out that they don't actually hold a certification for the destination country. Your phone shakes a little in your hand as you call your hard-won new customer to share the bad news.

(Gulp. True story.)

- ▶ **Your customers do not separate—as perhaps you might—your mission-critical solution from the hardware it is delivered on.** They are one and the same. So when they experience a failure, they don't know or even care whether the problem is the hardware or the software. They just want the solution to start working again, and they want it now. With four-hour response times being a typical expectation for a mission-critical solution, your systems integration vendor had better be on their toes. A one- to two-day wait for an active response may not only create an angry



customer, but it could cause costly SLA violations or loss of that account. Can your integration partner protect your brand by offering the level of service your customer expects? And even if the partner says it can—have you validated that it actually does?

- ▶ **A platform change occurred, but your development team did not receive advanced notice.** As a result, you had to institute a product hold, halting deliveries to sold customers while the software is updated and integration validated. Are you getting proactive updates on changes expected in your hardware platform so you can incorporate them into your software releases? Is your integration partner ensuring consistency and reliability for all parts of the solution lifecycle?

Great Expectations

Your customers expect a great experience, and in turn, you should expect your hardware integrator to help you deliver it. In fact, on the surface what you are looking for from a good integrator is similar to what your customers want from your brand.

- Quality product
- Efficient, timely fulfillment
- Great support when technical problems or failures occur
- Ability to scale and extend into new geographies

But as you can see from the scenarios above, achieving those benchmarks can be complex, with unforeseeable issues. It takes a systems integrator willing to dig deeper, who understands the questions behind the questions and is experienced in anticipating every scenario ahead of time. You need a partner who defines their success in terms of yours.

A systems integrator who can help safeguard your reputation and your customers' experiences also must have multiple areas of expertise. This Brand Protection Checklist outlines eight key competencies you should assess when selecting a partner:

1. Vision. Is the organization strictly production-focused, or is there a comprehensive consideration of the entire global experience, including needs that may be generated by future upgrades—including the roadmap of the hardware platform?

2. Process. A box builder will produce a product for you. A consultative partner will produce both a product and relationship, to help determine if there is anything that you haven't thought about that may affect your go-to-market success.

3. Integrity. Transparency throughout the entire process is a good sign that you have selected an integration partner that has your best interests at heart. So is the insistence on knowing the business model elements and performance goals to recommend the choices that best accomplish your goals—even if they cost less.

4. Quality. Does the systems integrator offer best-in-class products from manufacturers who depend on OEM orders as a large part of their business, and therefore have a vested interest in making sure that production is consistent and failure rates are ultra-low?

5. Value. A good integration partner will work closely with you to offer all your customers the right blend of price and performance. This goes beyond the appliance level of high-quality, well-designed products to include superior support models as well as pricing that takes the costs of regulatory compliance and international trade into consideration instead of making it an add-on surprise.

80%

of organizations
outsource to improve
business performance
and their overall
operating model.¹

54%

of IT leaders
are adding new
technology projects
to their 2020
roadmap.²

6. Supply Chain. Is this systems integrator's supply chain secure and efficient enough to support demand even in the face of disruptions such as natural disasters, political unrest and global health concerns?

7. Support. *This is the single biggest factor that defines your brand and customer experience.* Failure can be a brand killer! It can also be an opportunity to show your customers that you can handle anything. A good systems integration partner will help you achieve this by evaluating the alignment between what support you are able to profitably provide and what your customers demand—and creating a plan for filling in any gaps and meeting your SLAs. And truly superior support should be cradle-to-grave, providing options for product life cycle management as well as asset retirement and recycling.

¹ <https://www.efficiococonsulting.com/en-us/resources/insight/why-outsourcing-no-longer-about-cost-cutting/>

² <https://www.cio.com/article/3574959/exclusive-survey-how-it-is-recovering-from-the-covid-19-crisis.html?upd=1600365706091>

8. Reach. Scale is key to the success of solution providers, and multinational customers open huge avenues of opportunity. But they need to know they can deploy your product anywhere they are. The question is: Can they . . . really? An experienced integration partner not only understands the various and varied regulatory rigors that the multitude of international markets require, but also makes the experience seamless for your customers, and for you.

If there are pressures within your business to take more of the commodity approach in choosing a systems integrator, make sure that the organization is answering these very practical questions:

- Are you satisfied with the services you are receiving?
- Is your integration partner handling all elements that can be outsourced?
- Is your development cycle acceptable?
- Is your R&D cost from your integration partner more than you would prefer?
- Does your integration partner help you plan for platform changes?
- Do you have to handle your international logistics fulfillment yourself?
- Is poor inventory planning causing you to burn cash?
- Is your supplier assuring global compliance?
- Is your warranty support SLA meeting your customers needs?

Don't let internal company silos or knowledge gaps fail your customers. And don't settle for being "comfortably miserable" with your current systems integrator at the risk of your brand's value.

At CCI, we apply our vast experience to help software vendors develop their best-in-class model to give their customers an outstanding product. And we have consistently anticipated and delivered what it takes to give those vendors an outstanding experience as well.

We know that it's sometimes the little things—intangibles and details easily overlooked by hardware integrators in pursuit of momentary profit rather than long-term partnership—that matter when it comes to protecting your brand. And we firmly believe that innovation, creative thinking and proactive planning should not stop being invested in your product just because the IP has gone out your door and into the integrator's hands. Three decades of satisfied clients think this approach adds value to their business—and we're confident that you will, too.

Curious about how we can make it happen?

Contact us at sales@ccintegration.com to learn more.