From Reactive to Proactive: Building a Strong Partner Go-to-Market

Barrett King has spent over a decade building partner ecosystems at HubSpot, Ramp, and Close. In this guide, he shares the frameworks that separate programs that look good from ones that actually grow — from finding partner-market fit to making activation your North Star metric. A practitioner's playbook for partnerships that drive real revenue.

What's Inside This Guide

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What You Will Learn

This guide gives partnership leaders a practitioner's view of what it actually takes to move from reactive deal support to a partner motion that generates predictable, compounding revenue.

- Understand why most partner programs stall at the system level — and why the problem is rarely the partners, the strategy, or the people running it
- Learn how to identify partner-market fit by observing your existing customers before recruiting a single partner or building any program structure
- Discover the real difference between channel and ecosystem — and why confusing the two leads to programs that optimize for the wrong outcomes
- See how to define partner activation as your North Star metric, and why time to first transaction matters more than the size of your partner roster
- Explore what the right foundations actually look like — from your first hires to your first documented success metrics — before you build anything that needs to scale
- Learn how to get executive buy-in when leadership isn't partner-first yet, and how to make partner wins visible across the entire organization

These insights will help you build partnerships that go beyond activity and pipeline appearances — so your program becomes a genuine revenue driver, not just a supporting motion.

Meet Your Expert Guide

Barrett King

Head of Partnerships at [CloseH]

With over a decade in partnerships and go-to-market leadership, Barrett has built his career around one core belief: the right partnerships don't just support growth — they become the engine of it.

At HubSpot, he sharpened his GTM instincts working at scale, learning how partner ecosystems actually move revenue when built with intention. Now at Close as Head of Partnerships, he's applying that same thinking to a leaner, more deliberate motion — focused on fit, activation, and long-term partner value over raw program volume.

His work sits at the intersection of partner strategy and revenue execution — bringing structure to ecosystems that often run on relationships alone, and turning those relationships into measurable, repeatable growth.

Partner Market-Fit Strategist

Identifying where partners genuinely create customer value — and building programs around that signal, not assumptions

GTM & Ecosystem Architecture

Designing partner motions that go beyond channel, connecting sales, implementation, and ecosystem partners into a unified growth strategy

Activation-Led Growth

Focusing on time-to-first-transaction as the North Star metric — because a program's real size is measured by who's actually doing the thing, not who signed up

Barrett recently joined us for a live Q&A where he shared how to move from reactive deal support to a proactive partner GTM — what most programs get wrong about scale, why activation beats volume every time, and how to build partnerships that drive predictable revenue. His approach is practical, data-grounded, and built from years in the trenches.

Watch the Complete Session

YouTube

Q&A Live: From Reactive to Proactive: How to Build a Stron...

How do you move from a reactive partner GTM to a predictable growth engine? In this Q&A, Barrett King (Head of Partnerships at...

Introduction

What does it actually take to bridge the gap between a partnership program that looks good on paper and one that drives real, measurable revenue? In this session, Barrett shares the frameworks, mindsets, and hard-won lessons that define modern partner-led growth.

From finding true partner-market fit to activating partners as a core metric, Barrett covers the full arc of building partnerships that compound over time. This is not a theoretical overview — it's a practitioner's playbook, shaped by years of building partner ecosystems at HubSpot, Ramp, Close, and beyond.

Partner-Market Fit

How to identify where partners genuinely create value — before you scale anything.

Channel vs. Ecosystem

Two very different paths that look similar on the surface but lead to very different outcomes.

Right Foundations

How to prioritize early, make your first hire, and avoid over-building before you've proven anything.

Partner Activation

The North Star metric that separates programs that look good from programs that actually drive revenue.

Finding Partner-Market Fit

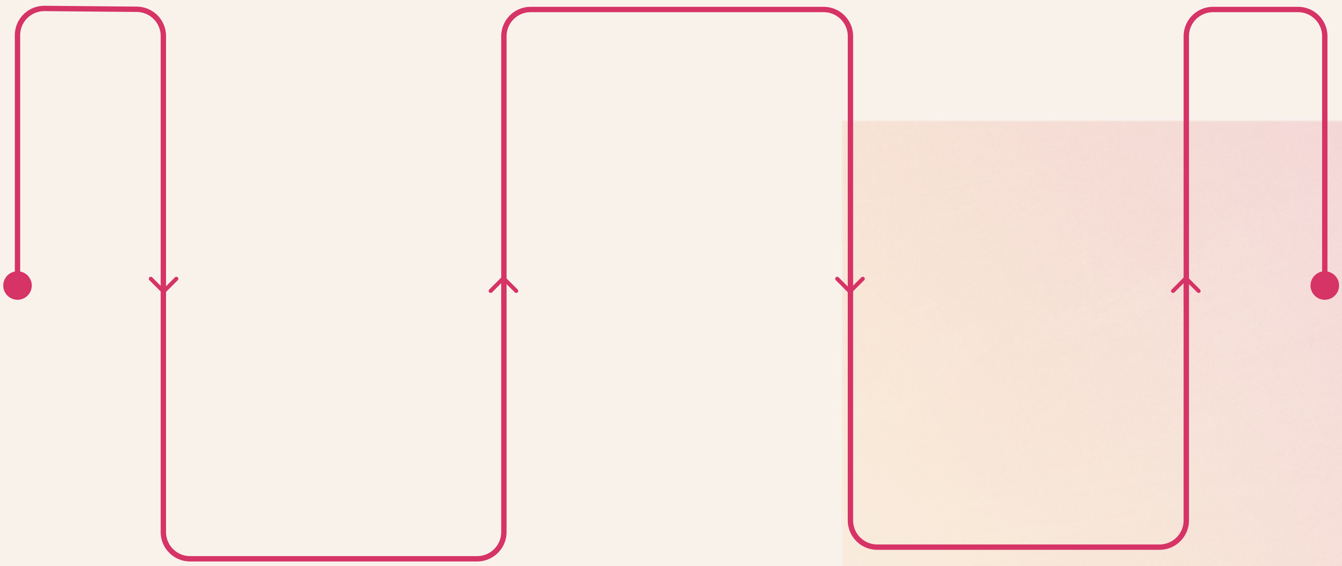
The most common question Barrett receives throughout his career is: *how do you define partner-market fit?* His answer starts one step earlier — with go-to-market maturity. Before you can find the right partners, you need to know whether your product actually has market fit. Do customers buy repeatedly? Do they stick around and spend money? If you're still figuring that out, bringing in partners to "help you win" is premature.

Partner-market fit, for Barrett, mirrors the same behavioral signals you look for in product adoption. Do customers log in repeatedly? Do they get value? He applies that same lens to partnerships — by **observing your existing customers** and identifying where they are already working with other software, consulting firms, or service providers. Those adjacent relationships are your first signal. At HubSpot, the insight was simple: the most successful marketing customers worked with marketing agencies. At Ramp, it was accounting firms and advisors using the data outputs. At Close, it's businesses that layer additional value — better sequencing, workflow optimization, voice agent ROI — on top of the platform.

> Partner-market fit is not just about generating more revenue. It's about increasing product usage, helping customers see long-term value, and extending the way your organization can impact customer growth. — Barrett King

The methodology Barrett recommends mirrors the scientific method: observe where your most successful customers are, form a hypothesis about what makes a good-fit partner, run an experiment with a small cohort, analyze the results, and refine. The key is using data — not intuition — to back it up. Look at the types of organizations already in your customer base. Are they additive (like agencies on top of HubSpot)? Are they using your outputs (like advisors at Ramp)? Or a combination? Those patterns point directly to your first partners.

"How do you define a strong GTM for a partner ecosystem being built from scratch, with the first partner as a pilot?" Barrett's answer cuts through the overwhelm with a deceptively simple framework.



SI Ecosystems, Executive Buy-In & Early Adopters

The challenge of building an SI (System Integrator) ecosystem from scratch when account mapping hasn't worked and partners keep asking: *"Bring me an opportunity to kickstart the partnership."* Barrett's response centers on a critical prerequisite: **defining success metrics and aligning your entire company to them** — especially at the executive level. Most of what partnership professionals do is cross-functional alignment, and without leadership buy-in on the behaviors you're measuring, the SI motion will stall.

Option A: Co-Deliver Early

For the first 3–5 opportunities a partner brings, co-deliver every use case. Reduce their overhead, increase their margins, and help them win — even if you're not sending them leads yet. Build trust through shared success.

Option B: Draw a Hard Line

Tell SIs that if they want to work with you, this is first-mover advantage — they have to want to be here. Seek out early adopters: the micro-SI with one fit customer, not ten. Do the unscalable work early. As Barrett puts it: *"Do the stuff that doesn't work in 2 years — now."*

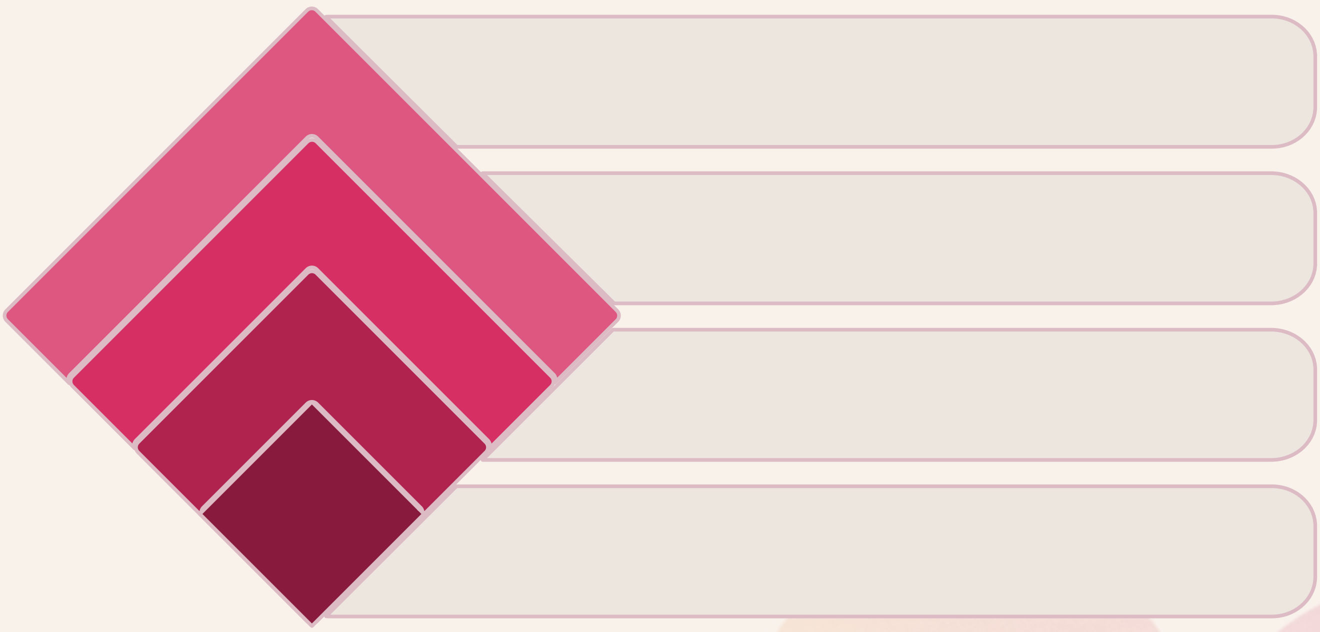
The broader lesson: look for early adopters first. They may not be your highest-logo, highest-volume partners, but they are invaluable for learning early partner fit. Once you've established the working dynamic with a few of them, you can start analyzing the economics — and make the case for why SIs should bring new opportunities as well. It's like managing a startup within a company: you have to experiment, document, and define success over time.

When Leadership Isn't Bought In — Yet

When *partners are critical to convincing clients, the sales team is struggling to go beyond product, and leadership simply doesn't want to be partner-first.* Barrett's first move? Look at **partner attach rate**. How many deals in the last 10 months had some form of partner involvement? Those deals are almost certainly higher value on the front end or show better LTV — longer retention, higher spend. That data is your foundation.

If you're starting from scratch, go find two or three sales reps willing to experiment. Tell them you'll help them win 10 deals next quarter by bringing partners in — even without a formal program. Find five businesses willing to work with you in a loose, creative way. They win services, you win deals, and now you have real data to bring back to a skeptical sales leader. Barrett is explicit: you don't need a formal partner program to have partners. You just need businesses willing to work with you and good judgment about staying above board.

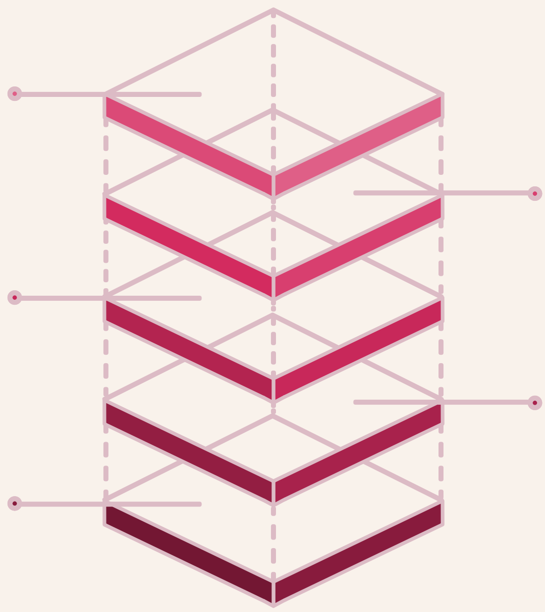
For organizations with a legacy ecosystem that was built, abandoned, and left in disarray, the challenge is less about buy-in and more about trust. Barrett recommends starting by establishing a clear baseline of success metrics, analyzing partner-attached deals over the last three to five years, and then deciding: do you lean into existing partners, find new early adopters, or start from scratch? The answer comes from the data — not from assumptions.



Channel vs. Ecosystem: Two Very Different Paths

Channel is the traditional model — businesses that bring net new revenue, net new leads, net new logos. It worked for a long time, and it powered the early growth engines of Microsoft, Salesforce, and HubSpot. The value exchange was clear: partners expand their services business, you get new customers. But channel is single-dimensional. It optimizes for one motion: acquisition.

Ecosystem is something broader. Analyst Jay McBain of Canalys — one of the top voices in partnerships — has called this the "decade of the ecosystem." The ecosystem is the surround sound of your business. It includes channel partners, yes, but also ISVs and integrations that extend platform value, marketplaces that increase distribution, and validation platforms like G2 that build credibility. It's about attracting, engaging, capturing, retaining, and expanding revenue — not just acquiring it.



Barrett describes himself as an ecosystem lead rather than a channel-focused partnerships professional — because building a successful organization today requires thinking holistically about all the places partnerships exist. Channel is still a component, but it's one spoke in a much larger wheel. The organizations that treat ecosystem thinking as a strategic priority are the ones building durable, compounding partner-driven growth.

Building the Right Foundations

One of the most common mistakes Barrett hears: *"I want to build a partner program."* His response is direct — don't think that way. Partner programs are big, messy, and hard. What you actually want to build is **real partnerships**: real relationships, real business outcomes, real value delivered together. The program is a byproduct of that work, not the starting point.

Early hires matter enormously. Your first two to four people in partnerships need to be builders, creatives, practitioners — and above all, entrepreneurs. They need to be people who think about how to build something, not just do something. Barrett is currently hiring his first Solutions Partner Manager at Close, and the profile he's looking for combines experience helping existing partners succeed with the ability to go out, have discovery conversations with new partners, and build repeatable processes. Both skills are non-negotiable.

Document Everything

Record calls with Granola, Zoom, or Gong. Feed partner conversations through Claude or similar tools to identify patterns, gaps, and opportunities. Put insights in Notion or GDocs — not in your head or your team's pocket.

Measure What Repeats

Your first partners should do the thing you've asked them to do in a repeated, predictable way — once a month, a quarter, a year. If it only happens once, it's not a program. Repetition is the signal.

Do More With Less

Could you build a $100M revenue stream with 30 people? Barrett believes you can — especially now. Lean into AI and technology as foundational tools. Think about how to make a lean program feel intimate and impactful at scale.

Resist the Tier Temptation

Don't build tiers, directories, or elaborate program structures before you have a foundation that works. You need a few partners doing the right things consistently before any of that infrastructure makes sense.

The art and science must coexist. The science is the tactical, systems-driven, measurable side. The art is the relationship-building, the phone calls, the genuine curiosity about how a partner's business works. Your first builders need to be good at both — or at least willing to try.

Exiting, Reviving & Managing Mature Programs

Two important questions: *when do you exit a partnership, and how do you manage a mature program with 100+ partners across multiple brands*? On the first question, Barrett's framework is behavioral. When a partner stops exhibiting the behaviors you've defined as foundational, the first step is always to try to reignite — get buy-in from a new stakeholder, run a training or boot camp, provide go-to-market assets, or bring your solutions delivery team in to support their first few implementations. Most partner challenges come down to resources, not willingness.

> Partnership is a choice. There is a seasonality to it — sometimes it ebbs and flows. But if you can go back to the foundational reason the partnership exists and the partner has buy-in, you can rebuild. If they don't have buy-in and aren't willing to invest, don't waste your time. — Barrett King

How long do you wait? It's relative to the behavior you're measuring. If your deal cycle is six months, wait at least six months. If it's two weeks, two weeks is enough. The key is that the metric must be measurable — not just "they seem excited." Excitement is not a success metric. Data is.

For mature programs, Barrett's advice centers on two things: documentation and evangelism. Use Notion or GDocs to capture foundational values, metrics, and partner insights in a place everyone can access. And then make partner wins visible — a monthly partner wins email to the whole company, presence at team meetings and all-hands, a Slack channel with weekly highlights. As Barrett puts it: *"Sunlight is the best disinfectant."* Transparency builds internal trust, surfaces gaps, and turns skeptics into advocates. If you're not evangelizing what's working, you're leaving influence on the table.

Partner Activation as a Core Metric

Barrett hears it constantly from partner leaders: *"We have 957 partners."* His follow-up: *"How many of them actually do the thing you want?"* The answer is usually seven. The volume-first mentality is a legacy of early partner programs that needed to fill a funnel — bring in thousands of partners to get enough output on the other end. That era is over. **Less is more. More productive is more valuable than more volume.**

60

Days to First Transaction

Activation = time to first deal. Ideally within 60 days of onboarding a new partner.

90

Days to Repeat Activation

Consistent activation means doing it again within the next 60–90 days. Two transactions = early momentum.

12

Months to First Horizon

A full year is your first real horizon of success when establishing an early partner program from the ground up.

Activation, as Barrett defines it, is **time to first transaction** — the moment a partner brings a deal or a net new customer. If that happens within 60 days, and then again within the next 60 to 90, you're on your way. That's at least six months of runway just to observe the pattern, plus a few months to get your footing — meaning a full year is your first real horizon of success.

The formula Barrett returns to is a simple triangle: *you + a third-party partner + a defined behavior = a better outcome for your customer.* Put that on paper. Reiterate it constantly. Make it the thing you talk about in every funnel review, every team meeting, every executive conversation. When activation is not steady or trending up, you have a problem — even if you're still hitting other goals. Activation is the North Star metric that everything else orbits around.

The Practitioner's Playbook: What to Do Next

Barrett closed the session with a grounding reminder: there are a thousand versions of "you could" and "you should." The goal isn't to implement everything at once — it's to take one thing and do it well. The fact that you showed up, asked questions, and engaged is already the first step. The rest is iteration.

01

Observe Before You Build

Look at your most successful customers. Where are they already working with other software, services, or consultants? That's your first signal of partner-market fit. Use data, not intuition.

02

Find Your Early Adopters

Don't wait for the perfect high-logo partner. Find the micro-SI, the scrappy agency, the one-customer consultant. Do the unscalable work early. Repetition of behavior is the proof.

03

Define and Align on Metrics

Get executive buy-in on the behaviors that matter. Document your North Star metrics. Tie partner success to ARR, LTV, CAC, and activation rate — not excitement or logo count.

04

Hire Builders, Not Just Practitioners

Your first partnership hires must be entrepreneurs — people who combine the art of relationships with the science of systems. They need to document, measure, and repeat.

05

Obsess Over Activation

Make partner activation — time to first transaction, then repeat transaction — your core metric. If it's not trending up, everything else is noise. Build your program around this single North Star.

Optimize Your Partner Program with Kiflo

You've read all the insights on how to move your GTM from reactive to proactive.
Now, see how Kiflo helps partner teams **measure, scale, and optimize** that impact across every motion: from onboarding to revenue.

What You'll See in our Demo

Track and Measure Revenue

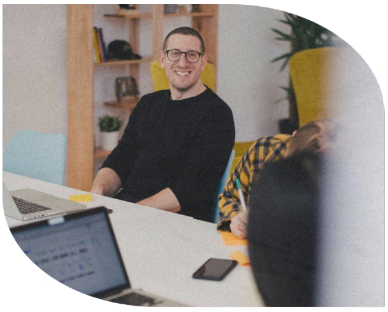
Gain full visibility into partner-sourced and influenced deals to understand your ecosystem's true impact.

Empower and Engage Partners

Collaborate seamlessly through partner portals, deal registration, and real-time performance dashboards.

Automate and Integrate Everything

Sync partner data with your CRM and streamline enablement, payouts, and reporting, all from one platform.



Ready to build stronger partnerships?

Experience how Kiflo can scale your partner program.

Book Your Demo →

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