Blurred Lines – Building Partnerships and Alliances in a Polygamous World

It's controversial and its ads are banned by the Super Bowl but the dating site Ashley Madison is probably as close a comparative to the partnership conundrum facing many technology companies as you can get. Its tagline "life is short…."suggests that multiple partnerships is the only way to be truly satisfied. If you liken it to the world of technology, cloud and customer solutions, you would probably have to agree. When it comes to partnering successfully, there is no longer one single road to happiness.

Panel Discussion at Microsoft Worldwide Partner Conference 2015

In an upcoming panel discussion at the [Microsoft worldwide partner conference in July 2015](), moderator Gail Mercer-MacKay, President of the International Association of Microsoft Partners will lead [Maria Olson, VP, Global & Strategic Alliances, NetApp]() and [Cynthia Johnson, Sr. Director, Data Center Solutions, Cisco](), in a no-holds barred discussion about the new world of partnering, and what you need to know before you select an ideal relationship-style for your next business opportunity. Are you dating, engaged, married, separated or divorced?

The following is a sneak peek into what they will be discussing:

GMM: Welcome and thanks so much for joining me today. I think first I have to comment that I am delighted two of the strongest and best known brands in technology have women in leadership. Both of you are running global operations. Congratulations on your accomplishments.

CJ: Thanks Gail. I feel privileged to be working at Cisco.

MO: Cynthia and I were speaking about that a few minutes ago. There is really no glass ceiling at either of our companies. Women have an equal opportunity to succeed.

GMM: Given the concern around the lack of Women in Technology these days, it is great to hear that [Cisco]() and [NetApp]() are helping to crack the code with some terrific role models. Hold that thought, we will be coming back to it a little later as we explore our main topic. I know you are both passionate about partnering, but isn't it becoming more difficult these days to identify a true partner?

CJ: We are no longer swimming in the nice, gentle swim lanes. There are sharks circling and people need to recognize the waters are trickier to navigate. There's nothing wrong with it. It is simply that there are new

> ### *Do You Ever Date Your Ex?*
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> *Microsoft and VMware were great partners, until competing agendas caused a complete separation. Yet, both Microsoft and VMware frequently found themselves dancing together again, albeit awkwardly, when customers wanted their Microsoft solutions virtualized on VMware architectures. Sometimes dating your ex is the best way to satisfy the customer, grow pipeline and win more deals.*

rules of engagement. It's not unlike the relationship scene, with multiple options for how people want and need to connect.

MO: Exactly. At NetApp we have a tight partnership with Cisco that used to have an exclusive element to it. As our companies have evolved, it has become more of an open marriage with both sides agreeing that "playing with others" is okay. But not everybody wants to hear that message.

CJ: One of my biggest challenges is keeping the sales teams focused whenever a new announcement comes out – and we are making them monthly these days – the water cooler chatter is far more dangerous than a new partnering announcement.

GMM: That's a great point CJ. Can you elaborate?

CJ: Rather than concentrating on closing deals, sales teams worry about "what does this mean" and get distracted by noise. There is often an immediate sense of mistrust across teams that have been working together for years. While a healthy sense of caution is only common sense, multiple partnerships and multiple choices are actually good for business.

MO: In today's hybrid, multi-cloud world, there are so many more options for customers. Instead of focusing on "how does this announcement impact my partnership", it is much smarter to get laser-sharp on "how can I best serve the customer". Because ultimately customers are making the decision and they tend to decide in favor of the people who care about them.

GMM: So what you are saying is nothing is exclusive anymore and multiple partnerships mean more opportunities for the sales teams who should simply focus on the end goal – the customer.

CJ: Exactly. One of my data center reps just closed a $10 million dollar deal by adopting that philosophy. His normal partnership for this client was blocked when one of our competitors made an announcement. He sat back, reassessed and spent time meeting with the customer to get a deeper understanding of their needs. During one of those meetings a light bulb came on and he realized one of Cisco's new cloud partners would be ideal. Three companies came together to form a virtual sales team and they landed the opportunity that ultimately was much larger than the original scope.

GMM: What I am hearing is that both Cisco and NetApp are open to non-traditional partnerships. That your organizations are eager to "date" some of the newer players.

MO: Yes, in fact, that is how some of our most innovative solutions are finding their way to market. One of our account executives was shut out of a large oil and gas client that had traditionally been a core account for him. He spent time exploring exactly what the client needed and realized our NetApp products were only a piece of the puzzle. He pulled together a 4-way alliance and piloted a solution that ultimately solved a $100 million dollar problem. It has now become a core solution in our portfolio.

GMM: This is great news for the new kids on the block. Young ISVs (Independent Software Vendors) or other technology companies who would love to go-to-market with a Cisco or NetApp logo stamped on their solution.

CJ: We love the innovators and we are continually communicating out to our field to be open to the disruptors – that disruption creates opportunity for market differentiation.

MO: Actually, that was how [FlexPod](#) was born. From the back of a napkin sketched in a Starbucks shop to a $3 billion business in under 3 years.

GMM: That's a great story.

MO: Yes, because it was the partners who really innovated on it. It was a Cisco / NetApp idea that only took off when we started sharing the concept with our partners. Ultimately it gave birth to a new industry norm - the idea of converged infrastructure.

GMM: Disruption rules. But let me get back to my first point. Do you think women have an advantage in the new world of multi-alliances?

CJ: I think women bring a unique lens and see things differently. So it is more about building teams that value diversity – gender, education, geography, etc. I always tell my people, hire for friction. If everyone around the table agrees all the time, then you probably have the wrong group of people and you are likely missing something.

MO: And remaining open to looking at things in a new way. Understanding that non-traditional partners can offer new ways of thinking.

GMM: So again, what I am hearing is that both Cisco and NetApp are open to partnering with the disruptors – you want the innovators to know you are keen to do business with them.

MO: We are partner-driven organizations. We want to be seen as constantly pushing the envelope with partners to deliver better solutions for our customers.

GMM: I feel like we are just getting started with this conversation. What can participants who attend the panel at WPC expect to hear from you?

CJ: We will share some specific tips on how to partner successfully with Cisco and NetApp. What works and what doesn't, as well as our own lessons learned for growing your business successfully through partners.

MO: NetApp has some specific frameworks that have helped us get to market quickly with new ideas that I am planning to share with the attendees.

GMM: And we are excited to be broadcasting live on Twitter throughout. Our hashtag will be #WPCNetAppCisco while the panel is running. Send your questions to that hashtag and we will do our best to get them answered live on-stage.

Thanks so much to both of you. I am really looking forward to our session. It is on Tuesday, July 14th from 10:30 to 11:30 am in room S230A – *Blurred Lines – Strategies for Building Partnerships and Alliances in a Polygamous World.* See you there.