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API development communities requires online and offline presence

Third-party developers aren't just uber-smart college kids coding in their dorm rooms, hopped up on Red Bull and Doritos. These days, a third-party developer could be an up-and-coming programmer or even a large company, and companies releasing [APIs](#) need to develop a third-party developer community to ensure the API's success. Companies can build API development communities in person, online and by offering incentives, according to [API management](#) companies and veterans.

Building the developer community is critical, particularly for cloud applications, according to experts. [Software as a Service](#) (SaaS) by its nature needs to be accessible and provide benefits to users, whether or not the ideal solution comes from the API development company or a third party, said Kevin O'Brien, senior director of the AppConnect program at email marketing provider Constant Content. "The benefits we've received [from the third-party developer community] have been immediate," he said.

The first step, however, is to have a compelling, easy-to-use application that results in a natural fit for third-party developers to work with the API, according to John Thomas, director of product management at San Francisco-based database software provider Embarcadero. "When you build a framework that is well-designed and architected and is extensible, it means you use languages and programming patterns that make it straightforward to take the base work and [create] something additional," he said.

For example, a framework may offer a lot of functions but not a specific one, like printing to a specific plotting printer. In that case, a third-party developer would see an opportunity to connect the framework to that type of printer, Thomas said.

Get personal -- and offer prizes

Once the API is ready, one way to build a developer community in person is to host in-person contests like [hackathons](#), said Alex Gaber, API evangelist at Washington, D.C.-based Layer 7 Technologies. Hackathons typically are weekend-long events dedicated to allowing third-party developers to create new ways of using a company's API. Often, companies will offer prizes based on specific challenges, he said.

Another personal method to foster a third-party developer community is to run online contests for third-party developers, Gaber said. "We see big companies throw their hat into the ring," he said, citing Samsung's first place prize offering of \$100,000 to the developer that could build the best integration with SDK tablets, or Netflix's movie recommendations algorithm contest that offered a \$1 million purse to the winner. "Netflix ended up with a bunch of different solutions that were built, functioned and worked," he said.

These contests can attract more than just individual developers, according to Gaber. For example, a 20-person developer shop could submit an entry, or a large company that wants a better relationship with the contest sponsor may also throw its hat into the ring with a solution built around that company's API, he said.

Dedicated portals provide a community feeling

Meanwhile, companies looking to foster community online need dedicated portals for their third-party API developers, according to experts. "With API providers, every company in the world is going to have an API portal. These portals are where you really go to get access to these APIs," Gaber said.

[Broadsoft](#) has a typical portal since it launched its first API four years ago, complete with forums and documentation, according to Leslie Ferry, vice president of marketing at the Gaithersburg, Md.-based VoIP company. That community has grown to 5,000 members, and those members have come up with new uses for Broadsoft's API. For example, one company in New Zealand tied the API into their billing system and can send emails to remind customers that their accounts are past due, which not only is less invasive for the customer but also reduces the length of time the bill is outstanding by 50%. "Our community enables third-party developers and our own customers to create new processes," Ferry said.

Meanwhile, [Constant Contact](#) shares their insights from working with small businesses to third-party developers, alerting them to trends, according to Constant Contact's Kevin O'Brien. Utilizing newsletters, forums and webinars, Constant Contact provides developers with what they know to help the developers know where to start.

Offer incentives as well

To encourage third-party participation in the company's API development, offering incentives helps. Broadsoft offers an incubator program that provides seed funding for developers. By providing developers with money up front, Broadsoft is able to speed the developers' time to create a solution for a common request, according to Ferry.

Meanwhile, Constant Contact has a revenue-sharing program in place with its third-party developers, according to O'Brien. "We have a marketplace that we promote to customers," he said. This marketplace includes the solutions third-party developers build.

No matter what, though, the developer experience should be as smooth as possible. According to O'Brien, a lesson learned is that, because of the volume of applications that a third-part developer can integrate, the developer's experience with the company's API should be straightforward and uncomplicated. "If they're making choices [about] which API to build on, it needs to reflect the functionality and be simple for them to use," he said.

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