



The Insider's Guide To CRM Selection: Get Control Of Your Business

Gaining an Integrated Customer View without Breaking the Bank

CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

The more easily your customers can do business with you, the greater your competitive advantage. How do you get there? An important step is connecting customer and sales data with other enterprise systems for a complete view of your customer, helping you deliver a smooth, consistent, and positive customer experience.

Front Office

If you are like most companies looking for a CRM solution, you want to integrate your front office – sales, marketing, and customer service – for more complete customer view. Don't assume, however, that because a vendor is offering each of these applications they are actually integrated. You'll need to look a little further here.

Back Office

Because customer data resides in other business systems, you will need to look beyond the front office and focus some attention on whether the solution can integrate with external data sources. Companies in manufacturing, for instance, may require tight integration with the back office, so should focus on integrating enterprise resource planning (ERP) and supply chain management (SCM) systems. For others, integrating with accounting systems will be necessary to complete the customer view.

Below are four insider tips to help you differentiate among the integration capabilities of CRM solutions.

Latest Technology

First, look for a CRM solution with a service-oriented architecture (SOA). The goal of SOA is to make integration cheaper and easier by leveraging a modular set of standards-based services offering more flexibility than previous architectures. You can thus be much more agile in evolving your CRM solution incrementally to meet changing business requirements or market conditions.

SOA, part of the enterprise software market for about two decades, has recently become a hot topic for CRM vendors because traditional solutions were brittle and difficult to integrate. If your vendor is not leveraging this latest technology advancement, you may not have the flexibility you need for a true competitive advantage. The CRM solution needs to provide software the way you want it.

Out-of-the-Box Integration

Next, look for a CRM solution that integrates out-of-the-box with the applications within its suite as well as with other technologies, such as your Web site and your phone system.

Front Office Integration. Integration to the back office isn't the biggest current challenge, according to industry analyst firm AMR Research. Integrating sales, marketing, and customer service is still the biggest dilemma. Front office integration problems should be addressed within the CRM footprint, but take the time to examine what is actually integrated. While the applications may appear integrated at the user interface level, they could be using a separate database for marketing campaigns and leads that is not integrated with sales contacts and opportunities, making it almost impossible to get a true campaign-to-cash view of your customer.

Web Site Integration. Look for a CRM solution that will allow you to design Web forms with embedded CRM field names, so customer data captured on your Web site can be automatically integrated with the CRM system. For example, your Web site may require visitors to register before accessing site materials such as white papers, webinars, or product information. Web form integration is a simple, powerful capability that automatically integrates sales lead data from the registration into your CRM system; automatically alerting your sales team to contact prospects while their interest is still hot.

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Phone System Integration. Whether your company has a traditional private branch exchange (PBX) or the latest, greatest voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) phone system, you want a CRM solution capable of out-of-the-box integration. An example is screen pops, where customer information stored in the CRM application automatically pops onto the user's screen when a customer service call comes in. This improvement in agent efficiency and dramatic reduction in call handling time yields a higher quality experience for your customer and diminished service costs for you. In the past, companies wanting this type of integration had to rely on a system integrator that created its own software to tie the CRM and phone systems together – a lengthy and expensive process. We will explore this topic further in the next volume, "Creating Meaningful Customer Interactions That Set You Apart."

The final tips are on getting information out of your CRM system, so you can share it with other business systems and extract more value from your customer, and getting information from other business systems into your CRM system to create a more complete customer view.

If your company is venturing into CRM for the first time, you need to decide what data you want to access and which systems that data will have to flow between. To make this decision, you must understand your company's business processes and most common customer touch points.

The trick here is finding a CRM solution that allows you to easily identify the fields of information you want to share, provides a robust set of application programming interfaces (APIs), and supports Web services, ensuring quick, cost-effective integrations.

Getting Data Out

You don't need another silo of customer data. Take the time to determine the level of effort required to get customer data out of your CRM system to share with other business systems.

For example, if you want to alleviate a backlog of bookings-to-billings you may want to integrate opportunity data from your CRM system into your accounting system. This could be accomplished manually by exporting data from your CRM system to an export file, then importing the file into your accounting system. Look instead for a CRM solution supporting a more automated approach to integration, including automatic batch file uploads, or real-time Web services, or API calls.

Getting Data In

To realize the promise of a 360° customer view, your CRM solution must allow easy integration of customer data from external sources.

Let's shake things up and look at an integration example at the front end of the customer life cycle. In this scenario, a lead has come in from your Web site and been scored by the CRM system, based on the prospect's survey responses, as "hot." A Web service call has been automatically triggered to pull information from Dunn & Bradstreet to augment the lead. When your sales team accesses the lead, they have a much better understanding of the customer, enabling a higher quality interaction in the first contact.

Many business executives have learned the hard way that the purchase price of a CRM application is only the tip of the spending iceberg. Integration can cost far more than the license. Determining the effort required to integrate the CRM solution with your other business systems and external data sources will be a critical component of your CRM selection.

CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT**Next, Volume IV: “The Insider’s Guide to CRM Selection: Creating Meaningful Customer Interactions That Set You Apart,” coming soon ...**

Is your business immune to the impact of commoditization that is sweeping across various verticals? If not, it’s time to start cultivating and sustaining relationships through satisfaction and loyalty.

Loyalty experts agree that retaining customers is more cost effective than acquiring customers. In fact, according to Forrester Research, the cost of attracting new customers is four to six times that of keeping customers. Retaining customers is also more profitable: A recent study by Bain & Company found that a 5 percent increase in customer retention improves profitability by 25 to 100 percent – provocative figures.

What does it take to improve customer satisfaction and loyalty? The first step is improving the way your company interacts with customers ...

If you found this information helpful, you may want to access previous volumes of the “The Insider’s Guide to CRM Selection” series: “Volume I: Ensuring High Adoption Rates with Cost-Effective Configuration” and “Volume II: Ensuring That Process Automation is a Business Accelerator, Not a Roadblock.”

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About FrontRange Solutions

FrontRange Solutions USA Inc. provides CRM solutions used by more than 130,000 companies and over 1.7 million users to automate and manage customer-facing initiatives. GoldMine is designed for businesses that want a complete and customizable solution that manages every aspect of the customer lifecycle with a quick time to benefit and low total cost of ownership. For more information, call 800.443.5457 or visit www.goldmine.com.

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