

Managing customer relationships through CRM

Customer relationship management can help you increase sales by targeting your clients. **By Gary Grabowski**

What is CRM? CRM stands for customer relationship management. Essentially, CRM gathers significant points of information about your customers. It is a strategy used by companies to learn more about their customers' needs and behaviors in order to develop stronger relationships with them.

There are many technological components to CRM, but thinking about it primarily in technological terms can be misleading. A more practical way to think about CRM is as a process that will help bring together lots of pieces of information about your customers, sales and marketing effectiveness, and responsiveness and market trends.

There is no ideal CRM software package that will work for every company and situation because every organization has slightly different customer relationship management needs.

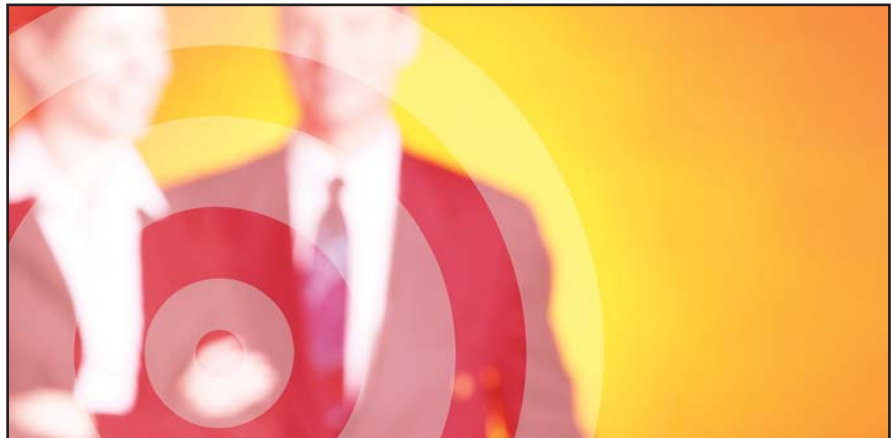
There are several things to consider when choosing a package.

- Will the CRM software support tracking and updating information? If your company wants customer service to have ready access to changes in customer spending habits and an opportunity to offer new product options based on these records, make sure this capability is built in.

Trying to customize an off-the-shelf software package later will be time-consuming and expensive.

- Will the CRM software package integrate smoothly with all platforms in use at your company? If you will have to re-enter databases such as client names, addresses and phone numbers, this will significantly increase the cost in the long run. Will it integrate with your e-mail/messaging system? Make sure that you can either integrate smoothly or import all information needed flawlessly.

- Is the CRM software package you are considering more than you need? An enterprise solution that offers 15 functions you don't need and will never use isn't a bargain.



- Has the CRM package been used at a company similar to your size and industry type? If it has been used for companies up to 10,000 employees and you have 150,000, it may not be able to sustain the volume of data and will crash or develop glitches.

What can CRM do for your company? CRM can:

- Help you develop better communication channels with your customers

- Enable you to collect vital data, including customer details and order histories

- Create detailed profiles and customer preferences

- Deliver instant, companywide access to customer information

- Identify new selling opportunities

Measuring the benefits of CRM

CRM benefits can be measured and quantified. Using CRM applications can lead to increases in revenue from:

- Reductions in operating

- A higher percentage of cross-selling due to offering a single point of contact with your company

- More success in attracting new customers and closing deals faster

- Simplification of marketing and sales processes by understanding customer needs

- Better customer service through improved responsiveness and understanding

The ideal CRM package will enable customer service representatives to review the account information of customers while they are talking to them and immediately be able to understand something about their needs, wants and spending patterns.

Making it work

For many businesses, the idea of implementing customer relationship management technology comes with a host of reservations. Managers worry it will be too costly and complex and whether their employees are ready to learn a whole new way of working. "What if we build it and nobody uses it?"

It is the responsibility of management to lead by example and push for a customer focus on every project. If a proposed plan isn't right for your customers, don't do it.

Send your teams back to the drawing board to come up with a solution that will work. Your customers will reward you in the long run.

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