

Finding the Best CRM System for Your Firm

Customer Relationship Management (CRM) is one of the most important tools a company can use to remain viable. But how does a firm go about implementing a new CRM system that will maximize customer-specific information?

This is the question we found ourselves asking. After extensive research, we decided to implement a new CRM system to replace one that wasn't providing us the desired functionality. Not surprisingly, this turned out to be a long, involved process.

Based on our experience, here are seven steps we found to be useful when implementing a new system:

1. Decide what you want out of a CRM system.
2. Research systems and determine pros and cons.
3. Obtain referrals from systems users.
4. Decide on a system and develop a CRM Team.
5. Customize and develop the system to meet your firm's needs.
6. Develop and implement a training program.
7. Rollout, review and improve.

The first thing to understand is that CRM is a tool to track customer information -- not a sales tool. You must decide what you want out of a CRM system. The best approach is to put together a cross-section of employees to devise a list of everything they want to see in a new system. The goal is to get as many suggestions as possible and prioritize them. This step also helps to obtain team buy-in on the system you end up purchasing.

Once you develop a list of needs, research several systems. Don't make a final decision until you compare the pros and cons of each system. You should end up with two or three systems that fit your needs.

After narrowing down the selection, get referrals from users of each system. Ask questions that focus on your priorities. Also ask users what they like and dislike about their CRM systems. The benefit of an outside opinion is that you don't get a sales pitch.

After gathering referrals, it's time to decide on a CRM system and create a CRM Team. Choose the system that fits your needs. At this stage, turn the process over to a small CRM Team, including a technical person who is responsible for system set up and installation. Be sure to also include a main user who understands the firm's processes and procedures and can help guide the customization of the system.

You may need more people on the team depending on firm size and complexity. If so, make the team representative of the areas that will use the new system. Creating a team takes the bureaucracy out of the process and streamlines decision making.

The CRM Team is responsible for customizing and developing the system to meet your firm's needs. This part of the process is time-consuming and intense. Do not rush this step. It is important that the team keep in mind the priorities, while also

thinking about the end-users. The system should be simple, straightforward and easy to implement and learn. The system also needs to be designed to capture customer information accurately.

As part of its work, the CRM Team should develop and implement a training program. They must become penultimate experts on the system, as their transfer of knowledge is essential to the system's success. Employees with an understanding of the system will be more apt to use it correctly. Individual training is best, since it allows employees to ask questions and improves the learning process. Regardless of how you train employees, make sure everyone is on the "same page" when you switch to the new system. Have a solid date to complete training.

The final steps are to rollout the system and, after a few weeks, to review it. Is everyone using it correctly? Is it as functional as desired? What changes can improve the system? Also conduct periodic reviews and make improvements based on end-user feedback.

Customers in today's world desire companies that go the extra mile. A strong and functional CRM system is a positive step. But remember, CRM is a total company function. From the top of your organization to the bottom, everyone must be on board. Follow these steps and pay attention to the details, and your new CRM system will more than likely help all facets of your business.