The CRM Buyers Checklist

When is the last time you purchased a CRM solution for your business? If your answer to this question is *"Never"* you're not alone. Selecting the right CRM solution for your business can be an overwhelming and frustrating process and for several reasons. First, most people are not professional software buyers. In fact, most have never purchased a software product so they may not know what to look for or what questions to ask. In addition, there are literally hundreds of CRM products to choose from so it can be difficult and take a lot of time to differentiate one from another.

Most buyers view CRM software as a commodity product meaning they are all pretty much the same, often differentiated primarily by price. To the novice buyer who often begins the evaluation process with no written plan of attack, little direction from management and limited knowledge about CRM technology this is perfectly understandable. So they approach the process by requesting a dozen free trials or sit through demonstration after demonstration after demonstration, hopeful that one or two of the products rise above all the others, but none do. Weeks go by and they become frustrated with the process because they are no closer to a decision than when they started. Sometimes they just delay the decision or make no decision at all and sometimes they just settle and select a basic low-cost, cookie-cutter solution. They just want to get through the process and move on, but there is a better approach to the evaluation process and it's quite simple. It is all about creating a buyers checklist.

What is a Buyers Checklist?

The Buyers Checklist is simply a document that outlines the questions necessary to enable you to quickly and easily narrow down the best 2-3 solutions for your business. You can utilize the checklist to capture information obtained via vendor discussions or demonstrations, but I recommend you send it to the solution providers on your list and let them respond back. Think of the checklist as a request for information. Interested vendors will take the time to submit answers to the checklist while some may opt out. This approach will save you an extensive amount of time while providing you with a list of those solution providers that can address your business requirements.

While the checklist should include the specific functionality required by the business, it should also include a host of other categories that are traditionally overlooked by product evaluators. Outlined below are several subject areas that should be considered in the checklist.

Vendor Profile

Perhaps equally important to the features and functions offered by the solution provider is the company profile. Ask questions such as; how long have they been in business? Do they have other customers in your industry or customers who may have similar business requirements? Ask for testimonials, case studies or product reviews. Keep in mind you are not really buying a product at this time. You need to find the right company.

Data Hosting Facility and Services

Perhaps one of the most critical aspects of using a cloud computing service is the data hosting facility and services they provide. Despite this, I have rarely had anyone ask me where their data

is. Is it properly secured, protected, backed up each day and accessible in case of an emergency? People seem to be satisfied with just hearing that it's in the cloud, but there are substantial differences between the cloud hosting services each vendor provides. Make sure you ask about this.

Product Limitations

Many basic low-cost CRM solutions come with a number of limitations which is why they are so inexpensive. Some limit the number of accounts or contacts you can have, the amount of data you can store or limit the number of reports you can generate. Make sure you uncover what these limitations are before making your decision. In fact, there is so much competition in this space that there is no need to consider any product with limitations, because there are so many that have none.

Scalability and Performance

If you believe your company is going to grow you will want to select a CRM solution that is not only scalable, meaning you can add users and additional functionality, but that the system performance will remain as expected. In several cases people have discovered that running an ad hoc report can take hours to run. This is an example of poor performance and means that the specific system was not designed for scalability and growth.

Customer Service

CRM is a resource intensive business whereby the interaction and support from the solution provider is often critical to ensuring that customers realize the maximum value from the product. It's important to fully understand the resources the solution provider can offer to ensure your success. Do they assign an account manager to your business? Do they have experienced sales, marketing and support personnel for the initial on boarding, training and after care. Do they offer best practices to ensure a successful implementation or do they simply offer e-mail support and nothing more?

Customization

No CRM solution is going to meet every requirement out of the box, but you need to know if the solution has the ability to be customized to meet unique and changing needs. Enterprise level solutions offer a high degree of customization while lower end products do not. Ask if the customization can be managed by the customer or does it require the vendor or costly third party services. This can get quite expensive.

Security Permissions

If you plan to have different departments using the CRM system you may have the need to limit people's access to specific data. Here is an example. Maybe you want the NY sales representative to only have access to his or her leads and sales opportunities or perhaps you want to give access to specific information to a business partner or supplier. Make sure the CRM solution can handle more than basic security permissions.

Reporting

Reporting is critical to improving operational efficiency. What type of reporting does the solution provider offer? Can you create custom reports using standard and custom fields? Can you customize the standard reports? Is there any graphical or analytical reporting? You will typically find that basic low cost solutions offer limited reporting capabilities.

E-Mail integration

Integration with e-mail clients like Microsoft Outlook or Gmail is paramount to the successful utilization and value proposition of a CRM system, but there several ways to offer this integration. Every vendor claims they offer this, but some make it a manual process and some providers offer an add-on component that automatically integrates e-mail, calendar, tasks and contacts. Make sure you understand what is offered and what is not.

Professional Services

You should expect to have a close relationship with the CRM solution provider you select and that they have experienced resources on board that will ensure that you realize the maximum value from their product. You may require assistance with installation, on boarding, training or customization. Stay clear of any vendor that cannot offer these services or provides customer service by email only.

The Right Solution

With CRM there is no one-size fits all. The solution that 'checks all the boxes' may be out of reach for your budget, or not simple enough for ease of use. The right solution will strike a balance. To help buyers find the right fit, CRM software providers will often market their solution in one of three categories:

Enterprise products are designed for large corporations with a lot of users, and offer comprehensive functionality, customizability and scalability. Enterprise level solutions will address all of the checklist items above. They are ideal for companies with 100 or more users.

Mid-market solutions are designed for businesses that need more functionality and flexibility than the basic low-cost, cookie-cutter solutions can provide, but without the cost and complexity associated with enterprise products. Mid-market solution providers will address the majority of the checklist items above and often at a reasonable cost. If you need a robust, flexible and scalable solution for 10 to 50 users focus on mid-market solution providers.

Small Business solutions offer an inexpensive vehicle for capturing account and contact information, storing notes and producing a sales forecast. By design these offer limited functionality and customizability, and support services are traditionally limited to e-mail only. However if you are a small group of five or so users, they can be a valuable low-cost tool for managing customer relationships.