

CHOOSING THE RIGHT CRM VENDOR

How to implement successful,
customer-centric CRM software
that powers your future.

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NOT ALL CRM SYSTEMS ARE CREATED EQUALLY

As you would expect, not all CRM software systems are created equal. Some of the underlying technology in a vendor's software is there because it's a legacy of the particular vendor's past. That's not necessarily a bad thing if you already own that vendor's software. But going forward, the technology you want should be built to power your firm's future and its vision. Onyx believes that means you need technology that is built with ten primary characteristics in mind. They are as follows:

1. **Comprehensive, customer-centric design.** The foundation of a successful CRM platform is a database, application, and interface design that places the customer at the center of your business.
2. **Internet-native three-tier application architecture.** Separating your databases, from the application business logic, from the user interface, and building the whole solution out of Internet-native technologies gives you the ultimate in flexibility, cost-effectiveness, and the ability to power your desired customer experience. Internet-native technology operates independent of platform or operating system – a truly open system.
3. **Component Web services capable.** There are two sides to the coin, relative to Web services. “Web services capable” means you can add features to your core CRM application by easily integrating with other pieces of software (large or small) that you've already developed or that other firms have developed, as long as they are also web services capable. It also means other applications can integrate with your CRM system to leverage its existing features. In short, web services help you gain greater leverage out of each IT dollar you spend on commercial or proprietary software and makes functionality easily available across a broader array of customer touch points.
4. **Interoperability in a federated data model environment.** The goal is not physical centralization of CRM data. Rather, the objective is the ability to logically link decentralized data so that it acts like it's all in the same place.
5. **Ubiquitous access (device independence).** Giving users access to information via phone, e-mail, Web, PC, kiosk, PDA, or any number of other devices.

6. **Flexibility - Rapid configuration and customization capable.** Rapid configuration is most easily achieved by allowing power users and system administrators to easily modify the “look and feel” and behavior of the application, using graphical administration tools, rather than requiring that IT professionals write custom code. For the most complex customizations, however, custom code usually needs to be written. For this task, there are industry-standard tools, and there are the proprietary tools that application software vendors develop. Industry standard tools are always the better choice because many people know how to use them.
7. **Role-based access.** Just because you’re a service person doesn’t mean you don’t need access to sales information – or the other way around. Access to information should be defined by the role the customer and company needs someone to play, not just the person’s job description.
8. **Personalization capable portal access.** Delivering a satisfying customer experience requires that users themselves – customers, employees, and partners – have the ability to alter how they interact with your CRM technology. It also requires that your CRM application automatically adapt to perceived patterns of customer interests and behaviors.
9. **Multi-tenancy.** You shouldn’t need separate systems or hardware to run separate configurations of your CRM software for your different departments.
10. **Global Deployment Readiness.** As more companies do business globally, the need for multi-language support and multi-country implementations has increased. It is important to make sure your CRM system has been internationalized and supports core technologies like Unicode – all with the ultimate goal of facilitating global CRM deployments.

1. COMPREHENSIVE, CUSTOMER-CENTRIC DESIGN

One test to determine whether a system is user-centric is to count how many screens/forms the user has to launch in order to complete a common transaction. A user-centric approach is built on simple, intuitive user interfaces that require the user to view or complete a minimum number of screens and enter a minimum number of keystrokes to navigate (beyond two screens you begin to degrade user productivity and satisfaction). The complexity required to deliver an elegant user experience should be managed inside the middle tier of the system.

A simple test to determine whether a system is customer-centric is to try to create a sales opportunity or a service incident without first linking to a person or company. If you can do work without either setting up a customer or linking to a customer, the design isn't customer-centric. There is no conceivable reason why work should be done on behalf of a customer if it's not explicitly linked to a customer record that's shared across the enterprise.

2. INTERNET-NATIVE THREE-TIER APPLICATION ARCHITECTURE

To make sure you have an application that is designed and built as a three-tier Internet-native architecture, ask your technology people these questions. You're looking for simple "yes" answers:

- Can you support additional, concurrent users by adding Web servers and application servers?
- Can your CRM application easily communicate with other applications running on different platforms? For example, can your CRM application running on the Microsoft Windows operating system communicate with your ERP application running on the Unix operating system?
- Can your CRM application easily integrate with today's Enterprise Application Integration (EAI) technologies such as Microsoft BizTalk and IBM WebSphere MQ via XML, the de facto Internet standard for data exchange?
- Does your CRM application use XML internally within the system to exchange data, and therefore avoid performance-degrading translation layers when integrating with other enterprise applications?

- Does your CRM application leverage vendor-specific services provided by the underlying operating environment (e.g. operating system, Microsoft .NET, J2EE platform) in order to maximize the performance and scalability of the application?
- Does your CRM application run without installing components on the local user machine?

3. COMPONENT WEB SERVICES CAPABLE

There is a simple test to determine whether your CRM application is Web-services-capable. Ask if other applications can use the Internet-standard protocols SOAP and XML to access the entire set of capabilities within your CRM application. If the answer is “No,” then most likely, the interface into your CRM application is based on a proprietary protocol, such as SAP’s Business Application Programming Interface (BAPI). This greatly reduces the ease of cross-platform integration and eliminates the ability to share pieces of your CRM application as Web service components to parties both inside and outside your organization over the Internet.

4. INTEROPERABILITY IN A FEDERATED DATA MODEL ENVIRONMENT

- Does your CRM application require that all customer-related data reside only within your core CRM application?
- Is it necessary that your CRM application contain the database of record?
- Is it necessary that data residing in other systems be duplicated into the CRM system in order to give CRM users access to that data?

If the answer to any of the above questions is “Yes,” then your CRM application could not easily participate in a federated data model environment.

5. UBIQUITOUS ACCESS (DEVICE INDEPENDENCE)

- Does your CRM application support specific and distinct user interfaces based on the device in use?
- Does your CRM application leverage the unique advantages of each device, while overcoming any existing limitations in the device?
- Are all devices serviced by a common business services and data services platform?

If you answer “No” to any of the above questions, your CRM application probably does not support ubiquitous access.

6. FLEXIBILITY - RAPID CONFIGURATION AND CUSTOMIZATION CAPABLE

Here's what you need to ask to find out if the technology you're about to buy is built on easy-to-customize metadata: Can the technology be easily and quickly modified as your business design and business processes change to meet the needs of your customers and market? The answers need to speak to four basic customization requirements:

- Ability to customize the user interface appropriate to the audience (customer, partner, employee) and in such a manner as to achieve a truly personalized customer experience.
- Ability to customize business processes to enable your firm to create a competitive advantage through its branded customer experience.
- Ability to model unique aspects of your business in the CRM application while still taking advantage of the operational benefits of a common platform. This is what we were just talking about: a generic, extensive platform on top of which CRM is built and other enterprise functions can be built as well.
- Ability to integrate with other systems, both within your enterprise as well as those of remote, trusted business partners.

To find out if your CRM application supports complex customizations through the use of industry-standard development tools, ask yourself two basic questions:

- Can you implement complex business rules and integrations by writing custom code?
- Can the development tool be used to modify other applications within your organization, either now or in the future?

If the answer to either question is “No”, the CRM application is a closed, proprietary system that will not adapt to your changing business processes.

Rather than listen to the technical explanations, give your technology team and prospective vendors a customer experience scenario and ask them what they'd have to do to configure the CRM software to support it. Ask specifically what they'd have to do at each layer.

- What would that mean we'd have to do to our data?
- How hard would it be to make changes to the actual application?
- What would we have to do to change what the user sees?

Then provide a different scenario and ask again. If the answers involve massive amounts of time, money, and efforts, you have the wrong technology, the wrong team, or both.

7. ROLE-BASED ACCESS

Some simple tests to determine if your CRM application supports role-based access and a portal framework are:

- Can your CRM application present different views to employees, partners and customers?
- Can your CRM application present different views to employees based on their role, mode of access, or current activity?
- Can your CRM application user interface seamlessly present data from other applications or content sources? If so, can this be set up by your IT staff relatively easily?

If you answer “No” to these questions, your CRM application is not portal-capable and will not be able to deliver the type of branded experience your organization hopes to achieve.

8. PERSONALIZATION CAPABLE PORTAL ACCESS

Some simple tests to determine if your CRM application will give you the level of personalization you'll need:

- Can your CRM application present different information to employees, partners and customers based on their explicitly stated preferences?
- Can your CRM application present different information to employees, partners and customers based on interests and behaviors perceived by the CRM application?

If you cannot answer “Yes” to both questions, your CRM application is not portal capable.

9. MULTI-TENANCY

A simple test to determine if your CRM application supports multi-tenancy is to ask your technology team if you can run multiple instances of your CRM software, supporting different business units with different customer attributes, user views and business rules on a single set of hardware. If they cannot answer “Yes,” your CRM application probably does not support multi-tenancy.

10. GLOBAL DEPLOYMENT READINESS

Some simple questions to determine if your CRM application has been properly internationalized are listed below:

- Do your products support multiple time zones and multiple currencies?
- Do you have a clearly defined internationalization process that you apply to your applications, and if so, what is it?
- Can you support multiple, distinct characters sets such as German, Japanese, Chinese (both single-byte and double-byte character sets) in the same physical database? Can you input and manipulate data in those character sets?
- Do you have a team or group that is responsible for application internationalization?

CONCLUSION

A word of caution. Anything can be done with technology given enough time, money, and effort. Witness the pyramids of Giza, the transcontinental railway, and the Apollo program that successfully placed a man on the moon. Determining if something is technically possible isn't the same thing as being assured that a business objective can be met using a specific set of technologies, in a reasonable amount of time, at an acceptable cost.

When the CRM vendors you deal with say that something is possible, be sure to qualify that possibility with time, cost, and risk. And then hold your vendors and consultants to those answers.

It is important to remember that there is a vast difference between capable and deliverable. *You can customize a school bus to be a competitive dragster, but why would you want to when you can start by buying a high-performance car with a powerful engine and go from there?*

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