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CRM Vendor Proposals: 10 Items You Need Most

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If a significant CRM system project is on your agenda in this new fiscal year, here are checklist items that you need to look out for in vendor proposals.

10 Things You Want:

1. A project plan focused on user adoption. As I've [written](#) endlessly in this column, a CRM system without active users and a rich set of data is just an empty shell. This is not a matter of training or even indoctrination. In the project plan, every delivery phase should be focused on things that will attract communities of users because the new features will inherently make their job easier.

2. Incremental delivery. As I've also written [here](#), CRM requirements tend to change more rapidly (and more radically) than other enterprise software. The project should be delivering functionality and data incrementally, so the business users see the system becoming more valuable at least once a quarter. With a SaaS system, the project should be able to deliver something of value to the business at least every six weeks, almost no matter how big the project is.

3. Adaptive pricing. Since there shouldn't be a big bang feature delivery, there shouldn't be any big bucks payments. As noted [here](#), the fixed price isn't always right — one side or the other is going to lose big if you insist upon a monolithic fixed price. We recommend managing each delivery increment to a budget that's fixed at the start of the increment, not the start of the project.

4. Domain knowledge. To be effective, CRM systems must be molded to the characteristics of your marketplace and the details of your business processes. If you see "cookie-cutter" thinking in the vendor's proposal, run for cover: they'll be delivering something that won't fit your business. The domain knowledge you need is both "vertical" (industry) and "horizontal" (business process), and you need to see it in the people actually bid for your project — not just the vendor's principals.

5. References in your industry. "References" goes without saying — but you need proof of the vendor's domain knowledge and project successes in business environments like yours. Don't be overly picky — references are hard for the vendors to produce — but make sure there is the right depth in the vendor's team.

6. Integration with marketing automation. CRM systems and Marketing Automation [are close cousins](#). But they're only cousins. The best of breed in CRM systems have weak marketing automation features, and the reverse is also true. Unless your CRM project is focused only on customer support, the system will be incomplete if it doesn't have a tight integration with e-mail blasters, landing page generators, registration systems, and event management features. Make sure that the project uses off-the-shelf adaptors for ERP, order entry, and other related systems.

7. Integration with your email and phone systems. CRM is all about communicating with customers and collaborating with internal staff to win the deal and build customer satisfaction. So your CRM system needs to be integrated with the main channels of communication: e-mail and phone. There's nothing wrong with third-party products here, but you want to make sure that appropriate inbound and outbound e-mails are logged for each "touch" and that the system provides "screen pops" to inform anyone who has to take an inbound call from a customer or prospect.

8. Data quality, data conversion, appropriate history. Even in a "greenfield" CRM project, there's data to be converted and integrated from day one. Don't try to import more data than you really require, as [the real cost of data](#) preparation and integration can easily be \$1 a record or more. In many CRM projects, getting your data really ready for prime time is the single most expensive part of

the project! Watch out for vendors who use weasel-words to put all the risk of this in your lap.

9. Mobile (read: iPad/Android/CrackBerry). In CRM, support for the road-warrior is moving rapidly out of the "nice to have" column. Sales reps and field support teams are increasingly working on the go or at the customer site, and they need real-time access to customer history, order status, and inventory information. Even if you have no requirement for this now, make sure that the technology you're buying can readily support popular devices for all the functions you're going to deploy.

10. Social Media Integration. You don't have to use Twitter or FaceBook yourself to know that consumers and professionals log on to social media networks by the millions every day. Whether it's Salesforce Chatter for internal collaboration or Reputation Defender for brand monitoring, your CRM project needs to at least have a strategy for integrating these next-generation customer touch points.

3 Things to Avoid in a CRM Proposal:

1. Large requirements discovery phases at the beginning, with accompanying requirements tomes. These are practically guaranteed to be obsolete (or just plain wrong) the day they are published. In an area evolving as fast as CRM, these big documents can't possibly reflect the needs of the business 18 months from now.

2. Boil-the-ocean data history. Even a small business can have a million leads and tens of millions of prospect interactions. Trying to bring all this into the new CRM system in a meaningful way can overwhelm your budget and schedule. See if you can get the initial project to focus on a year's worth of history, and bring in the rest later only if need be.

3. Feature-itis. This will do absolutely no good in a CRM project. You'll clearly need architecture, and a clean way to integrate systems....but project success is about getting the users really into the system. Not swamped with new things to learn.

David Taber is the author of the new Prentice Hall book, "[Salesforce.com Secrets of Success](#)" and is the CEO of [SalesLogistix](#), a certified Salesforce.com consultancy focused on business process improvement through use of CRM systems. SalesLogistix clients are in North America, Europe, Israel, and India, and David has over 25 years experience in high tech, including 10 years at the VP level or above.

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