Pythagoras

The Secrets to Creating a Successful CRM Strategy

Insights from UK non-profits about how to improve the success of your digital projects.

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Our dedicated team has delivered digital projects to over 100 customers in the charity and membership sector. Throughout these projects, as well as dedicated events, roundtables and partnerships, we have learnt a lot about what makes a successful CRM strategy.

As part of our commitment to non-profits, we've taken some key learnings from our team, our customers and attendees at our events, and compiled this guide to help you in the planning, execution and maintenance of your digital strategy.

Thank you to all of our contributors for sharing valuable insight and advice.

Planning

Planning sets the tone for your whole project. Here, we share some advice about how to make the best possible start.

Set your vision in terms of goals, not technology

It is important to set your strategy first and view technology as an enabler. Rather than starting with a goal to 'introduce a bot' or 'create a member portal', think in terms of what it is you are trying to achieve. Consider core objectives, such as 'providing a 24-hour online service to our members', or 'giving volunteers the ability to self-serve online' instead.

This way you'll have a clearer idea of the key drivers behind the change, and you'll be able to select the most appropriate technology to help you achieve this.

Set expectations early

Ensure expectations are set early in terms of your budget, time and resources. This will help you to avoid delays in the project which can incur additional costs. Projects often require considerable input from your users as subject-matter-experts, so it will pay to make sure teams are aware in advance and can prepare accordingly.

Tackle the question of ROI

Estimating the ROI of a digital project can be challenging, as it is difficult to provide metrics on expected improvements before your requirements have been fully explored. Here are some tips about creating a business case without committing to specific financial or time savings.

1. Consider what you are trying to achieve in terms of your wider business goals. Illustrate how your proposed solution will enable or accelerate your journey to achieving these goals.
2. Identify tangible, focussed objectives that can be demonstrated to have been met. For example, set out to reduce the number of phone calls you receive by a certain percentage, or to remove certain paper-based forms from a process.
3. Measure the length of time it takes to complete some of your common business processes. Estimate how long they are expected to take once the new system and associated automation tools have been implemented. This will offer a rough indication of ROI in certain key areas.

By approaching the ROI question cautiously, organisations can provide the justification they need to secure buy-in without committing themselves to unrealistic expectations.

Break your project up into manageable phases

Give your board the confidence that your objectives are achievable by breaking your project into manageable phases with clear objectives. This increases the likelihood of securing buy-in, and also allows you to create some quick wins in the early phases that increase confidence in the overall project delivery.

Employ extra help if needed

It can be beneficial to bring in an external change or project manager to plan your project and keep it on track. It helps to have a fresh pair of eyes when coming up with ideas for new ways of working. It also avoids any bias or historical preference for a particular technology or way of working. Some charities note that hearing constructive criticism or suggested improvements can be easier when coming from an external party.

"Understand your business processes before embarking on a CRM project, as this will save time and money in the long run."

Joanne Bailey
ICT Data Support & Project Manager, seAp

7 key roles to build your perfect CRM Project

1 Project sponsor

Enthusiastic executive sponsorship helps convey the importance of the project and ensures resources are made available.

2 Steering committee

CRM touches many different departments, so gather the departmental heads to agree upon a common direction of the project.

3 Project Manager

Your Project Manager will need to be comfortable having conversations at all levels and not be afraid to hold people accountable when required to keep things on track.

4 Product Owner

Part of the Product Owner's responsibility is to have a vision of what the organisation wishes to build. They must convey this concept to the delivery team to ensure that the solution is developed in line with expectations.

5 IT

Your IT team should be involved throughout to make sure everyone is on the same page about what the CRM system is intending to replace, integrate with or provide data for.

6 Subject Matter Experts

Make sure to listen to your colleagues that carry out the processes that will be incorporated into the CRM project.

7 Super-users/ Champions

Boost user adoption by appointing a team of Champions to spread enthusiasm about the project to their colleagues, gather feedback and provide answers to questions.

Making sense of your data and preparing for change

A system is only as good as its data. Here, we discuss some of the ways to prepare your data for the move and create better long-term habits.

Find out what data you are collecting and how you are using it

Before a project, you must understand your data estate. When it is stored in spreadsheets and siloed systems, it can be easy to underestimate the scale of your data.

Some good questions to ask are What, Why, What else?

- What do you currently store, and where is it?
- Why do you collect and store this data?
- What do you collect but not store? Do you need to request this data in the first place?
- What else could you benefit from that you don't already collect?

One charity warned others not to get too caught up in second-guessing what you will need in five years' time. It's important to strike a balance between being prepared, and hoarding data 'just in case'. Being skilful and selective about what you collect will help to avoid a situation in which you have so much data that you don't know how to make sense of it.

Ask about spreadsheets

While spreadsheets will always have a place in some organisations, they tend to spring up when staff feel like there is no better way to manage certain information. A key driver of a digital project is to increase communication and collaboration, so reducing the number of private spreadsheets should be a goal.

Rather than spreadsheet shaming, encourage your users to show and explain their spreadsheets. This will give you a good idea about the kind of data and processes involved in their role, and the information that needs to be captured as part of the CRM system. One charity even noted that they carry out a regular 'spreadsheet amnesty', where users are encouraged to declare and surrender their spreadsheets in favour of better systems.

Cleanse or archive incomplete, irrelevant and incorrect data

Nothing kills user adoption like logging into a new system and seeing bad data. Cleaning your data can also be a great way to get your users in the mindset of keeping better records before they move to the new system.

Procuring your CRM system

As well as choosing a technology, you are choosing a partner. Here are some of the most important things to consider when speaking to potential partners.

Gather a clear understanding of costs

Your supplier should be able to give you an estimation of run costs, not just for year one, but for year two, three, even five. Licencing costs are often subject to your use of the system, for example the number of users your will have or processes you will access. If you have aspirations to change your usage over time, make sure you understand the impact this might have on your overall costs.

Ask for customer testimonials

The best way to get a feel for your partner is by speaking to their other customers. A reputable partner will be able to provide a list of both recent go-lives and longer-term customers to demonstrate their capability and commitment to continued customer success.

Find out about system ownership post-project

There is a growing requirement from organisations to have control over their system post-project. Technology has moved on to a point where charities need not be completely dependent on their supplier to make small changes to their CRM platform. Ask your supplier how they plan to manage the transition from project to business as usual, and what their approach is to knowledge sharing and system handovers.

Understand your options for support

CRM systems play a crucial role in most organisations, and downtimes, errors and outages have a serious impact on business. Speak to your potential suppliers about their support and managed service options to ensure that your system will be maintained long after the project has been completed.

“We found that choosing a CRM partner was as important as choosing the technology. By considering both aspects simultaneously, and keeping our options open throughout the procurement process, we were able to select the right combination of technology and partner to fit our future CRM ambitions and preferred method of working.”

Daniel Lockeretz
Head of CRM, UnLtd.

“The relationship with the supplier is one of the most important considerations when embarking on a CRM project. Get a real feel for how well culturally aligned you are; meet your suppliers, visit their offices. In this day and age, technology is a given, so focus on the right team to support you and guide you.”

Kirsty Moors
Non-Profit Sector Lead, Pythagoras

Managing change

Communication is key to ensuring everyone is brought on your change journey. Here we share some advice for managing this process.

Set your vision from the top

True commitment to change has to come from the top of an organisation. Leaders and senior staff should take the organisation on a change journey, telling a story about:

1. The reasons for the change
2. How the change will be implemented
3. The role each person or team will be expected to play
4. The benefits that will come as a result

Communicate effectively

Let each team know where they sit in the project roadmap, making sure they appreciate that they will have an opportunity to feed into the design at the relevant time.

"Once teams start to get their hands on new technology, excitement can spread and other teams will start to ask for similar tools. It's crucial to celebrate this excitement while remaining firm in your project plan, communicating what they will receive and when."

Andy Shilton
Information Services Director,
Charted Insurance Institute

Be transparent about what you are purchasing

We have seen situations whereby departments have deployed stand-alone tactical systems that duplicate functionality already being delivered as part of an organisation-wide CRM project. Not only is this a waste of resources, it also has a material impact on the effectiveness of CRM. An overarching IT strategy, with clear communication and strong governance around purchasing new systems can help to keep everyone on the same page and prevent such overlaps.

Create a mechanism for users to feed back

CRM steering groups are a great way for representatives from multiple departments to get together and bring suggestions for enhancements. Some charities we've spoken to have created ways for their users to raise suggestions, which are then considered at monthly CRM meetings and, if appropriate, added to the roadmap.

Ask the right questions when discovering requirements

When setting the requirements for your new system, it's essential that you listen to your end users as well as management. These people are your experts; ask the right questions and they will show what can be improved. Rather than asking for CRM requirements, ask questions like 'what will make your job easier?', or 'how do you think we can interact better with our donors?'

Think outside of how you've always done things

Try to keep an open mind when considering requirements. Organisations can often get stuck in a cycle of recreating 'how we've always done things'. This results in them creating a shiny new version of the system they had before. You can avoid this by encouraging users to think outside the box, rather than presenting them options framed by their current system. If you choose to work with a partner, choose one that will challenge current processes, helping you make the most out of your investment.

"A thorough understanding of your processes is key. It is not helpful to migrate yesterdays' workarounds into your new solution. Ironing out those quirks is important but can trigger negative emotions in your users. Take them with you on the journey so that they understand why things are changing and how it benefits them."

Gerco; ODI.

Project

Here we discuss tips to help you keep your CRM project running smoothly.

Assign a strong project manager

Your Project Manager is an essential ingredient to the success of your project. We would always recommend assigning a Project Manager, no matter how small the project or organisation. Some great advice from a membership organisation is to ensure your Project Manager is not level-conscious. It is likely that your Project Manager will need to speak to people from different departments at different seniority levels, so they need to be comfortable challenging and chasing senior leaders to keep the project on track. If this will prove difficult for an existing employee, consider hiring an external Project Manager to ensure you can hold all teams to account.

"Be flexible in your approach. We moved from Waterfall to Agile and found Agile suits us much better as it enabled us to see what was being built."

Joanne Bailey
ICT Data Support & Project Manager, seAp

Give the project team the authority to make decisions

This is particularly important in Agile projects, as delays can mean wasted resource. Your partner should let you know their expectations about the pace of decision making and the amount of time they will require from you. For an Agile project, its important to have someone available for your project team to talk to and obtain a swift decision from.

Agile vs Waterfall

Take the time to understand the differences in project methodoliges. For example, ask yourself whether you have the resources and project experience required for an Agile project. You will also need to make sure you're comfortable having a flexible scope, and guiding your partner about the priority you would like to assign to each backlog item or piece of functionality.

If something isn't working, change it!

If you've started your project using a certain approach, this doesn't mean that it always has to be this way. For example, one charity adopted a Waterfall project methodology in order for us to deliver their first phase in time for a key deadline. After this, they moved to an Agile methodology for system improvements and additional work such as their customer portal, as it enabled them to become much more hands-on in the development of their system.

Don't underestimate the demand for your time

Even if your partner is undertaking the bulk of your project, you'll need to assign time for gathering requirements, making decisions and completing testing and training.

One charity tackled this by assembling a team of representatives from each department. They asked each member of the team to spend half of their week on project tasks, and hired additional help to complete their other day-to-day tasks. Working in this way ensures business as usual doesn't slip while focus is elsewhere, but also means that your project team has access to the insight and expertise of those who live and breathe the processes that you delivering as part of the CRM project.

"It is easy to kick off lots of change programmes, but businesses try to do it with staff/business users who are hopelessly over-utilised. It's a recipe for going nowhere fast because you can't get the face time necessary to really engage, respond, sign off etc.

Try to design your programme in such a way that you can mitigate this risk - either by going more slowly, or in smaller bites - or making it very clear of project impact and forcing the business to face up to the challenge of a scarce expert resource."

Andy Shilton
Information Services Director,
Charted Insurance Institute

Go live

Go-live is an exciting time. Putting appropriate planning in place ensures your users are comfortable to make the switch to the new system.

Ensure adequate training

Asking your teams to work with a system they are unfamiliar with will make them fearful of the change. Conduct training sessions or distribute materials as close to go-live as possible, to ensure your teams are ready to go once they are asked to move to the new system. Consider having floor-walking sessions or drop-in clinics from your partner or IT team during go-live to reinforce training.

"People and organisational change is always the most difficult element of introducing a new system and therefore a new way of working. Give yourself plenty of time (and budget!) to undertake genuine change impact analysis and training needs analysis; these will then enable you to understand what communications are required to create a 'coalition' of support and training documentation that's required."

David Blanco
Senior Project Manager, Age UK

Reassure users that support is there

Be prepared to answer questions about the system, even after go-live. This is the time when you want your users to develop good habits about using the system, so being there to support ensures they don't get nervous, confused, or revert back to the old way of doing things.

Assign champions

Your champions are those people that will spread the good word of CRM to their colleagues, explaining the reasons for the new system and helping them if they are struggling to use it. In a discussion about what makes a good champion, charities noted the following characteristics:

- Gregarious and enthusiastic, keen to take teams on a journey with them.
- Not too technical - you want everyone to be reassured that they can use the system too.
- Competent to explain the processes in simple and easy to understand language.

Business as usual

A successful CRM project shouldn't stop at go-live. Here we discuss the things you should have in place to ensure a painless transition into business as usual.

Create a change management process

To help maintain the rigour and change management that was in place around the system during the project, it is advisable to create a change management process. This will help you to keep track of any system updates and ensure that adequate documentation is made. Whenever a change is suggested, it should be evaluated against documentation to make sure it will not negatively impact other areas of CRM.

Be aware of technology updates

Many Cloud CRM platforms have regular updates, such as new feature additions or improvements. The impact of this is minimal for many systems, but the risk increases with the addition of code and third-party plug-ins. You can minimise this risk by keeping a note of any code or third-party tools and their interaction with the system. That way, if a problem does occur after an update, you have a good idea of where to look. Your partner will also be able to keep you up to date with the platform roadmap to give you advanced warning of changes.

Invest in a support partner

The CRM system is a business-critical tool for most non-profits. Any time with limited access to the system can have a dramatic impact on the productivity of your staff and the service you give to your customers, members or supporters.

You can mitigate this risk by working with a reputable partner for long-term technical support. As well as fixing issues as they arise, partners can often offer managed services packages. These will proactively notify you before you detect a problem in the system, reducing the risk of your system failing to perform as it should.

It's important to remember that a Cloud-based solution lives in a dynamic environment that is constantly being improved. The cost to support this system can be offset by the savings organisations make as a result of avoiding future system and hardware upgrades.

About Pythagoras

Pythagoras has been delivering transformational projects since 1999.

Our dedicated Non-Profit and Membership Team has a huge breadth of experience from working with a wide range of charities and other non-profits. We're committed to delivering intelligent solutions that increase our customers' impact and engagement. We have a truly collaborative approach and are proud to be considered trusted partners to over 100 non-profit and membership organisations.

The technology we deliver is helping organisations to direct maximum resources towards their causes, from monitoring sustainable fishing, to powering social enterprise start-ups, and delivering one of the UK's largest charity helplines.

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