THE 10 SECRETS TO BUYING A PUBLISHING CRM

I n today's highly competitive media landscape, magazines and newspapers need more than great content to flourish. To run a successful publication, publishers need tools that optimize profits and thoroughly maximize their resources.

If you are currently maintaining (or previously maintained) disconnected, separate software systems, you can probably appreciate why all-inclusive publishing solutions have grown in popularity. From simplified billing processes to streamlined communications, a unified platform can fix most inefficiencies plaguing typical publishing environments.

Hidden Buying Strategies

The number of choices available in today's marketplace can feel overwhelming, but you'll find a great product if you understand your options thoroughly. Publishers can often avoid common risks and pitfalls if they know what questions to ask and which hidden aspects to evaluate.

1. Find a platform specifically built for the publishing industry.

While big national names have great features for sales and CRM communications, they are not adequately designed to meet the demands of publishing. Good publishing CRMs typically offer comparable features to the big generic solutions, and publishing sales tools are often better for generating ad revenue.

Some big brands may offer to link to your publishing CRM, but the integration and support costs are generally higher than expected. Furthermore, having your CRM separate from your media contract, ad order entry and production system creates duplicate data entries, and that is precisely the problem your CRM should be solving!

2. Select a web-based, mobile-friendly platform.

Web-based CRM platforms are going to cost less to install and maintain than desktop based systems. It's simply a more efficient model. Almost all software providers now serve software over the web because of the greater efficiency. If you end up with a client server app, you pick up all of the IT fees associated with it, including installation, servers, maintenance and updates. These "hidden" charges typically add up to more than the price of most cloud-based systems.

3. Understand the back-up plan.

From brief Internet disruptions to electrical failures, all software solutions eventually

experience service outages. Your software provider should have a solid backup plan that can quickly restore your cloud-based service. Between different server locations and alternate Internet providers, your vendor should be equipped with a readily available solution. In fact, you may want to arrange for a monthly CRM data backup as a secondary precaution.

4. Look for company stability.

Industry staples that have been around the longest tend to have higher quality products. Platforms with large customer bases also typically indicate consistent innovations and improvements. Newer alternatives may seem similar, but rock-solid stability is very hard to imitate. Most software companies spend years perfecting a product before releasing it to the public. Even when they do, an application still may not reach an adequate level of product maturity.

Aside from reliability, you should also feel confident that your vendor will stay in business. If your software provider has a loyal, growing user base, then it's a sign of a great product!

5. Learn as much as you can about your vendor's customers.

While a large user base is very promising, the types of publishers using a system can be equally important. Your CRM should accommodate clients who share the same needs and requirements as your publishing company. If the platform only supports small publishers,

it probably won't scale well to higher volume order entry.

6. Ask for a list of recent innovations and ask about the frequency of updates.

The number of quality new features released within the past year often indicates the quality and size of their development staff. Any vendor who seems "lean" on tech resources could be a big risk and liability to your publishing company.

For example, if your vendor is supported by only three full-time developers, imagine the impact if they lost one; this would be one third of their developers! When publishers can't depend on a well-supported platform, it can negatively impact how your staff handles advertising.

7. Remember that a lower price doesn't mean it's a better deal.

If you are shopping for a publishing CRM, chances are your goals are to increase efficiency and reduce excess manpower. Keeping this in mind, a system's value proposition is much bigger than a monthly price tag.

For many companies, additional manpower can easily cost upwards of $25,000 annually. Therefore, if a system drastically reduces your labor needs, a few hundred dollars extra each month is a far better deal if it saves you $15,000 instead of $5,000.

8. Carefully consider who will be supporting your publication, and how much.

Having the CEO train you on their software may seem like great client service, but it's actually a bad sign. The reality is, many publishing CRM companies are too small to staff a client services department, or even one support person!

When your software provider lacks support staff, your needs will probably not be addressed promptly, or addressed at all. Or, in some situations, you may have access to a responsive support person, but it may not be someone who understands publishing.

Since your support package is an integral part of a software contract, it's important to find out who will be assisting you, and how much. Larger software providers can usually recommend a plan for small, mid-size and large clients. Nevertheless, you will want to know if you can change your plan, or add more support a la carte if you ever need it.

9. Find out how data imports are accommodated.

If you are switching CRM systems or have a high volume of records, you'll probably need help with data imports. Properly mapping fields during the data migration process can be quite complicated, especially for large publishers.

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Your software provider should clearly define what is included during the implementation process, and what fees are associated with it. Moreover, you'll need to know how long the data migration takes, and who will be dedicated to working on it.

10. Look for packages that can do the "hard stuff".

Any CRM can organize contacts, but solving the problems that plague publishing environments requires a great system:
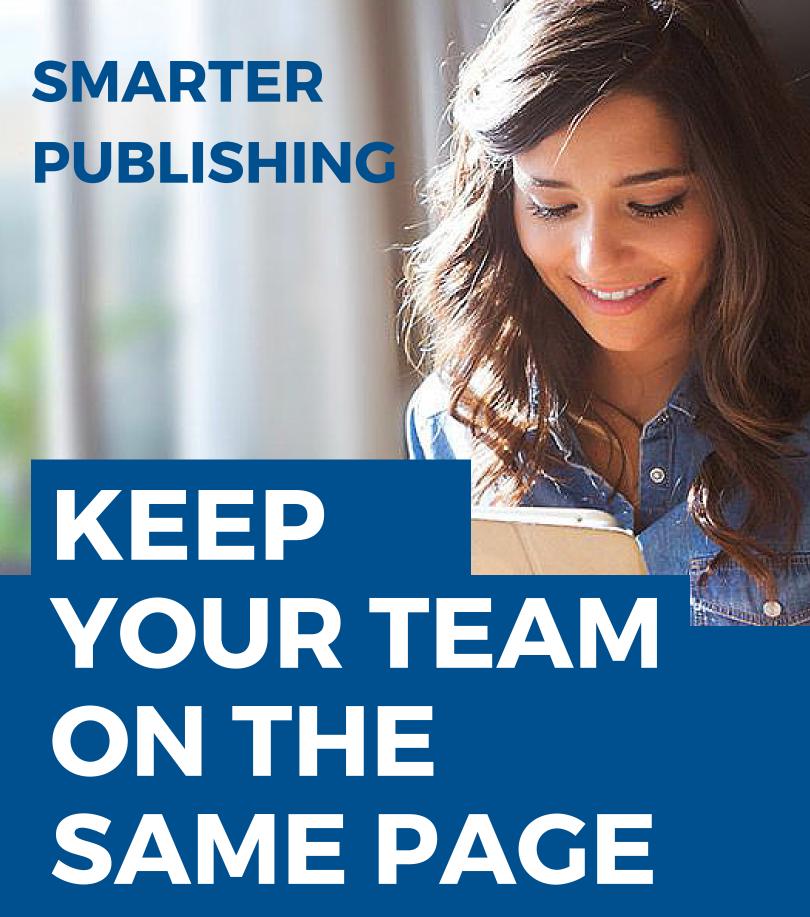
- **Customizable Reporting:** Even if a platform is specifically built for publishing, you may be disappointed by your CRM's reporting capabilities. Most publishers need customized templates with a multitude of filters such as time period, sales rep, business unit, and many other fields. If you can't extract the data you need on demand, you should find out if and how your vendor could assist you.

- **Detailed, Searchable Transactions:** Publishing CRMs may handle general billing, but having an easy way to track and mine details can be a time-saver. Searching transactions by payment type, payment status, client, issue and other fields by a specific date range will be appreciated by your billing department.

- **Integrated Flat Planning Tools and Digital Editions:** Exporting production information to a live, virtual map makes it easy to finalize your publication's layout.

Some CRMs also accommodate publishing to mobile apps and the web if you are using an advanced solution.

- **Integrated Marketing Automation, Lead identification and Data Append Tools:** Publishing CRMS with advanced marketing capabilities make it easier for sales reps to land new business. Imagine the impact it could have if you knew who on your website perused the advertising information.

- **Batch Billing Functionality:** Powerful platforms can process payments in bulk, and some can generate masses of statements. Any busy publishing environment using this capability would reduce manpower needed for billing.

- **Invoice Flexibility:** Omitting details on invoices may avoid client questions, but some advertisers demand that they see them. If your invoice templates are easy to adjust, you can please all clients with minimal effort.

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