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How to Develop a Long-Range CRM Strategy

By Geoffrey James

A CRM strategy is an integrated blueprint for how a company will use technology to achieve its sales, marketing, and customer-service goals. Every sales organization is unique, so building a CRM strategy is a unique process. According to Gartner vice president Ed Thompson, a CRM strategy must be relevant and linked to the overall corporate strategy, and it must build on existing sales or marketing strategies. "A CRM strategy cannot be developed in isolation," he says. Thompson makes the following recommendations:

Set Your Destination

If you don't know where you're going as a business, it's impossible to plan a CRM strategy that will support it. Your CRM destination should include measurable profitability and customer-experience targets. It should also the role of each team member and a clear picture of how your sales organization will be organized and led. It must answer such questions as the following:

- What is your ideal customer base?
- What products or services will you sell to your customers?
- What price will be most appropriate?
- What additional channels will you use?
- How will you build customer loyalty?
- How will you connect with customers to create a positive impression?
- What will drive customers to recommend you to others?

Audit Your Situation

Even if you know exactly where you're going, you can't get there if you don't know your starting point. Examine all aspects of your current situation: skills, resources, competitors, partners, customers, etc. Thompson advises measuring your organization's current state against equivalent organizations in the same or similar industry. "A competitive benchmark is an excellent way to gauge how far behind or ahead the organization is in comparison," he explains.

You should also assess the maturity of the current CRM approach and determine what might be useful to keep or revise. Even if your previous CRM initiatives have failed, you might be able to apply learning lessons to create a new and effective system.



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Map Your Journey

A CRM journey might take many years, and your map is likely to change en route. Have a long-range road map, and expect changes. "Setting the destination, auditing the current situation, and mapping the journey is an iterative process that may require several revisions before a final CRM strategy is developed," Thompson says. "The challenge is to avoid rushing the development process, as the company may be committed to many years of change."

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