

## CRM making life easier for CPA firms, small businesses

By Lisa Spinelli

More than two years ago, Diane Yetter, CPA and president of Chicago-based Yetter Consulting Services Inc., had disparate software systems for keeping track of her clients' needs, projects, history, contact information and billing.

Then she hired an IT consultant to custom-build her practice an online customer relationship management system so she could find all the information she needed in one location.

"We used to do all our billing out of QuickBooks, tracking and proposals in Excel, and all these other programs for everything else," said Yetter. "It performs real-time tracking, so you can see where things are at when you're on a client project. It cut payroll down from four hours to one hour and billing from eight to two hours. It really meets our needs."

CRM solutions are considered "front-office" applications because they not only manage client data, but also allow customers to interact directly with their data - changing their address, entering in their credit card information, or expressing their purchase preferences.

As a result, there has been an upswing in CPA firms, as well as small to midsized businesses, investing in CRM packages.

CRM technology is becoming more mobile and feature-rich, making it a core software product, said Anne Stanton, CPA and president of the Norwich Group, a national business and tech consulting group. An AMR Research paper stated that about a third of all SMBs with 250 to 499 employees and 19 percent of SMBs with up to 250 employees had CRM solutions.

"What's happening to the mid-to-larger-sized firms is that there is a drive, a need, to do sales and marketing and to keep more details on [their] customers," said Stanton. "The small firms need more tools than larger firms. In a five-person firm, those five people are doing everything from sales to tax prep, auditing and visionary work for the firm. They want and need more centralization when it comes to their clients."

AMR also reported that "software-as-a-service" or SaaS - a hosted solution where the software provider oversees everything from maintenance to data storage and security - is gaining momentum among SMBs, with 50 percent of those companies with 250 to 499 employees using a hosted CRM solution and 43 percent planning on using a hosted solution. Lower upfront costs, ease of use and the low maintenance costs associated with hosted versions make the SaaS model the most appealing to SMBs, said the Boston-based research group.

Yetter's custom-built solution is online, so data stored in the CRM system is never off-limits if someone is out of town or not in the office.

The choice between a hosted solution and an on-premise or server-based solution can depend on a number of factors: the level of customization that a firm or company needs, the integration abilities of the product to the back-office accounting system, or how feature-rich the customer wants the application to be.

Roger DeHaan, CPA and founder of Alliance Technology Group LLC in Aslip, Ill., said that the above-mentioned factors influenced his decision in choosing his firm's CRM products, as did his being a reseller of Sage Software's Sage CRM SalesLogix and ACT!

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The advertisement is a rectangular graphic with a blue top section and a yellow bottom section. The top section contains the text "WebCPA™" in a large, stylized font, with "Web" in blue and "CPA" in yellow. Below this, "Online Expo Center" is written in a smaller, blue, sans-serif font. The yellow section is divided into two horizontal bands. The upper band contains the text "TRADE SHOW" in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters, with "FOR THE" in a smaller font size below it, and "21st CENTURY" in large, blue, bold, sans-serif capital letters. The lower band contains the text "REGISTER TODAY!" in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters.

"We looked at various solutions, and the online ones were cumbersome at best, but everything improves in technology over time," he said.

At Sage's recent annual partner conference, chief executive officer Ron Verni asked the 3,000 attending partners to focus more of their clients on Sage CRM.com. Dave Batt, senior vice president and general manager of global CRM with Sage, assured attendees that Sage CRM.com is experiencing "tremendous growth."

#### Security worries

Many CPAs prefer to keep their data onsite, however, citing the same security fears that they have about putting enterprise resource planning or back-office accounting solutions online - hackers could steal their data and compromise clients' personal data.

"There are real reasons why people want their data in-house," said Stanton. "Salesforce.com is a popular solution, but it has its limitations, and when people want to move their CRM in-house, if you grow from a 500-person to a 5,000-person firm, how do you move it in-house? For CRM vendors, the biggest challenge is to give their customers a choice to move from a hosted to an in-house solution and back again - all the while keeping the environment highly configurable and simple."

Sage offers both hosted and in-house solutions, as do a number of other providers like QuickBooks and Everest Software. Everest also offers a hybrid model, what Everest chief technology officer Ali Jani called "dedicated on-demand."

"We put a lot of focus on allowing off- and online versions. Even though you're on a hosted environment, if you get on a plane or have no online capabilities, you can use the database offline," said Jani. "We provide two interfaces - the traditional browser interface and the power user interface, so you can get a really rich user interface with the on-demand environment."

Regional CPA firm Cherry, Bekaert & Holland LLP does not have a CRM application for their partners to keep track of their clients, said August Keller, director of marketing and business development. But the firm is looking into a few options - mostly Web-based.

"There has to be some linkage to Outlook. We only want people to have to load or put in data once. Asking them to load it in once is a big enough challenge, but asking them to load it into two different places would mean it never gets done," said Keller. "A bridge to sync it over to Outlook is a requirement."

Integration with Outlook is something most CRM packages offer as a standard, but integration with a back-office accounting system is one area many CRM systems lack.

NetSuite, Sage and Everest all offer clients an end-to-end software suite. The CRM applications are embedded into the suites so the information flows seamlessly; however, Norwich's Stanton noted, sometimes the technology suffers in order to provide the full suite.

"Really, [clients are] looking beyond CRM and having a single data source for all interaction with the customer and clients," said Mini Peiris, vice president of product management at NetSuite. "It's a holistic view, it's how the concept of CRM got started."

Peiris said that NetSuite is also watching a technology called interactive voice messaging. This software technology handles voicemail, redirects incoming calls, can read e-mail messages to a person over the phone, and can save the e-mail into a CRM application. Some Voice over Internet Protocol providers also offer a similar service. VoIP - digital calls made over the Internet - are translated from voicemails into text e-mails and can then be saved as attachments to certain contacts in a CRM package.

ATG's DeHaan already uses the IVM technology to rid his inbox of excessive e-mails before he arrives at work every morning.

Said DeHaan, "Even though we have remote Outlook client capabilities, calling in and killing off e-mails on the phone before work even starts has proven to be a real productivity enhancement."

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