Member Relations: An Association-Centric Approach to Customer Relationship Management

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CONTENT

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explosive growth for associations

> "The survival and growth of any business is totally dependent upon understanding what customers value, the jobs they're trying to do, and delivering a superior experience and value proposition.[1]"

We've recently spotted a trend, or perhaps even the precursor to a trend, in the association community: a renewed focus on data, and an increasing desire to provide more personalized and targeted member communications and services through the use of customer relationship management (CRM) strategies. This has led some associations to begin turning to, or considering a move to, customer relationship management (CRM) software as a supplement to or even replacement for their Association Management Software (AMS) systems.

Research clearly shows that a majority of associations would prefer that their AMS systems incorporate CRM-style data management capabilities. However, there is wide variance in the degree to which AMS products currently support CRM functions. Furthermore, AMS systems have the reputation for being large, complex, and expensive to acquire and maintain, and are often highly vendor specific. Some CRM systems can be acquired for free, and all the major packages have robust developer networks that ostensibly allow organizations using them a degree of freedom in their choices about implementation and support vendors. As a result, some associations are beginning to examine which of their business processes might be accommodated natively by CRM platforms.

In thinking about the role of AMS and CRM in the association universe, we need to consider CRM as an approach versus CRM as a software platform, and how those two relate to each other. We also need to consider what AMS can and can't do, what CRM can and can't do, and what aspects of each best support organizational goals.

1. http://www.brianvellmure.com/which-crm-software-is-best/

Customer Relationship Management: **The Philosophy**

"CRM is a strategic approach that…unites the potential of relationship marketing strategies and IT to create profitable, long-term relationships with customers…. This requires a cross-functional integration of processes, people, operations, and marketing capabilities that is enabled through information, technology, and applications.[2] "

One of the key problems we encounter talking about CRM is that we tend to conflate CRM as a concept with CRM as a software platform. CRM software supports or facilitates CRM the concept, but the software alone, without a commitment to the concept, is virtually useless. CRM software can provide a framework for collecting data, but it can't change the way associations operate.

Conceptually, CRM organizes relationships with audiences in the areas of sales, marketing, customer service, and support, allowing the organization to use data to better understand and serve customers, with the goals of recruiting more customers (increasing market share), retaining current customers, enticing current customers to purchase more programs, products and services (increasing customer share), and reducing customer support costs.

Historically, CRM has been primarily focused on segmenting customers to facilitate effective target marketing. CRM customer support functions have been organized around increasing efficiency (reducing the time spent on support calls) and driving sales ("customers who bought XX also bought YY").

The advent of social CRM changed the game. According to Paul Greenberg (via Wikipedia):

> "Social CRM is a philosophy and a business strategy, supported by a technology platform, business rules, workflow, processes and social characteristics, designed to engage the customer in a collaborative conversation in order to provide mutually beneficial value in a trusted and transparent business environment. It's the company's response to the customer's ownership of the conversation."[3]

In other words, we've moved from a world of one-way broadcasting to a world of two-way conversations that are taking place in public and cannot be controlled by the organization. We no longer merely send messages to passive recipients. Simply put, 21st century customer relationship management calls on us to form authentic relationships with our audiences.

2. http://www.journals.marketingpower.com/doi/abs/10.1509/jmkg.2005.69.4.167
3. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_CRM

> ***"Most big consumer brands are not used to having real relationships with customers. But associations are."[4]***

Make no mistake, the focus must be on relationship. Like any other relationship, our customer relationships require us to listen to them, understand their needs, and meet the ones we can. Buying into the CRM philosophy compels us to put systems and processes in place to manage those relationships, just as we do with our families and friends.

CRM, properly understood, supported, and implemented, helps us manage customer (member and non-member) relationships in a coordinated way across our associations so that every staff member can access the information we maintain on our audiences and use that information effectively to build stronger relationships with those audiences.

The key question becomes: what data is relevant? We can collect virtually any data on our customers, but not everything is a driver of relationship or of the behaviors we want to encourage. Gathering irrelevant data leads to GIGO: garbage in ➜ garbage out, in which our gigabytes of beside-the-point data obscure the real decision factors.

This, in turn, leads to a series of process questions.

- How do we decide which data to capture?
- Who is responsible for capturing the data?
- How will we capture the data?
- Where will be store the data?
- Once we have the data, then what happens?
- How will the data be reported?
- When will the data reported and to whom?
- How will we turn the data into the kind of information that facilitates data-driven decisions and better experiences for our audiences?
- Who is allowed to make those data-driven decisions?

Which leads us to strategy. Properly understood, CRM is a strategy,[5] not a tactic. Putting a CRM strategy together is like putting together any other kind of a strategy.

We seek to answer:

- Where are we now?
- Where are we trying to go?
- How are we going to get there?
- How will we know we've arrived?

> "Customer Relationship Management is a company-wide business strategy designed to reduce costs and increase profitability by solidifying customer satisfaction, loyalty, and advocacy. True CRM brings together information from all data sources within an organization (and where appropriate, from outside the organization) to give one, holistic view of each customer in real time. This allows customer facing employees in such areas as sales, customer support, and marketing to make quick yet informed decisions on everything from cross-selling and upselling opportunities to target marketing strategies to competitive positioning tactics."[6]

Unpacking that a bit, a 21st century CRM strategy is focused on your members and other audiences, rather than your staff and internal processes. It involves people, processes, and technology. On the people side, everyone from the CEO to the customer service representatives must actively support the CRM strategy. The entire team must agree on what data are going to be tracked and the process for doing so, and must be held accountable for collecting and using that data consistently and correctly. We tend to start with the technology, because it's the simplest component; it's defined and relatively easy to understand. Unfortunately, it's also the least important. If we have buy-in at all levels and have set up good processes, the technology we choose is nearly irrelevant.

4.http://www.socialfish.org/whitepaper#SCRM

5. http://www.iveybusinessjournal.com/topics/strategy/crm-is-a-strategy-not-a-tactic#.UO8lmLZXYvo

6. http://www.destinationcrm.com/Articles/CRM-News/Daily-News/What-Is-CRM-46033.aspx

Customer Relationship Management: The Software

Notice we said the technology is "NEARLY irrelevant." Now that we're on board with CRM the concept, what about CRM the software?

One of the major differences between CRM software and other types of databases is Sales Force Automation (SFA). SFA focuses on contact management with the goal of supporting a formal process for moving leads through the purchase loop[7] until they become customers.

"Leads." "Sales." "Purchase loop." These can be scary terms for associations. But, to quote Miriam Miller Wolk of the United Fresh Produce Association, "'Sales' is not a dirty word."[8] Selling involves convincing people that their investment in what you're offering – a legislative position, a webinar, a book, a conference, a membership – is worthwhile. Whether we realize it or not, we all do it all the time. To do it well, we need to understand people's needs, which comes via relationship. (For more on this concept, see Daniel Pink's book *To Sell Is Human.)*

That's what CRM software is designed to do: help you sell better, by allowing you to track every encounter you have with your current and potential customers.

How does it do that? As with any type of software, the specific features will vary from package to package. But there are some commonalities: [9]

- **Contact and lead management:** this is the heart of the system, where you track the customer data that allows you to manage your sales process effectively.
- **Customer support:** this provides things like self-service, knowledge base, ticketing systems, issue tracking, and task assignment and hand off, activities which are familiar to most of us from our interactions with our own IT departments.
- **Campaign management:** this provides list management, segmentation, and tracking for direct mail, email, and, ideally, social and word of mouth campaigns.
- **Inventory management:** this is used when you're selling physical stuff (like books) and integrates with your accounts receivable.
- **Workflow management:** this allows you to assign and hand off tasks between users across the system and includes follow up tracking.
- **Security management:** this is where you assign various users to different roles and groups that allow them to interact with various parts of the system and different data.
- **Reporting:** this is where you decide both what information will be included in your standard reports and who will run and receive them, and also where you can create ad hoc and custom reports.
- **Configuration/customization:** this is where you make your decisions about how the system will operate, what it will look like, and what features will be available to whom.
- **Integration:** this is what allows data in one system to talk to another (i.e., bulk email, website, accounting software, social platforms).
- **Platform/licensing:** different systems have different models, and you will need to select the process that makes sense and works for your needs (i.e., concurrent versus per seat licenses, software as a service versus enterprise installation, levels of remote support, web access, mobile access, etc.).

7. http://www.marketingprofs.com/charts/2013/10078/ditch-the-funnel-purchase-loop-echoes-buyer-behavior
8. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRxwR3fDDLY&list=PL3F88D22B135ED456
9. http://www.toolsjournal.com/item/151-top-features-of-a-crm-tool

Ultimately, as with any software package, you want something that integrates easily with other key systems, allows a wide range of configuration options without driving you off the upgrade path, is scalable as your association grows and your use gets more sophisticated, provides a comprehensible reporting interface, offers quality tech support, and, of course, includes the features and functions you need.

Let's talk about configuration versus customization for a minute.

- A *configuration* is a setting built in to a software platform that you can change by modifying certain variables or setup values in a way the software was designed to anticipate.
- A *customization* occurs when you write code to allow the software to do something it wasn't inherently designed to do.

Configurations almost always survive software upgrades. Customizations often don't, although if they are written against a documented Application Programming Interface (API), your chances are better. This is not to say that all customizations are necessarily bad; they just need to be well documented, as they will likely complicate the initial installation and must be accounted for in future upgrades.

Ultimately, most membership organizations perform the same basic functions (accounting, time and expense tracking, CRM functions, AMS functions), and most of the software packages designed to support those functions include very similar core features. The difficulty in system selection – and most of the resulting dissatisfaction – comes from insufficient up-front process documentation, which produces incomplete process mapping, which leads to choosing a system that's not a natural fit for the way your particular association operates. At that point, you have two options: change your business process, or customize the software to do something it wasn't designed to do. Do this enough times, and you're off the upgrade path, which as any IT staff person will tell you, is a bad place to be.

AMS v. CRM

"How are AMS and CRM alike? How are they different? How do I know which one to use, and in what context?"

In order to answer these questions, we'll review some of the major functional distinctions and provide a feature comparison chart to help you better understand the similarities and differences between the two types of systems. Then we'll share three case studies of associations using AMS and CRM in different ways to help you envision the role each might play in your association.

AMS v. CRM: It's All About Specialization

The once distinct line between AMS and CRM is blurring. CRM systems are increasingly able to integrate with third party solutions to provide additional functions, social networking platforms in particular, and AMS systems are adding many "classic" CRM capabilities. The key difference is specialization.

For example, CRM system contact management is based on the concept of the customer. Customers might be broken out into individuals and companies, but the screens to manage those customers are the same for every customer in the system. AMS systems also do contact management. However many AMS systems have distinctly different screens for managing different types of contacts, whether they be a member, a donor, an exhibitor, an advertiser, or any number of other specific contact types.

Transaction processing provides a second example. CRM systems use a generic order process for any and all financial transactions managed by the system. AMS systems provide specialized screens for different types of transactions, offering only those options that relate to the transaction at hand: fundraising pledge, exhibit sale, event registration, membership renewal, etc.

What is AMS?

Association Management Software (AMS) systems are complex databases written in light of the specific needs of membership associations. At their core, they track and assist with management of the membership relationship, but most include any or all of the following features as well: event management, volunteer management, reporting, website integration, social media integration, engagement tracking and scoring, product sales, communications support, mass emailing support or integration, fundraising support, ad sales management, subscription management, customer self-service, customer support/help desk, workflow support, chapter/component management, ecommerce integration, education and professional development management, accounts receivable (A/R) integration.

While both CRM and AMS systems are constantly evolving, the following chart provides a comparison of many of the features that are traditionally associated with the two types of systems. This is intended as a general guide to understanding the main differences between the two types of products. Of course, when choosing a system, you must evaluate each potential solution individually.

	CRM	AMS
Customer Management	Standardized customer structures and functions.	Specialized customer structures and functions.
Prospect Management	Strong support for separate prospect tables.	Some systems support managing separate prospect data.
Marketing Automation	List production and built-in campaign management.	List production; third party integration for campaign management.
Order Processing	Standardized order structures and processes.	Specialized order structures and processes.
e-Business and Customer Self Service	Most systems have minimal direct support; third party integration for e-business.	Specialized e-business features.
Activity Tracking	A primary feature, includes escalations and workflow management.	Some support, but usually secondary to transaction processing.
Opportunity Management	Rich support for lead management, opportunity tracking, quote creation, and conversions to orders. Strong sales team support. Some systems can integration with external business intelligence on prospects.	Minimal; often focused on specialty areas such as grants management, fundraising, exhibits, advertising, etc. Minimal support for complex sales teams and territories, or for integration with third party prospect data sources.
Case Management	A primary feature, facilitates tying support incidents to support contracts.	Minimal support for true case management beyond basic activity tracking.
Resource Tracking	Sophisticated resource tracking and direct support for allocating resources to cases.	Minimal support beyond meeting logistics management, which is a key function of most AMS systems.
Reporting and Analytics	Strong reporting around core CRM functions; usually strong data extraction or export capabilities.	Reporting varies widely, is often focused around key association-specific transactions (meetings, membership etc.). Many systems allow easy access to data for custom reporting.

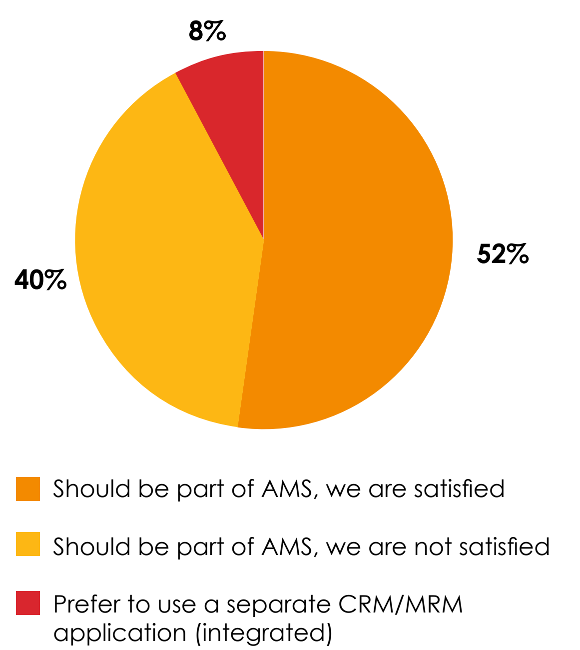
	CRM	AMS
In-Application Data Security Philosophy	Team oriented: sales or service teams own customers or opportunities.	Function oriented: functional areas have restricted access to specialized functions and related data.
Third Party Integration	Varies. Most systems have mature developer networks and documented APIs. Some systems also have strong third party ecosystems, which the CRM vendor may or may not control.	Access to APIs is often strictly controlled by the vendor, if available at all. Most AMS vendors have a number of pre-selected third party partners for specialty integrations.
Customization Support	Varies. Customizations are strongly discouraged other than basic screen modifications.	Strong customization capabilities available.
Reseller and Support Networks	Most systems have well evolved reseller and support networks.	With a few exceptions, minimal or non-existent reseller networks.

How Are Associations Currently Using AMS and CRM?

According to the 2012 edition of *Lehman Reports Annual Industry Study: Association Management Software Use and Satisfaction*, "interest in customer or member relationship management (CRM, MRM) by associations has increased in past years, mirroring well-established trends in commercial sectors." While the majority of associations feel that these features should be part of their AMS solutions, 40% of associations surveyed are not satisfied with the CRM options currently available within their AMS system.

As CRM continues to evolve, the gap between the CRM functions provided within AMS products versus those available through pure CRM systems could grow. And as associations themselves become more CRM-focused, that functionality gap could become more critical. Let's look at how some associations are currently grappling with this interplay.

CRM Consideration



Source: 2012 Lehman Reports Association Management Software Use and Satisfaction, © Copyright Lehman Associates, 2012, 2013

Case Study One: CRM+AMS

About the association:
501(c)6 trade association, company-based membership, located in Washington, DC
1200 members
27 staff
$7 million annual revenue
AMS: MatrixMaxx (since 2006)
CRM: Salesforce (since 2010)
Interviewee: Vice President of Membership and Marketing

Why did you choose to bring in Salesforce to supplement MatrixMaxx?
MatrixMaxx does an excellent job supporting traditional association functions, like renewal invoicing, renewal tracking, and event registrations. Several years ago, we decided to get more structured in our sales outreach to both members and non-members, and we needed enhanced sales forecasting, opportunity tracking, and sales strategy development – the type of features that are the core of CRM systems.

We've found that MatrixMaxx and Salesforce compliment each other. The AMS manages all our direct individual and company contacts: key membership contacts, the membership renewal cycle, meeting attendance, publications orders, online profiles, and committees. Our CRM system manages our sales influencers and decision-makers for membership, sponsorships, and exhibit sales, and all our prospects.

What benefits have you enjoyed?
Salesforce helps keep our sales process organized and coordinated. We rank our sales prospects, track intelligence, and easily pass information and tasks between sales team members. We share weekly sales opportunity reports, and the data helps us quickly identify and reach out to "hot leads" who are ready to make a decision. Salesforce also integrates with Microsoft Outlook, so it automatically tracks all our email interactions with contacts.

Both systems, Salesforce and MatrixMaxx, are cloud based, and Salesforce also offers mobile functionality, which means our sales team, all of whom travel frequently, has easy access on the road from both laptops and mobile devices.

Segregating our prospect data has allowed us to keep our AMS data clean and focused on member service and educational program management. Meanwhile, the Salesforce customizable reporting functions and opportunity tracking allow our sales team to focus on sales, better forecasting revenue and staying on top of sales pipeline management.

What drawbacks have your experienced?
Our biggest problem is duplicate data entry. Right now, the two systems aren't fully integrated, so people and companies have records in both. When we do mailings, we have to be careful about de-duping our lists, since we often pull lists from both MatrixMaxx and Salesforce.

What advice do you have for other associations considering the same path?
Staff buy-in is critical. No matter whether you use AMS alone, CRM alone, or the two together, if no one is entering data into your system, it's worthless. Executive support is also critical; that's what produces staff buy-in.

Managing two systems that don't fully talk to each other can be a little challenging, but if you have an aggressive sales strategy, it's worth looking into supplementing your AMS with a CRM system. Associations can take a lesson from the for-profit world in identifying prospects and moving them through the sales pipeline in an organized and intentional way, which ultimately creates the revenue we need to allow us to better serve our members.

Case Study Two: CRM in place of AMS

About the association:
501(c)6 trade association, company-based membership, located in Washington, DC
48 members
170 staff
$204 million annual revenue
CRM: Microsoft CRM (since 2011)
Interviewee: Director, IT Database Applications

Why did you choose to replace your AMS with Microsoft CRM?
In the spring of 2010, we began a system selection process to replace an AMS we had chosen not to upgrade for several years, which was, as a result, badly outdated. When we began the internal requirements gathering for a new system we realized something: although we have members, we don't do many of the things that most associations do, i.e., publications sales, trade shows, magazine subscriptions.

What we do have is a lot of committees, along the order of 500 that are currently active. And because we had chosen to let our AMS get so badly outdated, most of our staff were managing those committees through desk-drawer databases. We did not have one central repository of committee information, so we set out to find a system that would provide that.

We were initially attracted to Microsoft CRM because it features the familiar Microsoft interface and a direct and simple Outlook integration. Our interaction with our committees is 100% email, and our staff members have the option of automatically recording and tracking those emails in Microsoft CRM. On the rare occasions when someone has to work directly with CRM, it looks and acts just like Microsoft Office, which is comfortingly familiar. And while "committees" aren't innately part of Microsoft CRM, they were simple to create using the built-in "entity" function.

What benefits have you enjoyed?
Internally, our staff is actually using the system, which is key to success and something we were missing when we were trying to convince them to use a database that didn't look or behave like they were accustomed to software looking and behaving.

But our biggest benefit has been in member service. When executives at our member companies contact us, the main thing they want to know is: what is their company's level of involvement with the association (which explains all those committees and committee members)? We can now answer that with correct data immediately, rather than having to "sneaker express" a report around the office and deliver late, inaccurate data to our member company executives.

What drawbacks have you experienced?
We do perform one other "traditional" association function: event registration. We decided to run our events through Microsoft CRM, and we seriously underestimated the complexity of the accounting logic and controls that needed to be in place. AMS packages automatically include sophisticated accounts receivable logic that is challenging to reproduce. Were we to do this over, we likely would still select Microsoft CRM to meet our major need, running our committees, but we would likely outsource event registration to a third-party provider rather than trying to force CRM software to do something it wasn't designed to do.

What advice do you have for other associations considering the same path?
If you're a non-traditional association that neither uses nor needs most of the core AMS functions, switching to CRM might be a good decision. The key question you need to answer first, though, is: why? What are your requirements? CRM doesn't easily accommodate things like dues invoicing, product sales, subscriptions, and event registrations, at least not directly out of the box. But if you don't need any of those, CRM may be a viable option for you.

Case Study Three: CRM-based AMS

About the association:
501(c)6 trade association, company-based membership, located in Boulder, CO
1300 members
25 staff
$5 million annual revenue
AMS: Nimble AMS (since 2012)
Interviewee: Director, Website and Information Systems

Why did you choose Nimble AMS (based on Salesforce) to run your association?
In 2011, our association realized we needed to upgrade our association management technology. At that time, we were using one of the traditional AMS packages, and our staff had developed a culture of not using the system. Because staff had to rely on our database administrator or IT to do any meaningful reporting, they couldn't make data-driven decisions or see the potential for using the database to support not only who our members are and what they need from us today, but also who they will be and what they will need in the future.
We were quickly drawn to Salesforce. We liked the feature set and the thoughtful user interface (UI) design, we wanted the flexibility and mobile access provided by a cloud-based system, and we felt that their underlying philosophy of rapid platform development fit our vision of where we wanted to go.

On the other hand, we were concerned about the amount of custom programming we'd require to build all the features associations need: committees, events, sponsorships, membership renewals, A/R integration, foundation support. We worried about the cost and were concerned that we'd find ourselves needing additional customizations over time.

Nimble AMS was the answer: a cloud-based, Salesforce-based system without the dangers of substantial custom development.

What benefits have you enjoyed?
Even though we only completed Nimble AMS implementation in the fall of 2012, we are already enjoying the fact that it extends the base CRM functions built into the Salesforce platform, like open APIs, robust social integration, a substantial library of apps, a rich developer network, and ubiquitous, sophisticated, intuitive reporting, with the specific features associations need.

The biggest benefit we've enjoyed is that it's allowed us to re-think the role of data in our organization. We have a tremendous opportunity to build meaningful, two-way relationships with our members and other audiences, but only if our entire staff can use data effectively to engage fully with them and tailor member experiences, in person and online, to be more responsive to members and their changing needs.

In a traditional AMS model, everyone enters data, but the database administrator does virtually all the reporting out. Nimble AMS, using the Salesforce concept of the "social enterprise," allows our staff to collaborate within the platform and get and share data themselves, which helps them resolve issues and come up with new ideas quickly.

What drawbacks have your experienced?
The biggest adaptation we've had to make so far is changing our organizational culture. We now have a lot more resources, information, and tools at hand, which required a significant educational effort for our staff. While Nimble AMS is intuitive to use, we continue to work on culture and process change on an ongoing basis. We feel that we've fundamentally changed the way our association functions and given our people the tools they need to make intelligent decisions and respond rapidly to members.

What advice do you have for other associations considering the same path?

Human factors are critical. When considering an "IT solution," we tend to focus on the technology itself: feature set, security model, upgrade path. We should focus instead on the people, staff and members, who will be using the technology. Can they use it? Will it make their day better? Is it easy and fun? Will it delight them? They are the ones who will determine the success or failure of our project.

Make sure your vendor shares your goals and understands your design philosophy. NimbleUser is as user-focused as we are, and that made development and implementation conversations much easier. We were able to build on each other's ideas to arrive on the simplest, most user-friendly solution that also met our requirements, which allowed both sides to remain focused on finding the best outcome.

Conclusion

CRM software is well suited to some association processes, most specifically those related to large-scale prospecting and sales functions. CRM can segregate those leads, allowing you to share prospect data among staff in different departments or even different locations without "cluttering up" your main membership database with potentially irrelevant information. It's designed to manage transactional-style relationships and to allow you to make predictions about future buying behavior based on insights gleaned from analyzing large amounts of data. CRM software can be a viable and cost-effective solution for organizations that manage large amounts of data about relatively simple programs, products, and services.

On the other hand, many of the programs, products, and services associations offer our members have complex rules, pricing structures, and A/R interactions. While CRM can be customized to do these things, this amounts to attempting to force the system to do something it wasn't designed to do, which as discussed above, tends to be an expensive, time-consuming, and ultimately frustrating prospect. This is not likely to lessen either complexity or cost as compared to more traditional AMS products.

CRM is not a one-to-one replacement for AMS. But it can still be highly valuable to associations that don't do many of the traditional things associations do, or that outsource some of those traditional association functions. Its greatest application may, in fact, be as a supplement to AMS, supporting associations with robust sales functions. And in an era of flat or declining memberships, associations must become more comfortable with an active sales culture.

What Is Big Data?

Any discussion of data in 2013 sooner or later comes around to the concept of Big Data.

According to IBM: "Big data is more than simply a matter of size; it is an opportunity to find insights in new and emerging types of data and content, to make your business more agile, and to answer questions that were previously considered beyond your reach." [10]

In the nonprofit world, "Big Data" generally refers to collecting information about our audiences (member and non-member) from a wide range of internal and external systems and aggregating it to provide a more complete picture of them. This should include information beyond the transactions we have traditionally tracked in our AMS systems, such as interactions on public and white-label social platforms, data related to participation in online learning systems, participation in advocacy campaigns, feedback provided through event evaluations, or any other interaction our audiences have with our organization and even with our competitors.

Big Data, ideally, allows us to do predictive marketing analysis, which is the holy grail of data. Historically, marketing tracking is more art than science. We record and analyze customer behavior, looking for correlations, so we can identify which actions seem to have been more – or less – effective, and which customer profile types are more – or less – likely to engage in our desired behaviors. Big Data allows us to formulate and test hypotheses about why our audiences act as they do. The promise of predictive analytics, facilitated by Big Data, is that, based on analysis of truly massive amounts of data, we can begin to make reasonably accurate predictions of the future behavior of any given customer or group of customers.[11]

10. http://www-01.ibm.com/software/data/bigdata/
11. http://www.cio.com/article/716726/How_Big_Data_Brings_BI_Predictive_Analytics_Together

Success with either type of system requires executive level support, organization-wide buy in, careful documentation of and scrupulous adherence to sound business processes, compliance on collecting the data your team agrees is relevant, willingness to act on what that data tells you, and appreciation for the holistic nature of relationship, reputation, and interaction with your members and other audiences.

We fear that an overemphasis on the technology platform may mask more critical success factors. We believe it is more useful to focus on CRM as an organizational strategy that is dependent upon culture, management orientation, and workflow, rather than as the particular technology on which that strategy is implemented.

What we all have to remember is the reason associations exist: to understand our audiences' needs and help them meet those needs. In order to do that effectively, we must manage our constituent relationships in an organized and coordinated way. When everyone can access the information that supports those relationships, we can create stronger bonds between our organizations and the members and non-members we serve. AMS and CRM, used separately or together, can support this process, but only once our staff members fully dedicate themselves to a culture of customer service and positive audience engagement.

Questions for Reflection

- What are you currently using to manage your customer relationships? AMS? CRM? Both? Neither? What advantages might you enjoy from changing your customer and team support software? What would you have to watch out for?
- Does your association currently have a sales-friendly culture? What benefits do you think you'd enjoy if you did? What might you have to change in order for that to happen?
- Is IT a service department or a strategic partner in your association? How might your choices about positioning IT affect your ability to create a culture of strong, successful business processes? To use software strategically?
- How well do your IT and marketing departments collaborate? How might that affect the success of any sales and marketing related software projects, regardless of the chosen platform?
- Has your association started thinking about the concept of "Big Data"? How might you have to change to be ready to take advantage of the opportunities data warehousing can provide?
- What data might you need to begin collecting to do predictive analysis about your audiences? Do you currently have the systems and processes in place to collect and use that data? What outside or third party sources should you look at integrating?

Additional Resources

CIO.com, CRM Resources, http://www.cio.com/topic/3005/Customer_Relationship_Management_CRM_

CIO.com, "Top 12 Big Data Stories of 20120," http://www.cio.com/article/724347/Top_12_Big_Data_Stories_of_2012?taxonomyId=3005

Computer World, CRM Topic Center, http://www.computerworld.com/s/topic/120/CRM

Destination CRM, http://www.destinationcrm.com/

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About Elizabeth Weaver Engel

Elizabeth Weaver Engel, CEO and Chief Strategist at Spark Consulting LLC, has over 15 years experience in association management. Although her primary focus has been in membership, marketing, and communications, her experience has been wide-ranging, including corporate sponsorship and fundraising, technology planning and implementation, social media and Internet strategy, budgeting, volunteer management, publications, and governance.

Spark is a boutique consulting firm that provides strategic membership and marketing consulting for associations that have the willingness and capacity at both the staff and board levels to ask themselves tough questions and take some risks in service of reaching for big goals. Forget settling for incremental growth by making minor changes to what you're doing - we're going to uncover and solve the root problems that are holding your association back!

Elizabeth combines a focus on asking the right questions and finding and implementing creative solutions with a broad understanding of the association sphere. Throughout her career, she has excelled at increasing revenue, public presence, and member satisfaction while decreasing costs through a focus on the efficient and effective use of data, staff, and technology to serve organizational goals and constituents.

Prior to launching Spark, Elizabeth consulted in online campaigns and marketing and in Internet and social media strategy for Beaconfire Consulting, and in a wide range of subject areas in association management in the not-for-profit consulting practice at RSM McGladrey, Inc. She has also served associations directly in a variety of positions, including Director of Member Services and IT, Director of Marketing and Sponsorship, Vice President of Marketing, and Acting CEO.

Elizabeth is a Certified Association Executive and holds a Master's degree in government and foreign affairs from the University of Virginia.

About George Breeden

George Breeden has over 25 years experience in the business and technology sector, with more than 20 years specifically serving not-for-profit organizations. He has worked in a wide variety of disciplines and is considered a leading expert on not-for-profit technology and effective business operations. George has specialized in helping organizations get the most from their current resources, which includes effective facilitation, team building, and vendor remediation.

Hartman Executive Advisors is an independent strategic business technology advisory group, focused on helping mid-market corporations and organizations achieve positive outcomes from their IT investments. Many companies are intimidated by technology. They turn to Hartman to harness the power of technology and to transform IT into a core business strength. Hartman's clients are CEOs, CFOs and COOs who want order, control and consistent results from their IT resources. A partnership with Hartman elevates your business to the next level.

George has a Master's degree in Nonprofit Management and a Masters of Business Administration. Additionally, George is a Certified Association Executive and is actively involved with a number of nonprofits, including ASAE's Ethics Committee, as a member and volunteer, and is also a volunteer ski patroller at Canaan Valley in West Virginia.