

3 Big CRM Trends to Watch in 2017

Mobile technology and social integration means more channels and more data, helping to fuel these three trends in the coming year.

By Matt Keenan - Posted Jan 10, 2017

The prediction business is a tricky business. It is a challenge to separate the signal from the noise when you are looking at the trends that are shaping the market. For me, this challenge is compounded by the rapid pace of innovation in both the core customer relationship management (CRM) space and the adjacent technologies that influence the core.

If we quickly look back to 2016, the continued investments in mobility and social integration have created a wealth of new, rich data and opened the floodgates with regards to interaction channels that are available to customers. There has also been continued investment in analytics with a real focus on turning insights into actions. The evolution of these areas has created a springboard effect in the trends for 2017.

The first trend that I see shaping the CRM landscape in 2017 is **personalization**. Our workforce is continuing to evolve into an incredibly diverse, multigenerational, multicultural body. The way that people interact with CRM solutions varies wildly depending on background, experience, and expectations. The concept of "off the shelf" or "out of the box" has been fully obviated. The coming year will see a demand for CRM solutions to enable deep personalization across four key levels:

- The Organization requires the ability to define their set of standards.
- The Department requires the ability to define their unique processes.
- The Team requires the ability to define their specific data views, reports and dashboards.
- The Individual requires the ability to define their unique CRM user experience.

Effective personalization drives a sense of ownership at all levels, and that ownership translates to adoption, utilization, and achievement of the true CRM value proposition.

The second trend that will dominate CRM in 2017 is **simplification**. CRM solutions have become part of a standard technology ecosystem over the past several years. Over time, the solution is modified, extended, and enhanced based upon the changes required by evolving business needs. However, these modifications tend to be additive in nature. The continual cycle of additive changes creates overly complex data models, confusing screens, and complicated processes. Organizations with CRM implementations that are over three years old should take the time to do a deep review of all aspects of their system with a focus on the following questions:

- How do we use the data we are collecting?
- Is the process that we have built still applicable to our business today?
- Does the CRM user experience drive the right focus for our users?

There are two very specific benefits that a simplification project will provide. First, simplification leads to higher adoption and lower costs of ownership. Simpler solutions are more approachable and easier to embed in a user's day-to-day life. In addition, simpler solutions reduce overall training (and retraining) demands as well as reduction in overall user support costs.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, a simplification project paves the way to both predictive and prescriptive analytics. The effectiveness of machine learning and advanced analytics is fully predicated on the quality and consistency of the data that is provided to the algorithms. The adage of "garbage in, garbage out" is fully realized in the world of advanced analytics. Organizations that focus on simplicity will create cleaner, more focused data sets to teach the modeling algorithms, thus deriving better output. Over time, additional data can and should be added to the models, but it is best to start simpler.

The final trend in 2017 that bears some focus is delivering CRM through **alternative user experiences**. By now, mobility is a given. It is incredibly common to walk into any coffee shop in the world and see people on their smartphones, their tablets, or their laptops interacting with CRM solutions. The innovation that will come to the forefront in 2017 is leveraging voice- and chat-driven interactions with CRM tools. The recent evolution of natural language interaction in the consumer space through tools like Alexa, Siri, and OK, Google, has created an opportunity

for users to interact with CRM solutions in the same manner. From simple use cases, like searching and retrieving information, to more sophisticated scenarios, such as dictating meeting notes or updating records, voice-based interactions will change the way people interact with CRM technology.

Similarly, there has been rapid innovation in artificial conversational entities, more commonly known as chatbots. These bots allow for deep interactions with CRM systems through nontraditional interfaces like Skype from Microsoft. Like voice-based use cases, chatbots enable both simple search-and-retrieval functions, as well as deeper navigational and data manipulation opportunities.

The value proposition for these alternative user experience models is that there is absolutely no learning curve for a user to be efficient and effective while interacting with a CRM system. The ability to frame questions and drive actions using speech or plain text prompts will drive significant reductions in total cost of ownership. Additionally, these new modes will decrease the informational time lag that is inherent in most CRM systems today. Access to real-time user updates will allow organizations to react more quickly to opportunities and challenges in the market.

In conclusion, 2017 will be a transformative year for the CRM space. Advanced technologies like machine learning and natural language processing are opening the door for an explosion of new capabilities for the CRM market. However, organizations need to take the time to thoughtfully prepare for the adoption of these technologies. This year, companies need to take the time to rethink their overall CRM goals and drive simplification efforts through their solutions. Once the solution has been rationalized and simplified, the road forward to enable personalization and alternative user experiences will be much clearer.

Matt Keenan is senior vice president of CRM Products Group at [Aptean](#) and helps companies looking for a set of strategies to build lifelong relationships with customers. Keenan is a 20-plus-year veteran with deep experience in all facets of CRM, including sales, service, marketing and social CRM. He has worked with companies of all sizes across a wide range of industries to evaluate, develop, and implement customer-centric initiatives, including sales, channel, and customer service process design as well as technology platform evaluation and implementation.