



Oracle's radical SaaS CRM vision

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Oracle is announcing a suite of innovative software-as-a-service (SaaS)-based applications. According to David Bradshaw, Oracle's new applications have the potential to transform the way that CRM is used and greatly improve its effectiveness.

'Consumable CRM'

How can CRM deliver undeniable value to even the most cynical and hard-bitten member of the salesforce? This is the challenge that Oracle has set itself in the first phase of its 'consumable CRM' project.

There is a problem with the way many sales staff perceive CRM systems – as a tool for managers to monitor and control their activity rather than help them sell. They tend to see the imposition of a standardised sales process as a way of reining in 'rogue' deals with unauthorised elements, rather than the delivery of pre-qualified sales leads and a library of sales tools.

Let's be fair here. There are plenty of quite decent CRM applications out there that can fix most of these problems properly when used. However, the central problem remains for many users: CRM systems are seen as a burden, not a means of doing a better job.

So what can be done to fix it? One possibility would be to throw CRM as we know it away and start again, using so-called Web 2.0 capabilities like social networking, blogs and wikis. But would you end up with anything significantly better for all the effort? There's no way of knowing.

A different approach, and the one taken by Oracle, is to treat existing CRM systems as a starting point and build on top of them in a way that directly addresses the issue – the value that sales teams get from CRM. Rather than trying to do everything in one go, you build specific capabilities directly targeted at key tasks that users have to do well to be more successful.

As often the most reluctant to embrace CRM, the sales team is a good starting point for this kind of strategy. If it can work well here, it can work almost anywhere.



The first phase

There are four modules in its first foray into this area, all of which can be used independently.

- Oracle Sales Campaigns: this will enable individual sales staff to run their own sales campaigns. Salespeople run campaigns all the time, typically using email or phone. They often swap assets among themselves, and within the tool is the ability to build a circle of 'friends' or social network and share your campaigns selectively. For example, you might share some with people you trust and collaborate with, but not with those you compete against or who have failed to collaborate fairly in the past.
- Oracle Sales Library: sales staff (and others) already share documents, but in an unstructured way. This will provide them with a more structured way of doing this, but one that they control themselves rather than having a heavyweight content management regime imposed on them by management. They have the ability to rate presentations as a whole and individual slides, they can use the items that most suit them, and return any changes back to the library for others to use.
- Oracle Sales Predictor: 'what to sell next' tool – a tool that helps sales staff decide what item they should next try to sell to customers, based on the analysis of what has been sold to similar companies. The salesperson can improve the recommendations by feeding in further information – for example, that the item initially recommended has recently been bought, but from a competitor.
- Oracle PDA Sales Assistant: mobile sales – a complete rethink of the mobile sales interface, getting away from the often-hated tabs and list interface most often used. In effect, the mobile sales interface becomes a set of special-purpose 'widgets' that can substitute the mobile client of many CRM applications, including Siebel On Demand, Siebel 8.X and salesforce.com.

All the above social productivity applications will be provided as part of Oracle's portfolio of on-demand services, otherwise known as SaaS. Prices have not been announced yet, but we believe they will be attractive. These applications are intended as a starting point and the portfolio will be filled out over time, initially just on the sales side, but eventually for other areas.

There are some very smart touches to this. First, you can use any or all of the applications independently. Secondly, they are not just for Oracle CRM (Siebel, PeopleSoft and Oracle eBusiness Suite) – these social productivity applications are designed to work with non-Oracle CRM systems such as salesforce.com, SAP and home-grown systems.

But thirdly, and most importantly, the long-term vision is that these task-based modules will eventually become the only way that many users interact with their CRM systems. Therefore, these applications that are designed explicitly to help people do the task in hand will feed back into the CRM system to the extent that many people will not need to use it directly.



Long-term impact

The ability to offer the choice to pick and choose which bits of CRM you can license and use may seem a strange step for the market leader. However, taking over the front of the application is a very smart move, as it makes the software applicable to a wide range of CRM systems – Oracle just has to build a range of APIs.

CRM and collaboration

One aspect we are struck by is Oracle's association of CRM and collaboration. There is a strong potential to go a lot further here. Quite a number of processes in CRM are intrinsically collaborative, such as large sales teams working on a single mega-deal together or service teams providing a mix of phone, web and field service. Beyond collaboration within the 'disciplines' of sales, service, marketing and channel management, there is also plenty of scope for cross-disciplinary collaboration too.

Most CRM systems support limited amounts of collaboration, generally in a highly structured way. While this can make it easy to do routine pieces of collaboration (for example, account manager, technical specialist/designer and telesales collaborating on a complex sale), it is based on repeatable patterns. However, in the real world, collaborations are more variable, and it is often left to the humans to collaborate informally and work around the system to get the job done.

Bringing some collaborative tools into the process will give the team stronger tools to carry out less formally structured processes. However, there are problems with many collaboration tools, in that they typically perform one or a handful of functions; for example, unified communications, web presentation, document management, or wiki building. What's needed is an integrated set of collaboration and other capabilities with the right mix of capabilities for sales, marketing and services, and with the right integrations into the underlying CRM systems.

This is one view of the path that Oracle has begun treading – to unite CRM with the right collaboration tools.

What next?

Oracle isn't yet revealing what the next set of applications will be. We believe that it will concentrate on the sales domain first, then extend out into other areas. Marketing seems an obvious area, as it mixes analytics with collaboration to build campaigns.

There are also plenty of issues in large contact centres where most agents are still having to access multiple different systems to get their job done. Not surprisingly, user experience and staff turnover are big and long-standing issues here.



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