

CRM Partners Buyers Guide

Software Provider and Product Assessment



EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY

***ISG** Research™



CRM Partners

Partner relationship management (PRM) helps enterprises support the processes that ensure contracted partners that market, sell and even service are managed in the most effective manner possible. An enterprise's ability to manage the extension of its business to a third-party is best handled with a dedicated application that can interoperate with other CRM applications and platforms through which it can share data and information about its products and services.

ISG defines CRM Partners as the applications that support PRM processes and tasks across leaders, managers, and relationship marketing and sales professionals. The applications should be able to orchestrate the workflow and sharing of data from the enterprise to partners. Management and operations with partners span many departments across the front office of an enterprise including marketing, selling, service, the partner team and accounting where payments are exchanged. This requirement for PRM to support more than just selling is



An important aspect within CRM and the channel ecosystem is the role of partner, often overlooked but critical in many industries where business transaction flow through resellers or distributors.

critical and should be part of any investment into systems that can support the broader set of processes and teams.

An important aspect within CRM and the channel ecosystem is the role of partners, often overlooked but critical in many industries where business transactions flow through resellers or distributors. One fundamental issue in the partner-distributor model is determining who owns the customer. Traditionally, the partner or distributor owns the customer, which can frustrate manufacturers. However, modern partner systems foster a more symbiotic relationship between the originator (manufacturer) and the reseller. Both parties share a mutual interest in understanding the customer, thereby benefiting from shared information.

By utilizing customer information, modern partner systems enable both manufacturers and distributors to better meet customer needs. This creates a win-win

situation, benefiting both the manufacturer and the distributor.

A well-designed partnership relationship system within CRM can significantly enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of both originators and partners. Effective partnership systems create a win-win situation for both the originator and the partner by providing access to customer information and insights. For instance, if the originator has 300 partners, they can analyze patterns and identify successful product combinations. This valuable information can then be shared among all partners, allowing them to benefit from the collective knowledge and experiences of the originator, who interacts with numerous resellers.



By sharing these insights, each partner can become more efficient and effective in dealing with customers. Access to customer data allows partners to better understand customer behavior and preferences. For example, if the data shows that customers who purchase a specific product are likely to be interested in another related product six months later, partners can use this information to tailor their sales strategies. This benefits both the originator, by increasing sales, and the partners, by improving their customer engagement and sales outcomes.

The evolution of PRM technology within CRM is being challenged by dedicated software providers who focus exclusively on the management and operation of partner channels. Through 2026, a new generation of partner management applications for onboarding, SLA management, and origination and partner payments will replace existing ones that only focus on indirect channel selling. One of the most challenging aspects in managing partners across a channel is the ability to define and track mutually allocated investments called market development funds (MDF) to their expected outcomes. While many CRM systems can now provide shared access to customers and selling processes, the requirements for PRM traditionally go much further and are managed by processes and teams across marketing to customer service.

Partner Management
Market Assertion

Through 2026, a new generation of partner management applications for onboarding, SLA management, and origination and partner payments will replace existing ones that only focus on indirect channel selling.

Stephen Hurrell
Director of Research, Office of Revenue

ISG Research™

The ISG Buyers Guide™ for CRM Partners evaluates software providers and products in key areas such in the management and operations of partner marketing, selling and service that is in adherence to agreements. Also assessed was support for business collaboration, sales and pipeline management, roles and preferences, integration with other systems and investment. The research only evaluated PRM systems enabled within a CRM platform and its suite of supporting applications.

This research evaluates the following software providers that offer products that address key elements of CRM partners as we define it: HubSpot, Microsoft, NetSuite, Oracle, Salesforce, SugarCRM and Zoho.



Buyers Guide Overview

For over two decades, ISG Research has conducted market research in a spectrum of areas across business applications, tools and technologies. We have designed the Buyers Guide to provide a balanced perspective of software providers and products that is rooted in an understanding of the business requirements in any enterprise. Utilization of our research



ISG Research has designed the Buyers Guide to provide a balanced perspective of software providers and products that is rooted in an understanding of business requirements in any enterprise.

methodology and decades of experience enables our Buyers Guide to be an effective method to assess and select software providers and products. The findings of this research undertaking contribute to our comprehensive approach to rating software providers in a manner that is based on the assessments completed by an enterprise.

The ISG Buyers Guide™ for CRM Partners is the distillation of over a year of market and product research efforts. It is an assessment of how well software providers' offerings address enterprises' requirements for PRM software. The index is structured to support a request for information (RFI) that could be used in the request for proposal (RFP) process by incorporating all criteria needed to evaluate, select, utilize and maintain relationships with software providers. An effective product and customer experience with a provider can ensure the best long-term relationship and value achieved from a resource and financial investment.

In this Buyers Guide, ISG Research evaluates the software in seven key categories that are weighted to reflect buyers' needs based on our expertise and research. Five are product-experience related: Adaptability, Capability, Manageability, Reliability, and Usability. In addition, we consider two customer-experience categories: Validation, and Total Cost of Ownership/Return on Investment (TCO/ROI). To assess functionality, one of the components of Capability, we applied the ISG Research Value Index methodology and blueprint, which links the personas and processes for PRM to an enterprise's requirements.

The structure of the research reflects our understanding that the effective evaluation of software providers and products involves far more than just examining product features, potential revenue or customers generated from a provider's marketing and sales efforts. We believe it is important to take a comprehensive, research-based approach, since making the wrong choice of PRM technology can raise the total cost of ownership, lower the return on investment and hamper an enterprise's ability to reach its full performance potential. In addition, this approach can reduce the project's development and deployment time and



eliminate the risk of relying on a short list of software providers that does not represent a best fit for your enterprise.

ISG Research believes that an objective review of software providers and products is a critical business strategy for the adoption and implementation of PRM software and applications. An enterprise's review should include a thorough analysis of both what is possible and what is relevant. We urge enterprises to do a thorough job of evaluating PRM systems and tools and offer this Buyers Guide as both the results of our in-depth analysis of these providers and as an evaluation methodology.



How To Use This Buyers Guide

Evaluating Software Providers: The Process

We recommend using the Buyers Guide to assess and evaluate new or existing software providers for your enterprise. The market research can be used as an evaluation framework to establish a formal request for information from providers on products and customer experience and will shorten the cycle time when creating an RFI. The steps listed below provide a process that can facilitate best possible outcomes.

1. Define the business case and goals.
Define the mission and business case for investment and the expected outcomes from your organizational and technological efforts.
2. Specify the business needs.
Defining the business requirements helps identify what specific capabilities are required with respect to people, processes, information and technology.
3. Assess the required roles and responsibilities.
Identify the individuals required for success at every level of the enterprise from executives to frontline workers and determine the needs of each.
4. Outline the project's critical path.
What needs to be done, in what order and who will do it? This outline should make clear the prior dependencies at each step of the project plan.
5. Ascertain the technology approach.
Determine the business and technology approach that most closely aligns to your enterprise's requirements.
6. Establish software provider evaluation criteria.
Utilize the product experience: Adaptability, Capability, Manageability, Reliability and Usability, and the customer experience in TCO/ROI and Validation.
7. Evaluate and select the technology properly.
Weight the categories in the technology evaluation criteria to reflect your enterprise's priorities to determine the short list of software providers and products.
8. Establish the business initiative team to start the project.
Identify who will lead the project and the members of the team needed to plan and execute it with timelines, priorities and resources.



The Findings

All of the products we evaluated are feature-rich, but not all the capabilities offered by a software provider are equally valuable to types of workers or support everything needed to manage products on a continuous basis. Moreover, the existence of too many capabilities may be a negative factor for an enterprise if it introduces unnecessary complexity. Nonetheless, you may decide that a larger number of features in the product is a plus, especially if some of them match your enterprise’s established practices or support an initiative that is driving the purchase of new software.

Factors beyond features and functions or software provider assessments may become a deciding factor. For example, an enterprise may face budget constraints such that the TCO evaluation can tip the balance to one provider or another. This is where the Value Index methodology and the appropriate category weighting can be applied to determine the best fit of software providers and products to your specific needs.

Overall Scoring of Software Providers Across Categories

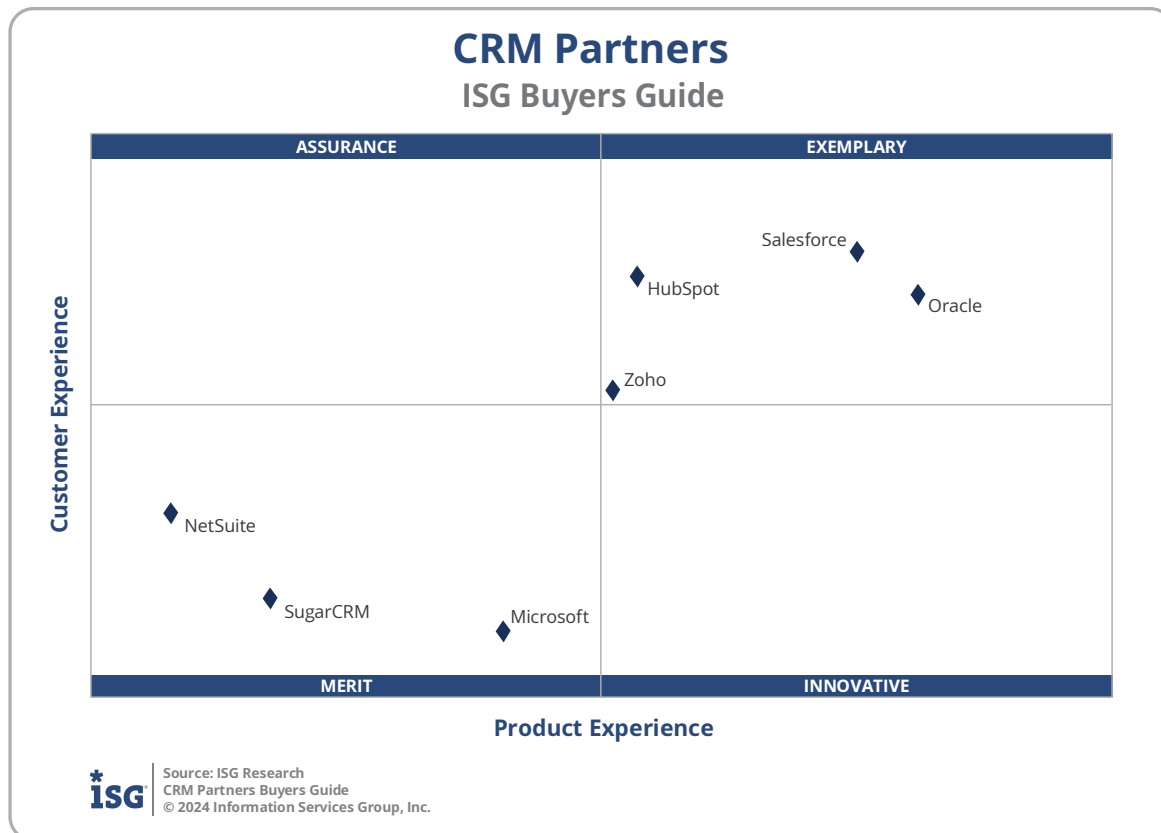
The research finds Salesforce atop the list, followed by Oracle and HubSpot. Companies that place in the top three of a category earn the designation of Leader. Salesforce has done so in seven categories; Oracle in six; HubSpot in five; Zoho in two and Microsoft in one category.

The overall representation of the research below places the rating of the Product Experience and Customer Experience on the x and y axes, respectively, to provide a visual representation and classification of the software providers. Those providers whose Product Experience have a higher weighted performance to the axis in aggregate of the five product categories place farther to the right, while the performance and weighting for the two Customer Experience categories determines placement on the vertical axis. In short, software providers that place closer to the upper-right on this chart performed better than those closer to the lower-left.

The research places software providers into one of four overall categories: Assurance, Exemplary, Merit or Innovative. This representation classifies providers’ overall weighted performance.

CRM Partners Overall			
Providers	Grade	Performance	
Salesforce	A-	Leader	83.1%
Oracle	A-	Leader	82.5%
HubSpot	B++	Leader	77.4%
Zoho	B+		74.6%
Microsoft	B		67.9%
NetSuite	B		64.2%
SugarCRM	B-		62.3%

ISG | Source: ISG Research
CRM Partners Buyers Guide
© 2024 Information Services Group, Inc.



Exemplary: The categorization and placement of software providers in Exemplary (upper right) represent those that performed the best in meeting the overall Product and Customer Experience requirements. The providers rated Exemplary are: HubSpot, Oracle, Salesforce and Zoho.

Innovative: The categorization and placement of software providers in Innovative (lower right) represent those that performed the best in meeting the overall Product Experience requirements but did not achieve the highest levels of requirements in Customer Experience. None of the providers rated as Innovative.

Assurance: The categorization and placement of software providers in Assurance (upper left) represent those that achieved the highest levels in the overall Customer Experience requirements but did not achieve the highest levels of Product Experience. None of the providers rated as Assurance.

Merit: The categorization of software providers in Merit (lower left) represents those that did not exceed the median of performance in Customer or Product Experience or surpass the threshold for the other three categories. The providers rated Merit are: Microsoft, NetSuite and SugarCRM.

We warn that close provider placement proximity should not be taken to imply that the packages evaluated are functionally identical or equally well suited for use by every enterprise



or for a specific process. Although there is a high degree of commonality in how enterprises handle PRM within CRM, there are many idiosyncrasies and differences in how they do these functions that can make one software provider's offering a better fit than another's for a particular enterprise's needs.

We advise enterprises to assess and evaluate software providers based on organizational requirements and use this research as a supplement to internal evaluation of a provider and products.



Product Experience

The process of researching products to address an enterprise’s needs should be comprehensive. Our Value Index methodology examines Product Experience and how it aligns with an enterprise’s life cycle of onboarding, configuration, operations, usage and maintenance. Too often, software providers are not evaluated for the entirety of the product; instead, they are evaluated on market execution and vision of the future, which are flawed since they do not represent an enterprise’s requirements but how the provider operates. As more software providers orient to a complete product experience, evaluations will be more robust.

CRM Partners Product Experience			
Providers	Grade	Performance	
Oracle	B++	Leader	64.6%
Salesforce	B++	Leader	63.9%
HubSpot	B+	Leader	57.7%
Zoho	B+		57.1%
Microsoft	B		54.4%
SugarCRM	B-		47.9%
NetSuite	B-		45.9%

ISG | Source: ISG Research
CRM Partners Buyers Guide
© 2024 Information Services Group, Inc.

The research results in Product Experience are ranked at 80%, or four-fifths, of the overall rating using the specific underlying weighted category performance. Importance was placed on the categories as follows: Usability (20%), Capability (25%), Reliability (10%), Adaptability (10%) and Manageability (15%). This weighting impacted the resulting overall ratings in this research. Oracle, Salesforce and HubSpot were designated Product Experience Leaders.



Customer Experience

The importance of a customer relationship with a software provider is essential to the actual success of the products and technology. The advancement of the Customer Experience and the entire life cycle an enterprise has with its software provider is critical for ensuring satisfaction in working with that provider. Technology providers that have chief customer officers are more likely to have greater investments in the customer relationship and focus more on their success. These leaders also need to take responsibility for ensuring this commitment is made abundantly clear on the website and in the buying process and customer journey.

The research results in Customer Experience are ranked at 20%, or one-fifth, using the specific underlying weighted category performance as it relates to the framework of commitment and value to the software provider-customer relationship. The two evaluation categories are Validation (10%) and TCO/ROI (10%), which are weighted to represent their importance to the overall research.

The software providers that evaluated the highest overall in the aggregated and weighted Customer Experience categories are Salesforce, HubSpot and Oracle. These category leaders best communicate commitment and dedication to customer needs.

CRM Partners
Customer Experience

Providers	Grade	Performance
Salesforce	A	Leader 17.6%
HubSpot	A-	Leader 17.4%
Oracle	A-	Leader 16.8%
Zoho	B++	15.9%
NetSuite	B+	14.2%
SugarCRM	B	13.0%
Microsoft	B	12.7%

Source: ISG Research
CRM Partners Buyers Guide
© 2024 Information Services Group, Inc.

Software providers that did not perform well in this category were unable to provide sufficient customer case studies to demonstrate success or articulate their commitment to customer experience and an enterprise’s journey. The selection of a software provider means a continuous investment by the enterprise, so a holistic evaluation must include examination of how they support their customer experience.



Appendix: Software Provider Inclusion

For inclusion in the ISG Buyers Guide™ for CRM Partners in 2024, a software provider must be in good standing financially and ethically, have at least \$50 million in annual or projected revenue verified using independent sources, sell products and provide support on at least two continents, and have at least 100 customers. The principal source of the relevant business unit's revenue must be software-related and there must have been at least one major software release in the last 12 months.

Software providers that supported the management and operations of partners in conjunction with a CRM system were included in this evaluation. The criteria was applied to the marketing, selling and servicing capabilities specific to partners and their collaboration and integration with CRM.

The research is designed to be independent of the specifics of software provider packaging and pricing. To represent the real-world environment in which businesses operate, we include providers that offer suites or packages of products that may include relevant individual modules or applications. If a software provider is actively marketing, selling and developing a product for the general market and it is reflected on the provider's website that the product is within the scope of the research, that provider is automatically evaluated for inclusion.

All software providers that offer relevant PRM products and meet the inclusion requirements were invited to participate in the evaluation process at no cost to them.

Software providers that meet our inclusion criteria but did not completely participate in our Buyers Guide were assessed solely on publicly available information. As this could have a significant impact on classification and ratings, we recommend additional scrutiny when evaluating those providers.



Products Evaluated

Provider	Product Names	Version	Release Month/Year
HubSpot	HubSpot Customer Platform	n/a	August 2024
Microsoft	Microsoft Dynamics 365	2024 release wave 1	August 2024
NetSuite	NetSuite Partner Relationship Management	2024.2	September 2024
Oracle	Oracle CS Partner Relationship Management	24C	August 2024
Salesforce	Salesforce Sales Cloud Partner Relationship Management	Summer '24	August 2024
SugarCRM	SugarCRM, Sugar Sell	14.0	August 2024
Zoho	Zoho CRM, Zoho One	n/a	August 2024



Providers of Promise

We did not include software providers that, as a result of our research and analysis, did not satisfy the criteria for inclusion in this Buyers Guide. These are listed below as “Providers of Promise.”

Provider	Product	CRM Suite	Revenue	Customers	# Continents
Allbound	Allbound PRM	No	No	Yes	Yes
Channel Mechanics	Channel Mechanics PRM	No	No	No	Yes
Impact.com	Partnership Automation	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Impartner	Impartner PRM	No	No	Yes	Yes
Mindmatrix	Bridge	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Partnerize	Partnerize	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
PartnerStack	PartnerStack	No	No	Yes	Yes
WorkSpan	WorkSpan	No	No	Yes	Yes
Zift Solutions	ZiftONE	No	No	Yes	Yes
ZINFI	ZINFI PRM	No	No	Yes	Yes



About ISG Software Research

ISG Software Research provides authoritative market research and coverage on the business and IT aspects of the software industry. We distribute research and insights daily through our [community](#), and we provide a portfolio of consulting, advisory, research and education services for enterprises, software and service providers, and investment firms. Our premier service, ISG Software Research On-Demand, provides structured education and advisory support with subject-matter expertise and experience in the software industry. ISG Research Buyers Guides support the RFI/RFP process and help enterprises assess, evaluate and select software providers through tailored [Assessment Services](#) and our Value Index methodology. Visit www.ventanaresearch.com to sign up for free community membership with access to our research and insights.

About ISG Research

ISG Research™ provides subscription research, advisory consulting and executive event services focused on market trends and disruptive technologies driving change in business computing. ISG Research™ delivers guidance that helps businesses accelerate growth and create more value. For more information about ISG Research™ subscriptions, please email contact@isg-one.com.

About ISG

ISG (Information Services Group) (Nasdaq: [III](#)) is a leading global technology research and advisory firm. A trusted business partner to more than 900 clients, including more than 75 of the world's top 100 enterprises, ISG is committed to helping corporations, public sector organizations, and service and technology providers achieve operational excellence and faster growth. The firm specializes in digital transformation services, including AI and automation, cloud and data analytics; sourcing advisory; managed governance and risk services; network carrier services; strategy and operations design; change management; market intelligence and technology research and analysis. Founded in 2006 and based in Stamford, Conn., ISG employs 1,600 digital-ready professionals operating in more than 20 countries—a global team known for its innovative thinking, market influence, deep industry and technology expertise, and world-class research and analytical capabilities based on the industry's most comprehensive marketplace data. For more information, visit isg-one.com.